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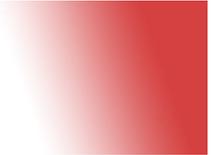Department of
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Quality enhancement: lessons from the Scottish experience

Murray Saunders
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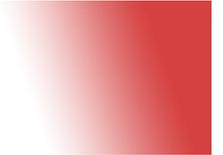*Lancaster University*

Discussion

1. Some ground clearing
2. The approach and evidence base
3. A case: the Scottish enhancement approach
4. Experience from stakeholders
5. SWOT analysis of enhancement led approaches

Some ground clearing!

The Lancaster approach: enhancement as 'practice'

- Focus on the routine, recurrent behaviours associated with enhancing quality

- Experience of quality shaped by positional factors(interests, priorities and adaptations).

- Differences between rhetoric and practices at all levels

- Change understood as 'changed practices'

The implementation staircase

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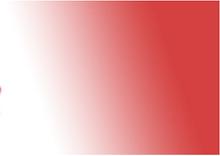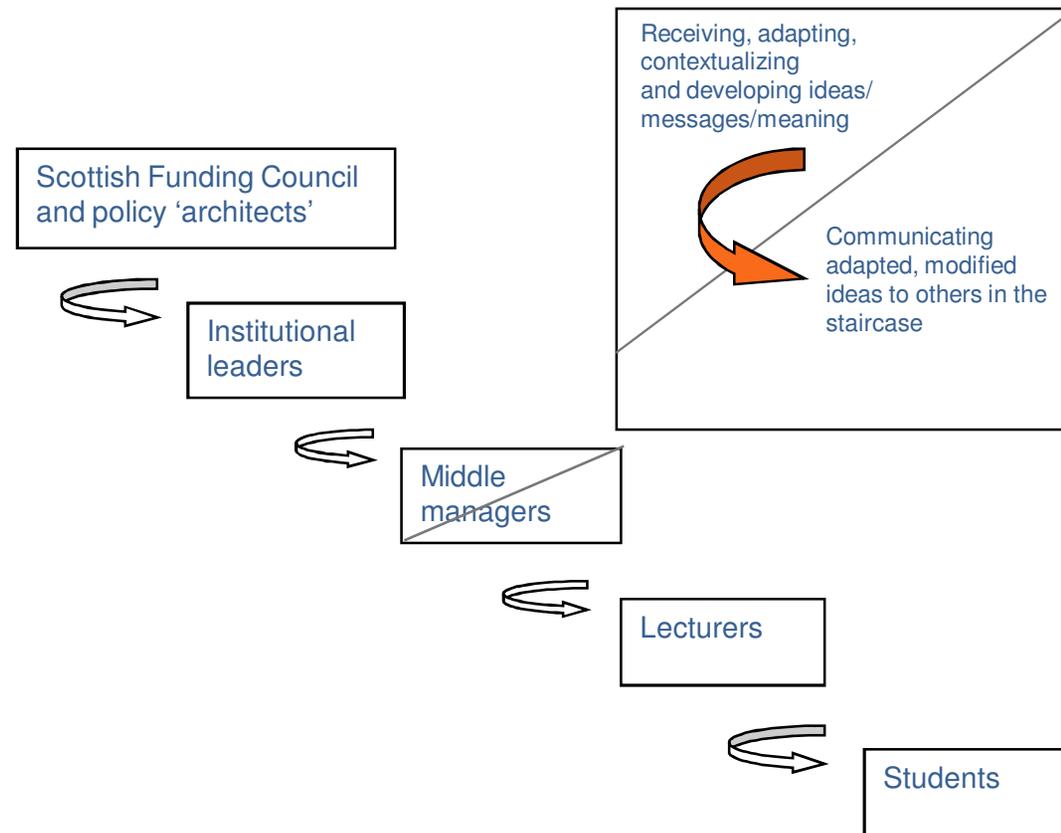
Enhancement:

Involves deliberative practices towards making things better (improvement).

- *Incrementalism*: doing the same only a little better, in other words improvement on existing practice clusters.   Improving the quality of teaching materials might be an example.
- *Innovative incrementalism:* addition of innovations to existing practices, for example adding an international dimension to a syllabus where none existed before, or a new teaching practice to a repertoire.
- *Transformational:* radical understanding of enhancement involves a re-think of existing approaches, even fundamental purposes, and completely new practices.

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The general features of an Enhancement Led Quality Strategy

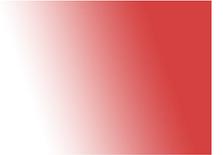- Balancing enabling mechanisms with compliance to quality standards
- An enhancement led national quality system means a shift in emphasis not mutual exclusivity between assurance and enhancement
- The enhancement of the student experience in higher education (means *supporting practices associated with improvement*, being innovative, being enabled through resources and a positive 'climate');
- *partnerships* between agencies and stakeholders;
- a theory of educational change that places more weight on *consensual approaches than more coercive stances;*
- *shift away from top-down compliance-inducing pro*cesses to participative and critical supported self-evaluation.

Intersections of quality practice: national/institutional

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Process tightly controlled

Focus tightly controlled

Focus weakly controlled

Institution is told what to focus on and how *Example: Quality Review, following QAA Guidelines*	**Institution decides on focus but how it does it is prescribed.** *Example: the institution has discretion on what to include in REF, but form of report and analysis of profile are externally driven*
Institution is told what to focus on to evaluate but can develop own system of quality *Example: quality of the student experience: must be evaluated, but the institution can use its own mechanisms, in its own way*	**Institution decides on focus and can develop own system of quality** *Example: internal evaluations of institutional initiatives, staff appraisal*

Process loosely controlled

Why Scotland is an interesting case

From its inception in 2003, the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), coordinated by the Scottish Funding Council with the participation of the Scottish Universities themselves, attempted an integrated approach in which 'enhancement' rather than 'assurance' was emphasised in its approach to the quality of University teaching and learning.
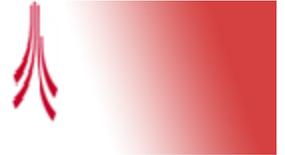
Specific features of the Scottish Case

- Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR), coordinated by QAA Scotland (assurance dimension)
- A comprehensive institutional programme of internal subject level reviews
- Improved forms of public information about quality, the different needs of a range of stakeholders including students and employers (in practice a focus on NSS)
- A greater voice for students in institutional quality systems,
- A national programme of quality enhancement themes, facilitated by the QAA, aimed at developing and sharing good practice in order to enhance the student learning experience. **(e.g. Graduates for the 21st Century, research-teaching linkages, the first year, employability, assessment)**

The evidence base

- Longitudinal comparative dimension (revisiting, trajectories, repeat surveys) 2003-2010 in two phases

- Stakeholder voices (national 'voices')

- Cyclical site visits to all institutions (800 participants)

- Quantitative sampling of participants (course reps, teaching practitioners, middle managers, student institutional reps, staff with specific remit for quality, a sample of students 'with no remit')

Where are we now? QEF evolving

- Overall positive experience of QEF, commitment of staff, increased use of reward for T&L (53% of quality staff), using available expertise (only 12% of quality 'people' used in internal review)
- Themes seen as facilitative rather than prescriptive?
- Balance between student instrumentalism and student intrinsic interest in subject (not mutually exclusive)
- Engagement practices (decision making and influence and/or commitment to learning)
- Is ELIR still seen in this way = *"a theory of educational change that places more weight on consensual approaches than more coercive stances embedded in some quality assurance regimes with a shift away from top-down compliance-inducing processes to participative and critical supported self-evaluation"*.

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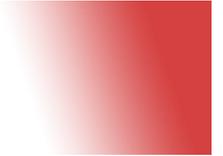
Some policy lessons for sustaining quality enhancement/assurance balance

A focus on the experience of ELIR

- Data suggests the challenge of balancing assurance with enhancement
- Central control, issues of responsiveness and tone in the 'visit process'
- Developmental devolution or central control over change processes impacts on incentives to innovate
- Responsive systems facilitate, centralised systems can tend toward excessive bureaucracy
- Pressure points include using quality processes to reflect 'impression management' through league tables
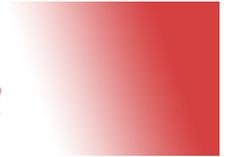
The student voice in quality enhancement

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Involvement in external reviews

- By phase two (of ELIR visits), there was a general trend to view student panel members as useful members of teams and this has persisted into phase three as students participation legitimated and authenticated the review process.

- Student interviewees reported being involved in the preparations for ELIR, meeting ELIR panels and in one case writing part of the Reflective Analysis for their institution. It is important to note that these students felt they had the freedom to decide the content of their section

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Involvement in external reviews
(as presenters)

'when you walked in - the panel were on one side of the room, you on the other. But when you got into it, the language was very friendly, very open. I think it's probably quite daunting when you see three or four academics sat at the table when you come in.'

Involvement in external reviews (as reviewers)

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'Having done a review, and been heavily involved in the preparations here, my eyes have been opened somewhat to the process and I'm still hugely supportive of it. However I think that there's an issue in the preparation of the reflective analysis …having done a review I would be so much better at writing ours now, it would be unbelievable. There need to be training of people on how to write assessments The process requires that institutions are able to be open and honest.'

Involvement in external reviews
Summary

Concerns:
- Lacking maturity
- Lacking technical expertise
- Being overawed

Practice:
- Dynamic of the panel
- Identification of important issues
- from students' perspective
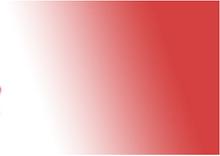- Chaired sessions
- Authored sections of reports

Issues

- Workload
Commitment/incentive to participation (payment, vouchers, course credit)
- Generic and context based training/sensitisation
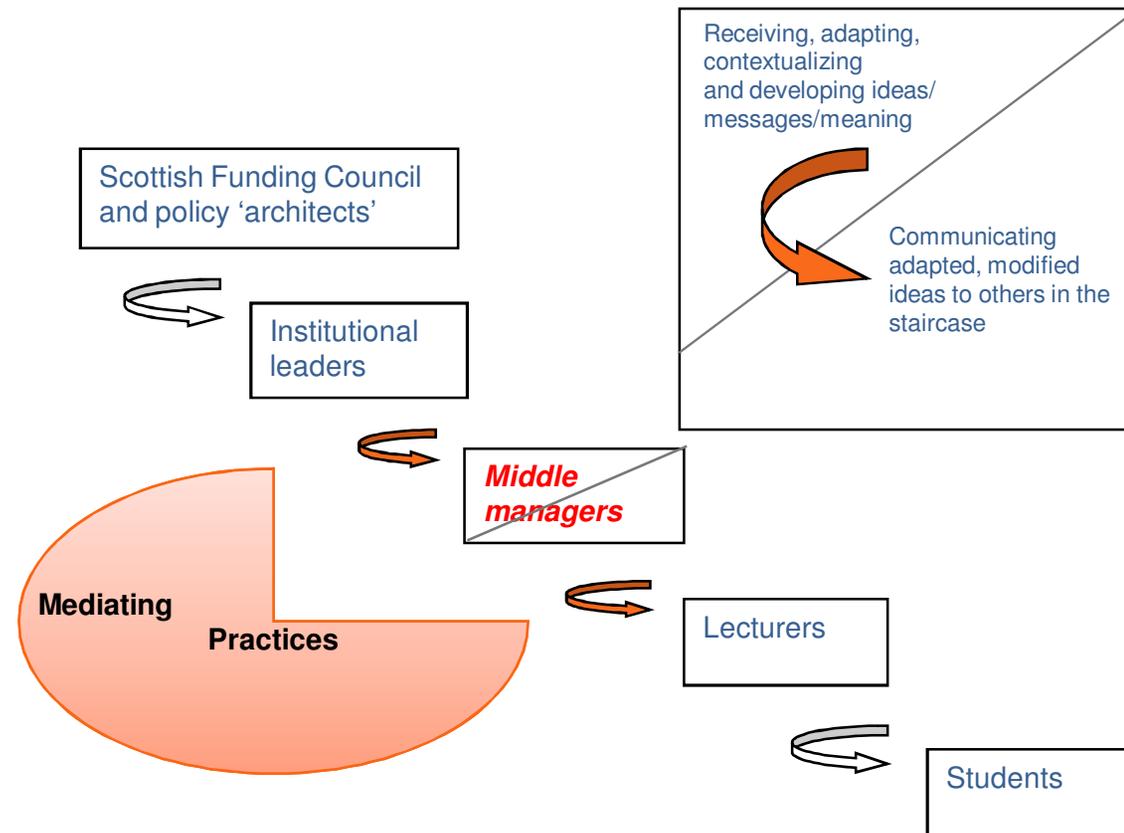- What is an acceptable level of involvement?

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Engagement-as-learning

"Reps in the surveys tended to indicate a really positive experience of teaching and learning in their institutions. Over three quarters of respondents stated that their tutors provided stimulating teaching sessions, that they participate in a wide range of learning activities and that they learn a great deal in class. This may provide a key indicator of success for QEF"

Although they may know very little about the structure of the QEF, increasing satisfaction with their student experience in HEIs can be seen as an indicator of the effectiveness of the framework from inception in 2001/2 to 2010

The implementation staircase

Mediation practices

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These are between

- academic and management (remoteness, tension between institutional and disciplinary allegiance, ´´protection´´, communication))

- leadership and management (collegiality, power, morale)

- empowerment and preparedness (no voice, no control of finance, training)

University systemic characteristics can militate against devolved enhancement culture

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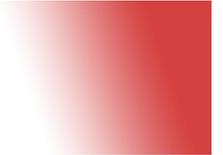
Sustaining collegiality in quality

" *I think the basic argument still stands, which is that enhancement has to be, to some extent, about adventurousness, about taking risks, about trying things. Not in a hazardous way, but safeguarding standards across the university, and of course the academic progress of students, not imperilling them.*

But, often the people, who end up on Quality Assurance Committees, are by nature, if you like, cautious and defensive, and they like to stick to the rules" (senior manager pre-1992 university).

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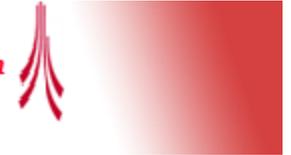
Sustaining collegiality in quality: policy issues for discussion

❑Playing safe and risk avoidance (antithesis of pedagogic confidence)

❑Control and bureaucratization (diminishing the space for innovation)

❑Engagement-as-learning and engagement-as-representation

❑Instrumentality and transformational learning

❑League tables (contradictory effects)

❑Intensification as a threat to enhancement (time, pressure points)

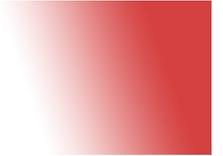❑Drifting back to assurance emphasis (resources, competition, comparability)
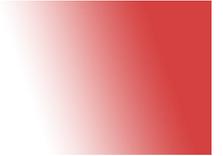
SWOT analysis on enhancement led quality approaches
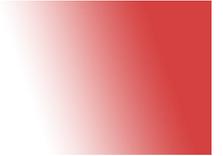
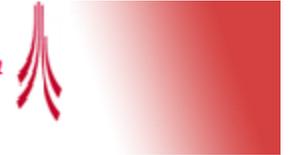# Strengths

- Buy-in
- Legitimacy
- Embedded culture of improvement
- Likely to lead to improved student experience

Weaknesses

- Lack of consistency
- Less standardization
- Rhetorical rather practice based change
- Comparative lacunae

Opportunities

- System wide cultural change
- Focus on practices
- Avoidance of strategic conduct
- Accountability based on real changes

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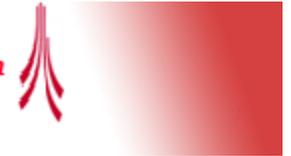
Threats

- Tendency to retreat to assurance away from enhancement (balance returns to control and management from the Centre)
- Lack of political courage in the face of international league tables
- Externally derived targets
- Funding conundrum ("when going gets tough, risk gets going")

Bamber, V, Trowler, P, Saunders, M, and Knight, P (April 2009) *Enhancing Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Curriculum in Higher Education: Theory, Cases, Practices* (Buckingham: Open University Press)

Saunders, M., Trowler P., Bamber, V. (2011**) *Reconceptualising Evaluative Practices in Higher Education: the practice turn* (McGraw-Hill, Open University Press)

Trowler, P., Saunders, M., Bamber, V. (2012*) Academic tribes and territories in the 21st Century* (Taylor and Francis)