

Six professors have just received full marks for their teaching of economics at Warwick. So why do they believe that the whole assessment process is 'damaging and destructive'?

Imagine you've built a successful organisation based, like Warwick University's economics department, on an outstanding reputation. You are known throughout the world; you turn potential customers away by the thousand. Your reputation is supported by every external indicator of your past performance; it's never been questioned.

Then, out of the blue, someone slanders you. You have to go to court to defend yourself. The jury must absorb a hundred witnesses and 20,000 pages of documents - all inside three days - and the judge will let private opinions and hearsay count in evidence too.

The quality of your rhetoric is likely to weigh more heavily than documents and expert witnesses. The best you can hope for is that the judge will find in your favour, with no damages and no order for costs. Every penny you've spent, all the months of preparation, are gone for ever. The trial process is so flawed that you could lose your case and your reputation, and be left with nothing. There is no provision for appeal.

This is the system of teaching quality review that has been imposed throughout England's universities and is operated by the QAA - the so-called Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Economics at Warwick has just been reviewed, and we obtained the maximum score: 24 out of 24. This point is worth making in capital letters so that you know: we would not recognise a sour grape if we stood on one. Our economists have played this system and won.

Do we delight in a deserved victory? Are we pleased that other university departments in this nation will be subjected to the same rigour? No, our frank conclusion is that it is probably the most damaging and destructive system of regulation that could possibly have been devised. Before we say why, let's make it clear that we have only praise for the underpaid, overworked academics who conscientiously reviewed us on the lines laid down by the QAA. The procedures are at fault, not the people who operate them.

Let's start with this department's score. Our full marks should place us among the country's elite. The world will think that, anyway. As for ourselves, we do believe we're very, very good (though not perfect). But our belief is not based on our QAA "teaching quality" score, which does not remotely measure teaching quality in this or any other department.

There are many possible illusions about the QAA process. Get your notepads out.

Illusion 1 Warwick's perfect QAA score tells parents that our teaching quality is the best.

Wrong. QAA only measures the claims that each institution makes about its teaching quality. We made high claims for our teaching quality, and the QAA panel agreed; so we got full marks. A department that made lesser claims, and proved them, would get full marks too. So you can't compare a 24 for economics at Warwick with the score from anywhere else. These QAA numbers are virtually useless. Yet nobody explains this to parents, teachers, or newspapers.

Illusion 2 The QAA has measured teaching quality objectively at Warwick.

Wrong. The method is not scientific. We supplied the hypothesis, the evidence and the witnesses. We chose the students, the former students and employers, the samples of student work, and the internal documentation to be seen by the panel. (Without a word being said, our students grasped perfectly the incentives at work: the more they supported us, the more their degrees would be worth.)

Finally, we managed the stage. We chose the meeting rooms, the seating plans, and which of us would perform as advocates. We trained ourselves in theatre and rhetoric; we learnt to argue fluently with passion and conviction. We were barristers in our own defence.

In other words we, who had the clearest possible interest in the outcome, also had a decisive influence on the hypothesis, the evidence, and the trial process. We did it well, but it wasn't objective.

Illusion 3 QAA scores can measure the change in teaching quality at Warwick

Wrong. The QAA's methodology is so unstable that it never uses the same criteria twice. In the previous cycle the scoring system was different, and it will be different next time round as well. Each time, the criteria change. Because it's never done the same way, anyone wanting to make useful comparisons over time cannot begin to know how teaching quality is altering.

Illusion 4 The QAA aims to enhance teaching quality in universities

Wrong. The QAA aims to enhance confidence in teaching quality, not teaching quality. Read the rubric. Its mission is "to promote public confidence that quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded and enhanced." It's there to "assure", not "ensure". The whole thing is a hugely expensive public relations exercise.

Illusion 5 QAA reviews are cost-effective

Almost certainly wrong. Within the QAA methodology there is no attempt to compare costs with benefits, and no limit to the costs which universities are expected to incur in order to comply with bureaucratic criteria. Yes, we have found some benefits (whoopee). But that is like finding that when you fall out of an aeroplane you get a good view on the way down.

These benefits are vastly outweighed by the process's immense costs. Our estimate is that in preparing for the review over the past year our one department has spent £150,000 to £200,000 in staff time alone (ten times this sum at business consultancy rates). Multiply by the departments reviewed annually and add the overheads, and the hidden costs of QAA regulation are of the order of a hundred million pounds a year.

A still greater cost is not reckoned here at all. Teaching quality rests at its heart on the teachers' inner motivation. We're not well paid by the standards of the business world; the reason we do university economics is because we want to. Nothing could be more destructive to this motivation than the distrust and adversarial spirit that pervades QAA methodology.

Increasingly, we are forced to do things because the QAA says so and threatens us if we don't, not because true teaching quality demands it. Enthusiasm and scholarship are being strangled by bureaucratic monitoring and demands for paper trails.

Universities don't ask for irresponsible control over the public money that pays us. We're willing to be called to account. There is a case for regulation. But not like this.

True teaching quality is being wrecked by a self-interested lobby of regulators. John Randall, head of the QAA, was quoted last week as saying that the intensity of regulation should rise with the level of fees. The bigger the cake, the more they want to get their hands on our crumbs.

We have to stop the QAA monster or it will eat us alive.

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