Accountability and Quality Improvement

If You Think There’s a Simple Solution, You Don’t Understand the Problem

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Outline

• Quality in higher education
• Accountability and “The New Public Management”
• Measuring quality – The proxy problem
• Improving quality – The incentive problem
• Assessment for accountability vs. improvement
• Is there a way forward?
• Discussion
Quality in Higher Education

A GLOBAL HOT TOPIC
A Global Hot Topic

• A major concern of...
  – Governments
  – Consumers
  – Other stakeholders

• Driven by...
  – Cost escalation
  – Global competition in a knowledge economy
A Global Hot Topic

QUALITY IN THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE
What is it? How Should it be measured? Who decides?

U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
December 2015

http://sites.nationalacademies.org/PGA/bhew/qualityeducation/index.htm
Accountability and “The New Public Management”

Traditional accountability
• Finances
• Fairness
• Use of power

Enforced by rules & regulations

New accountability
• Performance
• Less regulation of process
• Higher expectations for outcomes

Less concern with how goals are achieved

But how to measure performance and promote improvement?
WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “QUALITY” IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

- Broad participation
- A high-quality student experience
- Quality of teaching
- Quality of scholarship
- External engagement by academic staff
- Research & innovation
- Engagement with community & society
- Internationalisation
We can probably agree on a list of quality dimensions

How to measure them is another matter entirely

Consider an example…
Quality Domain – Not directly measurable
(e.g. quality of provision)

Measurable with error
(e.g., academic reputation; student satisfaction;
teaching quality; student learning)

Measurable with little to no error
(e.g., staff-student ratio; per-student expenditures; share of staff with PhD)

"Proxy" measures

Adapted from Bevan & Hood, 2006
The Proxy Problem

• Proxies are often poor approximations
  – Especially true in cases like higher education

• Minimizing measurement error often compromises fidelity to the broader quality domain
A BASIC PERFORMANCE-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY MODEL
Quality Domain → represented by Proxy Measures → leads to Performance judgment

So far, so good. But let’s think about the behavioural implications
Quality Domain

Represented by Proxy Measures

Leads to Performance judgment

Incentivised feedback loop

Intended feedback loop
A problem of goal displacement

“A system of performance rewards linked to precise measures is not an incentive to perform well; it is an incentive to obtain a good score.”

(March, 1984)
It’s About *More than Measurement*

- The key design challenge of a performance-based quality regime is not choosing **the right measures** (a *technical* problem)

- It is ensuring that the system motivates **the right behaviour** (an *alignment* problem)

- Very difficult when proxy measures are linked to high-stakes rewards and sanctions
  - Many more ways to do it wrong than right
Is there a way out of this dilemma?

WHAT IF WE PUT IMPROVEMENT AT THE CENTER?
“Accountability requires the entity held accountable to demonstrate, with evidence, conformity with an established standard of process or outcome. The associated incentive for that entity is to look as good as possible, regardless of the underlying performance. Improvement, in turn, entails an opposite set of incentives. Deficiencies in performance must be faithfully detected and reported so they can be acted upon.”

(Ewell, 2009)
## Ewell’s “Two Paradigms of Assessment”

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<th>Strategic Dimensions</th>
<th>Assessment for Improvement Paradigm</th>
<th>Assessment for Accountability Paradigm</th>
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<td><strong>Intent</strong></td>
<td>Formative (Improvement)</td>
<td>Summative (Judgment)</td>
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<td><strong>Stance</strong></td>
<td>Internal</td>
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<td><strong>Predominant Ethos</strong></td>
<td>Engagement</td>
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### Application Choices

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<th>Instrumentation</th>
<th>Multiple/Triangulation</th>
<th>Standardized</th>
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<td><strong>Nature of Evidence</strong></td>
<td>Quantitative and Qualitative</td>
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<td><strong>Reference Points</strong></td>
<td>Over Time, Comparative, Established Goal</td>
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**SOURCE:** Ewell, 2009
Assessing “student engagement” is strongly rooted in the improvement paradigm

Student engagement represents a new approach to the quality question
What is Student Engagement?

The extent to which students are exposed to and participate in effective educational practices

- Educationally purposeful activities and practices
- Empirically linked to desired outcomes
A New Perspective on Quality

Student engagement represents a shift in how we think about what matters in the student experience—

– From satisfaction (happiness) to quality of educational experiences

– Strong focus on *behaviour* rather than attitudes and opinions
Why is it Important to Measure Student Engagement?

• Outcomes information alone is insufficient to guide improvement
• Diagnostic information is needed
  – Identify areas of strength and weakness to understand the outcomes
  – Target interventions
  – Monitor progress
NSSE, ISSE, & More

• US & Canada
• More than 1,600 colleges and universities 2000-2016
• 90% repeat participation

• Adaptations in…
  – Australia
  – China
  – Ireland
  – Korea
  – New Zealand
  – South Africa
  – United Kingdom

• Experimentation
  – Chile, Denmark, Indonesia

New report out today!
EXAMPLES OF NSSE DATA USE
A closing question for discussion

What would an improvement-focused accountability system look like?
Discussion