



## QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

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*Norman Reid* has had experience in teaching chemistry at school and at university as well as very extensive management experience in education. For over a decade, he has directed a large international research centre and, as part of this work, has supervised very large numbers of research students. His paper on quality assurance comes not only from that experience but also from the wealth of research evidence available. On the basis of that evidence, he will suggest ways forward for Pakistan as Higher Education seeks to develop a robust demonstration of quality.

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### ABSTRACT

Any rapidly growing system of education will always need to examine itself to see if quality is being maintained. Indeed, it is in the interest of every institution of Higher Education to seek quality in that a good reputation leads to high levels of quality applicants as well as quality staff being attracted and then feeling valued and fulfilled. More important, students will be positive, motivated and successful.

The key in all quality assurance in Higher Education is to focus on the students. Are agreed goals being met? The presentation will explore such goals and will identify ways to assess whether they are being fulfilled. This means that we need to look at the '*product*' as seen in the graduate. Are they equipped for their futures in the world of work where they can make a positive contribution? Most will enter employment and it is important to see how employers view their graduate employees. However, it is also important to look at the '*process*' - the experiences our students have undertaken. It is here where peer review can offer most valuable insights in exploring the whole learning experience. Indeed, we need to talk to our students to consider the whole learning experience from *their* perspective.

In quality assurance, there is often confusion between the goals of *accountability* and *improvement*. These are very different and the mechanism to offer insights on one will not necessarily help the achievement of the other. This will be explored.

The talk will draw on much research evidence in seeking to point to ways forward for the future for Pakistan so that present and future students can enjoy a rich and enhanced experience on their educational journey.

## INTRODUCTION

Higher Education is growing at an exponential rate in Pakistan (Figure 1).

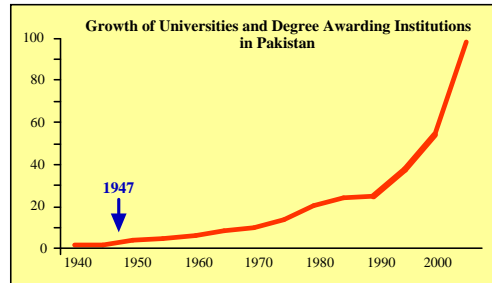


Figure 1 Exponential Growth

In such circumstances, there is always a need to look at quality, the fear being that growth in quantity may compromise quality. In many ways, this fear is somewhat misplaced. It is in the interests of all institutions of Higher Education to seek quality because a reputation of quality,-

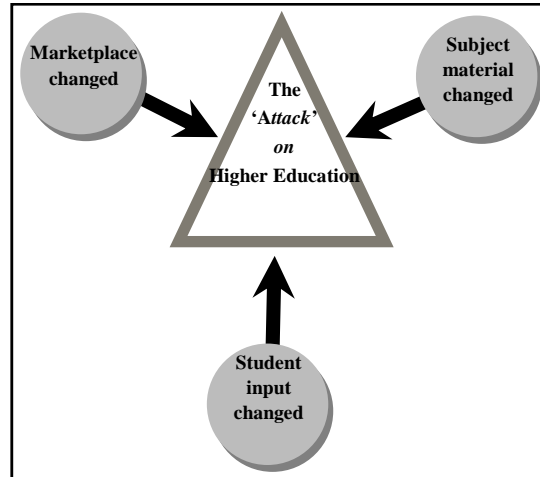
- ☑ Leads to good reputation;
- ☑ Encourages student applications;
- ☑ Attracts able staff;
- ☑ Allows staff to feel valued and fulfilled;
- ☑ Generates students who are positive and motivated

Perhaps the drive for quality assurance in Pakistan in relation to Higher Education reflects trends which have taken place in other countries in previous decades. However, there is no evidence that the Quality Assurance procedures adopted by say, the UK, have in fact enhanced quality. There is plenty evidence that they have distorted priorities. Academics are highly adept at ensuring that factors which are to be measured are emphasised at the expense of other factors which will not be measured. The latter may be more important.

Thus, if completion rates are being recorded as evidence of quality, the subject departments ensure that their completion rates are good. This may undermine quality if some students are allowed to complete when this lacks merit. Similarly, if completion of PhDs within a maximum period of 4 years is a measured evidence of quality, then supervisors will ensure that all their research students complete within that period, even at the expense of quality of the thesis produced.

### Pressures on Higher Education

Higher education is being attacked from many sides (Figure 2). Very often countries can no longer afford to support students and many students now have to work. With the growth in numbers, the levels of academic commitment and learning skills are much more diverse and, thus, the quality of teaching is a major issue for many. In addition, the job market for graduates has changed and, frequently, the numbers and nature of graduates no longer matches employment markets. Another problem is that the knowledge explosion means that content cannot be 'covered' in a first degree.



*Figure 2 Attacks on Higher Education*

Given that, in the West, many graduates cannot now find jobs commensurate with their qualifications, it is worth asking three questions in Pakistan:

- 👤 Do we want as many in Higher Education?
- 👤 Can we afford as many in Higher Education?
- 👤 Can we retain quality with so many in Higher Education?

This paper seeks to bring together findings from a number of major studies and reviews to offer some guiding principles for the way forward.

#### The Nature of Quality Assurance

Quality assurance can be described as all those planned and systematic activities to provide adequate confidence that a product or service was satisfying given requirements of quality. This is easy to say. However, while widely accepted, this statement raises numerous questions itself:

- ☑ What is the product?
- ☑ What is the service?
- ☑ What are adequate requirements?

The '*product*' can be seen in terms of the students and what they have gained from their journey through higher education. A '*service*' has been offered to them and the question is the extent to which that service has changed them educationally so that they can be seen to have achieved '*graduateness*'. The nature of the '*requirements*' is, however, even more difficult to describe. However, in all of this the focus must be relentlessly on the students (Figure 3).

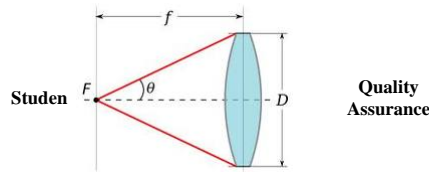


Figure 3 Students at the Focus

The danger in all quality assurance is that we focus on the peripherals for these are often more easy to quantify. We need to insist on focussing on the students, their experiences in learning as students and the nature of the final ‘product’. Thus, quality assurance needs to be seen in terms of the extent to which the agreed goals have been reached by students (Figure 3).

Let us look at some goals which seem to be broadly agreed across the literature:

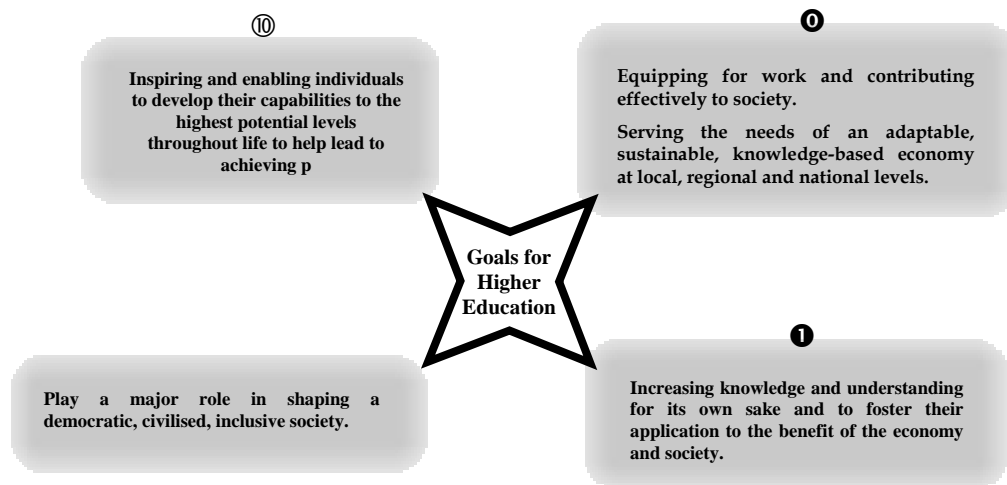


Figure 4 Four Goals

The first goal relates to the extent to which individual student potential is released. The second recognises that graduates have a role in the workplace, making a contribution to the nation. The third relates to the key role of higher education in increasing knowledge and understanding and making that available to wider society while the fourth is more imprecise but extremely important: graduates have a role in shaping the society of the future.

It is worth stopping for a moment and looking at quality assurance as it has developed in the United Kingdom. It is frightening to note that, over first 10 years of quality assurance in the UK, there were 10 different external regimes or major modifications. The problems were numerous. The process was being driven politically. The political view was that far higher levels efficiency and effectiveness could be achieved for much less resource. Indeed, in the 18 years from 1979 to 1997, the resource level was more than halved, with some fairly disastrous consequences. For example, expensive subjects had to reduce the time spent in

activities like laboratories. Indeed, some universities closed down departments offering expensive subjects while retaining cheaper subjects. Sadly, the expensive courses turned out to produce graduates who tended to find jobs easily.

There were valiant attempts at quality assurance, each new process being introduced to solve the problems which had become obvious in the last attempts. This has gone on more or less ever since, and the problems have never been properly solved. The whole assumption that competition would drive up quality turned out to be totally flawed. This also was politically driven and was carried over from the world of commercial production. In the world of competing companies, competition may well work effectively.

We only have to look at the cut-throat computer and IT market to see how the 'quality' manufacturers have taken market share relentlessly from other companies. However, in the world of social provision (schools, hospitals, higher education, police), competition is at best irrelevant and, at worst, can cause major damage. Higher education institutions work best when they work in cooperation for the welfare of those served.

Indeed, the idea of external regulation is also probably flawed. The very nature of higher education means that only those who have hands-on expertise in higher education can be equipped to comment on what is offered. The subject areas are too specialised. Thus, the only people who can comment on the standards and effectiveness of, say, a graduate programme in physics are those employed in delivering graduate programmes in physics. This is no different when compared to medicine. In each speciality, those involved in that speciality are best placed to know who are the outstanding surgeons or physicians and which hospital units are functioning in an exemplary way. Outsiders cannot judge for there is no simple criterion of 'quality'.

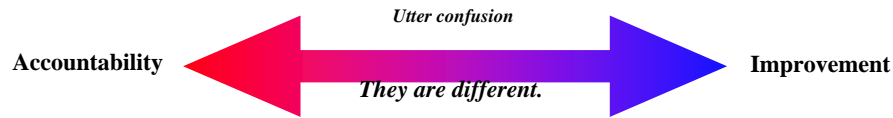
In his review of the literature and the actual provision of higher education quality in the UK, Brown (2004) noted what he called, '*.....the sad story of waste and confusion....*'. It is worth noting that Brown was actively involved *on the inside* in the quality assurance developments. Indeed, pages 156-158 of Brown's review give a fairly brutal criticism of the whole process in the UK. The assumption that competition would drive up quality is totally flawed. The idea of external regulation is flawed. Driving a process with endless financial cutting was a serious issue. In the UK, the actual institutions failed to challenge what was being imposed on them and failed to ask: where is the evidence?

If there is one lesson for Pakistan in all this it is *not* to copy any of the practices from the UK. The reason they were changed year on year was that they simply did not work. There is surely something better.

The Brown review raises a key question: why did all these structures developed by highly able minds not '*deliver the goods*'. There are several possible answers to this. Firstly, the political imperative used models from commerce and industry and these were totally inappropriate: we cannot quantify production and efficiency in higher education in any neat way. Secondly, the drive for competition rather than collaboration was flawed.

Thirdly, because of the way the systems were set up, the higher education personnel did not ever feel that they owned the process. It was imposed from outside, in their view.

However, there is perhaps a fourth factor. There is a confusion between two key ideas:



*Figure 5 Exponential Growth*

Of course, if large sums of public money are being spent, there needs to be some system of accountability. This is quite a different matter when seeking to look at the *quality* of provision and seeking to find ways to enhance this. There is frequently an unwritten assumption that institutions of higher education are wasting resources and it often fails to be appreciated that it is the interest of *every* institution of higher education to look at itself to seek for the greatest efficiency in the use of limited resources as well as seeking the highest possible standard in its provision. No institution would encourage inefficiency or seek low standards. They would quickly collapse. It needs to be stated bluntly that there is no evidence that suggests that quality assurance actually improves standards. Part of this stems from the fact that standards cannot be defined objectively in any agreed way. Thus, for example, degree quality is no evidence of educational quality (Yorke, 2009).

#### The Concept of Graduateness

This leads to an important idea which can be captured in the question: Are graduates different from those who have not gone to an Institution of Higher Education? Another question follows immediately: Is any gain for graduates justified terms of the time and resources spent?

Let us look at the evidence from research to throw light on these questions. In a very recent study conducted by Hanson and Overton (2010) in the UK, graduates in one discipline were approached two years after graduation and asked to look back on their studies in the light of whatever job they were doing. The study showed:

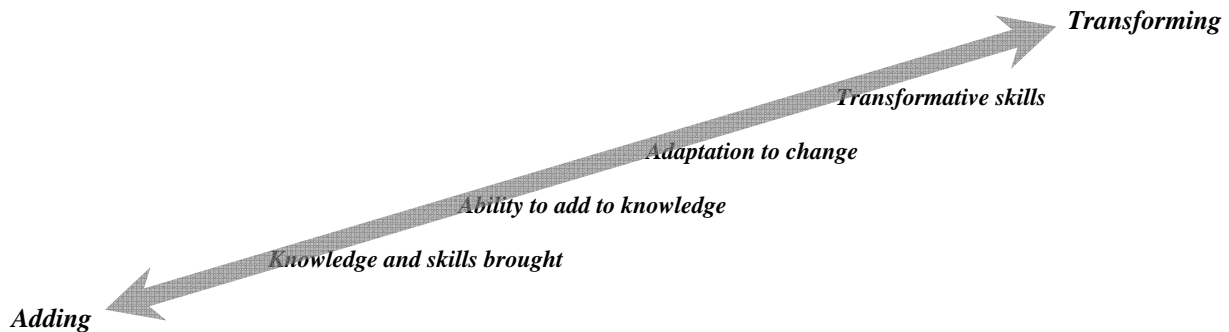
- Graduates were very positive about the subject matter they had been taught.
- Graduates wanted more opportunity to develop what might be called '*generic skills*' in the way the subject was taught.
- The picture seems constant across institutions of widely different character.

This is very encouraging and is, perhaps, the first study which looked the perceptions of graduates, now established in a job but close enough to reflect back on their undergraduate experiences. This is the kind of study which might prove of immense value in Pakistan and

the methodologies of the researchers are well worth copying. The findings in Pakistan might be invaluable for future planning.

This study looks at matters from the perspective of the graduates. What about employers? There have been several major studies carried out in the UK by Harvey and his team during the 1990s (eg. Harvey and Green, 1994; Harvey, Moon and Geall, 1997). One study alone covered some 2000 employers of graduates, more or less encompassing all areas of study. The studies started to develop some kind of concept of 'graduateness', as seen by employers. 'Graduateness' is what graduates tend to be able to do where others are less well equipped. This can be seen in their development of a continuum of employers expectations from their graduate intakes.

At its most basic level, employers wanted graduates who would add something to their organisation. At its best, employers really valued what they called *transformative skills* - the ability to take an organisation forward in new and effective ways but they recognised that only a minority of graduates would do this. Here is yet another way Pakistan can gain insights into the quality of its higher education provision: survey the employers who employ the graduates.



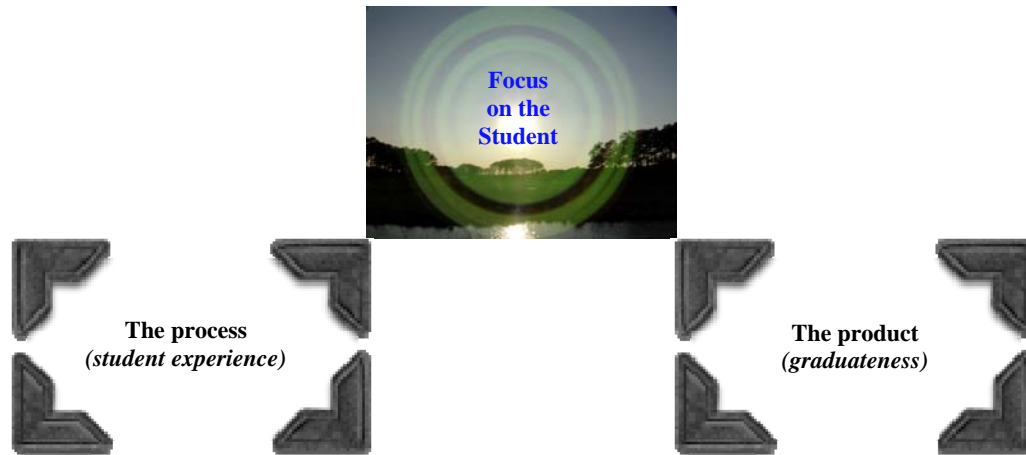
*Figure 6 Employers Continuum*

It is an interesting feature of the studies of the views of employers that the employers did not regard the subject matter which students had been taught as important as many other aspects of the learning experience. In the study of graduates, Hanson and Overton (2010) found that students valued the content they had been taught, did not want less content, but wished that the content had been taught in different ways to allow more generic skills to develop.

Another key finding from the studies of employers is that employers place great value of certain generic skills. They are not interested in skills like essay writing or in presenting detailed balanced criticisms. They are interested in writing short terse reports (one side of A4), the ability to present brief and cogent arguments that lead to clear conclusions, and being able to make lucid verbal presentations. Team working was rated highly.

## Process and Product

In thinking in terms of any concept of 'graduateness', we are looking at the 'product'. What about the 'process'? This means looking at the experience of students as they move along their educational journey. Are they being taught appropriate material, and at an appropriate level? Are they developing key skills? Figure 7 illustrates the idea.



*Figure 7 Process and Product*

At this stage, we need to be very clear what are our goals. For taught courses, this might be set in terms of generating graduates:

*who know and understand enough in their own discipline to be able to apply their knowledge and skills in the future, with some degree of basic competence and confidence.*

For each subject area in each institution of higher education, there needs to be some specification of the knowledge and skills base as well as some indication of what is meant by competence. Given the knowledge explosion, it is inappropriate to have a common specification in any subject area for competence and confidence can be gained in numerous ways, using different content selection and different approaches to presentation.

Perhaps the best way for each institution to gain clear insights on its provision in each specific subject area is by peer review. This must be carried out positively and affirmatively. There is no universal prescription for success.

For research students, the goal might be set in terms of generate postgraduates

*equipped to carry out their own research unsupervised in the future, with some degree of basic competence and confidence.*

The presentation made two years ago has offered some insights into this area and how evidence might be collated easily (Reid, 2008).

### **A Way Forward**

Looking at all graduates in all subjects, there is a range of useful ways to move forward:

- ☑ A survey of how graduates see their course, two years after graduation, in terms of how the course has equipped them for the job they are undertaking.
- ☑ A survey of employers to see the extent to which they view graduates positively, where they see strengths and where they see weaknesses.
- ☑ A survey of students at various stages in their degree to gain insights into how they are coping and what they see as useful or otherwise.
- ☑ Occasional reviews of course, their structures, the approaches to presentation, the skills being assessed and the standards set in assessments, all carried out affirmatively by means of peer review.

This list of four ways forward offers an agenda for action. It avoids the check-list approach and sees education holistically. It never seeks to compare between departments or institutions. Of major importance, it avoids the distortions which quality assurance procedures in higher education in other countries have so often generated. As an added bonus, such an approach is far more likely to have teaching staff support and it had been found critical for success that any quality assurance is not imposed from outside but ‘owned’ by the profession.

The check-list approach is not helpful as education is much more than the sum of the parts. It has been shown again and again that institutions can pass the criteria on check lists but still do not offer a quality experience. Equally, institutions can offer very rich educational experiences but might fail on some criteria on check-lists.

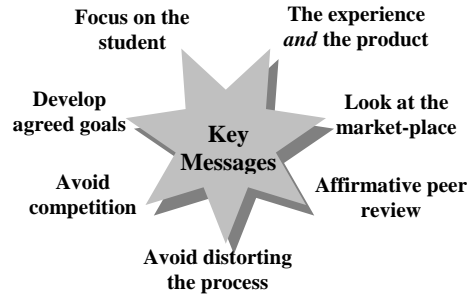
*The outcomes from various studies can be summarised in table 1:*

<b>Key Requirements for an Effective Quality Assurance Regime</b>		
Purpose	Improvement, not accountability	Most staff, most of the time, do their best. Accountability destroys this goodwill
Focus	What is necessary for quality improvement	Keep the focus on the student - the ‘experience’ and the ‘product’
Self-regulation	Procedures must support, not undermine	Institutional procedures are usually fit for purpose
Meaningful	Ownership and meaningfulness for all involved	Quality assurance procedures to be mapped on to institutional procedures
Diversity	Must promote diversity and innovation	Freedom to innovate must be enhanced. This is the key to the future
Accountability	Adequate quality control and accountability for the quality assurance regime	Validity, reliability, transparency: Is quality assurance detrimental to quality ?

**Table 1 Key Requirements**

## Summary

The key messages are outline in the diagram below:



*Figure 8 Key Messages*

This set of seven key messages stresses the focus on the student, both in terms of the 'product' and the 'process'. It generates an affirmative and supportive atmosphere which does not hinder the exciting innovation which every institution of higher education should have as a hallmark. It avoids the quite unacceptable distortions which are now so common in the western way of looking at quality assurance while the whole process is set in the context of societal needs, especially those of the market-place.

Our overall aim is to encourage a new generation of students who are equipped to make a difference, no matter what their future career may be. Of course, we want to allow students to develop their potential fully. Equally, we want our future graduates to be equipped to take society forward in every sphere of life and enrich the nation.

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