BUILDING A QUALITY CULTURE:
BRIEFING PAPER

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Preliminaries

1. There is a standard expectation that higher education will contribute to economic and social development. Institutions are expected to be responsive to the needs of society and the economy and, in many countries including Thailand, governments have sought to achieve this through policies of 'decentralisation' – in other words, by delegating authority to university councils and executives. From a European perspective, decentralisation will promote the development of institutions that are 'innovative, well-managed and forward-looking' (EUA, 2009); 'vibrancy, vitality (and) variety' will characterise the higher education system as a whole (Sursock, 2002). The fundamental question that we shall be exploring in the conference workshops is how our arrangements for academic governance can enable us to achieve these objectives.

2. I should start by defining what I mean by 'academic governance'; I should also explain the structure of my presentation and our workshops. 'Governance' is a rather grand term for what might be defined simply as 'the way that a city, company etc. is controlled by the people who run it' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). 'Academic' governance refers to the control of the academic rather than the corporate affairs of an educational institution and here we are largely concerned with the field of quality management. The management of human resources, IT systems, marketing, the university's estate etc. belong to the field of 'corporate governance' and these functions are beyond the scope of our discussions in our session on 'building a quality culture'.

3. If our concern is with the way that the academic affairs of a university are controlled by the people who run it, we will find it helpful to structure our discussions around two simple questions:

   - *who or what body* controls?

   - *how* is this control exercised?

   These are questions that can be applied to the internal management of a university, and the governance of the higher education system as a whole. Both the workshop questions and my presentation start by exploring the national-level arrangements for controlling the quality of what universities do (external quality assurance). We shall then consider the ways in which these national arrangements influence or shape the design and operation of institutions' internal quality assurance systems. The ultimate purpose of our

discussions is to decide what makes an internal system 'effective', and what this might imply for the reform of external quality assurance requirements.

Case Study

4. The rest of this briefing paper presents a case study on the development of the 'external governance' of higher education institutions (HEIs) in one country – the United Kingdom. I shall also consider the impact of these external quality assurance requirements on the ways in which institutions have designed and operated their own quality management systems. The purpose of the case study is to provide a point of reference for our discussions, and to introduce and apply the key concepts and questions that we shall be discussing at the conference. It also serves a confessional purpose – I am declaring the position from which I am coming. In my presentation I shall be drawing on the experience of other countries, and in the workshops we shall, of course, be focusing on the situation in Thailand.

5. The case study is not an exercise in cultural imperialism! It is certainly not my intention to suggest that there is a single, 'right' way to regulate HEIs and for institutions to design their quality management systems and build 'a quality culture'.   In my view, we should resist the temptation to import quality management systems from other countries, other fields (such as industry and commerce), or even from other institutions. Instead, we should develop our own approaches to the management of quality and the development of 'a quality culture'; and we must ensure – above all – that our approaches are fit for the purposes, character and circumstances of our higher education systems and institutions. In the words of the report of a European Universities Association project:

    > 'First and foremost, quality assurance must be context sensitive and thus individualised. When developing quality assurance processes, HEIs and QA agencies need to take into account disciplinary characteristics, various organisational cultures, the historical position of the institution as well as the national context' (EUA 2009).

6. Finally, you will notice that some of the six workshop questions are descriptive (they ask you to describe how things *are*) and two are normative (they are asking for your opinion on how things *should* be). The focus of this briefing paper is on the descriptive questions as they apply to external and internal quality assurance in the UK. It is for you in the workshop to consider the normative questions when you are discussing the Thai higher education system and your experience within your own institutions.

Background

7. British higher education has changed considerably over the past forty or fifty years. In the early 1960s there were only 25 universities compared with today's figure of around 160 institutions that can award their own degrees. In 1960 about 6% of the age group entered full time university education; the

equivalent figure today is around 49%. Overall, the number of students in higher education has increased 22 fold since the early 1960s.

8. This process of expansion has sometimes been described using the inelegant term 'massification' – the transformation of what had been an 'elite' into a 'mass' higher education system. This expansion has been accompanied by diversification. In the 1960s, specialist colleges for the training of teachers comprised the great majority of higher education institutions that did not have university status. Today, there are some 700 non-university colleges and other institutions that offer higher education programmes: a large number of these are privately owned and many operate on a 'for profit' basis.[1]

9. 'Massification' has an equally inelegant twin: 'marketisation'. This word describes a further, more recent development: the creation of a marketplace in which all higher education institutions would compete with one another for students and public funds. This has been strongly encouraged by government policy and it has profoundly altered the balance between public and private investment in higher education: public money in support of teaching has declined by 80% over a three year period, and income from the fees paid by UK and overseas students has quadrupled over a ten year period. At 0.69% of gross domestic product, public expenditure on British higher education is now the second lowest in Europe.

10. According to Peter Griffith (2014), massification and marketisation have been powerful drivers for the emergence of 'quality' as a political priority. Marketisation incurs the risk that standards might be lowered when institutions compete with one another for students. And, despite the shift from public to private investment, massification has been achieved at considerable public expense, resulting in a concern to ensure that governments and their tax payers are getting 'value for money'.

Who (or what) controls?

11. The first of our workshop questions asks where the Thai system fits within 'Burton Clark's triangle'. I'll give you a full explanation of Burton Clark's triangle (or 'triangular conception') in my presentation. For the moment it is only necessary to explain that he distinguished three ways in which a higher education system might be 'integrated' (organised, managed or called to account). These were through state control, the market and 'academic oligarchy'.

12. Although they were largely dependent on public funding, British universities in the early post war period were for the most part free of state control. With respect to academic matters they were (and remain) largely autonomous,

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[1]   It should be noted that, prior to the creation (as a non profit making company) of the University College at Buckingham in 1973, there were no private HEIs in the United Kingdom.

and until the 1980s they were self-regulating with respect to the quality of their programmes. The external examiner system – an almost uniquely British institution – was the primary means by which the public was provided with an assurance that any variation in academic standards was within an acceptable range.

13. It would appear, then, that 'academic oligarchy' would best describe the way in which the British university system had been organised. There was a recognition of the need for accountability for the distribution and use of public funds, but this was achieved through the University Grants Committee (UGC). The majority of the UGC's membership was drawn from individuals who were actively engaged in university teaching or research. UGC's independence protected the system against 'improper (political) encroachment on legitimate academic freedoms'. It acted as a 'buffer' between institutions and the State.

14. The higher education system expanded in the late 1960s with the creation of some 30 'polytechnics'. This led to what was described, at the time, as a 'binary system' - a system with two parts: the autonomous, self-regulating universities that were accountable only to themselves for the quality and standards of their programmes; and the so-called 'public sector' institutions (the polytechnics and teacher training colleges) that were under direct local government control and whose courses were approved either by a local university (in the case of the teacher training colleges) or by a new independent body (CNAA – the Council for National Academic Awards).[2] The public sector institutions were also subject to regular visits from Her Majesty's Inspectorate.[3]

15. So, in the 1970s the two parts of the system had very different relationships with government. In the 1980s things began to get more complicated. Most of the polytechnics were granted 'accredited' status by CNAA which meant, in effect, that they gained the power to approve their own degree courses. They were also released from local government control. Whilst this gave them an apparent independence it also meant that they lost local government protection from the effects of central government decisions. At the same time, the UGC was replaced by a body that was able to exert more control over the funding of university activities, and universities were 'encouraged' by the government to set up their own quality assurance body – the Academic Audit Unit (AAU) – to oversee the ways in which they handled their responsibilities for managing the quality and standards of their course.

16. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act abolished the CNAA and granted university title to the polytechnics. Funding Councils were created for each of

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[2]   CNAA was established by Royal Charter in 1964 and, with the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act, disbanded in 1992. The Council was responsible for the academic awards offered by the polytechnics and many colleges of higher education.

[3]   Inspectors (HMIs) were employed as civil servants and until 1992 the Inspectorate was part of a government department.

the three countries within the UK and the Act required them to 'secure that provision is made for assessing the quality of education' in institutions for which they supply funding. 'Secure that provision is made' was the crucial phrase, because it indicated that either a Funding Council could itself assess the quality of publicly financed programmes, or it could commission another body (including perhaps the universities themselves) to undertake this task. Over the following ten years, responsibility for external quality assurance was shared between the Funding Councils and a limited company (the Higher Education Quality Council: HEQC).[4]

17. In 1997 this 'power sharing' arrangement was replaced by the creation of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). Like HEQC, QAA is a limited company that is owned by the bodies that represent HEIs; the composition of its Board (the majority of whose members come from *outside* higher education), however, gives the Agency a degree of independence. The work of QAA is now largely governed by its contracts with government departments – the Home Office, the government Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) and BIS' partner agencies (the funding councils).

18. QAA's independence and its relationship with institutions on the one hand, and government on the other, came under threat in 2009 as a result of discussions in a Parliamentary Select Committee. The Committee recommended that greater powers should be given to the Agency, with the effect that the ability of universities to control academic standards would have been undermined. Although the recommendations were not adopted, there has been a change in the relationship between QAA and universities. Some would argue that this change has reduced the autonomy of institutions and increased their accountability to an Agency over which they exert less control (see para 33, below).

19. We have now arrived at what may be new stage in the relationship between universities and the state. In June of this year the funding councils suggested that they should have a different kind of relationship with the universities. QAA would no longer act as the 'go-between' – the buffer body – in that relationship, and university governing bodies would be responsible for ensuring the effectiveness of their institutions' arrangements for managing the quality and standard of programmes. On the assumption that the proposals are consistent with the fundamental principles of 'autonomy' and 'co-regulation', they have received a broad welcome from the higher education community.

20. Back in the mid-eighties, Gareth Williams argued that the British higher education needed to be more 'adaptable' and 'responsive to the needs of society'. He said that we had two choices – institutions should either be subject to 'external regulation' or they should be exposed 'to the opportunities and rigours of the market'. Ten years later, the American

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[4]   HEQC was owned by the higher education institutions and it inherited the staff and functions of the Academic Audit Unit (see para 15, above).

academic, Martin Trow, suggested that we had gone in one direction masquerading as another. He described the UK government as employing 'the rhetoric of the market' whilst in reality universities operate 'in something more like a command economy'. Since then, and particularly over the last ten years, we would appear to have moved in *both* directions: state control over institutions is stronger despite the government's commitment to the creation of a competitive market for higher education. In the words of the Government's 2011 White Paper:

> 'Our reforms to higher education funding will promote the development of a more diverse, dynamic and responsive higher education sector where funding follows the student and the forces of competition replace the burdens of bureaucracy in driving up the quality of the academic experience'.

How is control exercised?

21. The second workshop question is based on the assumption that in most countries the state retains significant control over the higher education system. It is also assumed that universities are not 'owned' by government departments and their staff are not state employees; instead, the state controls institutions by *regulating* them. This, then, prompts two questions: how does the relevant government agency evaluate the quality of what institutions do, and what sanctions does it have in the case of institutions that are found to be inadequate?

22. For the purpose of understanding the British experience, we can begin to answer the first question by distinguishing between 'quality audit' and 'quality assessment'. In 1991 the Government Department for Education and Science defined quality audit as 'external scrutiny (to ensure) that institutions have suitable quality control mechanisms in place' and quality assessment as the 'external review of the quality of teaching and learning in institutions'. Audit focuses on an *institution's* competence in managing its responsibilities, whilst quality assessments are conducted at *subject or programme* level and can often involve the observation by review teams of teaching and learning.

23. A second useful distinction – between 'validation' and 'verification' – is borrowed from software engineering. Validation in this context refers to review methods that seek to establish whether a programme or quality management system is fit for the purposes set by the university itself. Verification, on the other hand, entails the evaluation of a programme or quality management system against some set of externally imposed standards.

24. From 1992, quality assessment exercises were undertaken by the funding councils whilst HEQC conducted audits of universities' quality management arrangements (see para 16, above). In both cases, however, these two review methods fell into the 'validation' category: institutions and their programmes were evaluated against the standards and purposes that they had set for

themselves. Following the publication in 1997 of the Dearing report, there was a move towards 'verification' and the evaluation of programmes and systems against standards that had been agreed by institutions (but *not* imposed by statute). These 'standards' comprised what came to be known as the Quality Assurance Agency's 'Academic Infrastructure' – the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, Subject Benchmark Standards and a Code of Practice which provided guidance on the design and management of quality assurance processes.

25. For reasons that are explained later (see paras 30-31, below), in 2002 QAA abandoned its universal quality assessments (programme-level reviews) in favour of institution-level quality audits. This new arrangement was based on the premise that responsibility for programme-level quality assessments should be repatriated to institutions, and that the Agency's role should be to obtain a periodic assurance that institutions were effective in their handling of this and their more general quality management responsibilities. The funding councils' recent proposals for a new approach to quality review (see para 19, above) could take this 'repatriation' process a stage further.

26. Neither the powers of QAA nor the 'standards' to which institutions are expected to conform are prescribed by statute. As I have explained already (para 17, above), QAA is not a state agency but a limited company that is owned by the 'representative bodies' – in effect, it is collectively owned by institutions.[5] This does not mean that the Agency is toothless. Institutions are obliged to participate in QAA reviews as a condition of their receiving public funding, and this funding could be withdrawn from a 'failing' institution or from an institution that declined to participate in QAA review exercises. And, in 2009, the Parliamentary Select Committee (see para 18, above) recommended that QAA should be able to remove a university's degree awarding powers if there were serious concerns about the standards being maintained by that institution. Although that recommendation was not acted upon, it is already the case that an unfavourable review can result in the removal of an institution's licence to recruit international students.[6]

27. The impact of an unfavourable review on an institution's reputation and on its ability to recruit staff and students is possibly the strongest sanction in Britain's 'marketised' higher education system. This sanction has become more powerful with the shifting balance between public and private investment and the need for institutions to generate fee income from the students they recruit (see paras 9 and 20, above). 'Transparency' has been a government policy requirement since at least 2002: institutions are required to make 'quality' related information publicly available, and there are several independently published surveys of student opinion on the quality of their

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[5]   The 'representative bodies' – Universities UK and Guild HE – are established by and act for higher education institutions.
[6]   This is because QAA acts on behalf of the Home Office (UK Visas and Immigration) to ensure the quality and probity of institutions that are licenced to recruit students from outside the EU.

courses and the teaching they have received.[7] These state-sponsored public information requirements have increased the exposure of institutions to market forces, enabling governments to rely on institutional self-interest in minimising any risks to their reputation that would be posed by an unfavourable review outcome.

Partners and objects

28. One of the workshop questions refers to the distinction between 'regulating as a partner' and 'regulating as an object'. You are asked whether this distinction is useful in discussing the relationship between your universities and the Ministry/OHEC.

29. The distinction is made by Dow and Braithwaite in their 2013 review of the regulation of Australian higher education institutions. Regulation as a 'partner' entails 'working with the (the institution) in a responsive way to achieve a shared outcome'. The institution is expected to 'engage cognitively and emotionally with the task at hand and to contribute constructively to achieving shared objectives'.   An institution is regulated as an 'object' when it is subject to 'prescriptive requirements'. In such a system, 'compliance is uncomplicated …. The regulatee does what is required: no more, no less. Engagement is through obedience'. The first case implies a degree of trust in the institution in the context of a self- or co-regulatory arrangement. In the second case, the expectation of compliance means that the regulator intrudes on any claims that an institution may make to act autonomously.

30. In view of the long-standing tradition of university autonomy (paras 12-13, above), it is not surprising that Britain's Russell Group[8] universities have repeatedly protested against the intrusive nature of the funding councils' and QAA's review methods. Back in 1998, the University of Cambridge described the external quality assurance regime as 'becoming too prescriptive and interventionist'. QAA's proposals were said to present a 'real threat' to 'the autonomy of institutions'. (They) are alien to the character of the University and carry pressures which could seriously damage the flexibility and diversity which is a particular strength of Cambridge; they would certainly be unprofitable for a University such as this'.

31. Cambridge's objection was to being regulated as an 'object'. In the following year, the President of the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals,[9] complained about the 'the endless rounds of assessment' undergone by British institutions. This was echoed by academic members of the House of Lords. As Lord Norton put it, the consequences of QAA's accountability

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[7] The most important of these is the National Student Survey (NSS) of undergraduate students. See http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/results/

[8] The Russell Group represents 24 'leading' UK universities which are committed to maintaining 'the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector'. See http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk

[9] The CVCP was a 'representative body' and the predecessor to Universities UK.

arrangements were 'pernicious and long term' and they threatened to 'undermine rather than enhance the quality of teaching'. In making these comments, he may have had in mind a resolution passed by the academic board of the London School of Economics. The board threatened to secede from its engagements with QAA on the grounds that it had 'infringed academic freedom' and was imposing on institutions 'its own bureaucratic and pedagogical agenda'.

32. The action taken by QAA in 2002 altered the balance between the Agency's responsibilities for quality review and those held by institutions (see para 25, above). In return for bringing universal subject-level quality assessments to an end, institutions were expected to review their own programmes, with the effectiveness of their review methods being tested by periodic QAA audits. Responsibility for 'quality assessment' was thus transferred back to universities, and audit teams were charged with making judgements of confidence 'in the soundness of (an) institution's present and likely future management' of academic standards and the quality of the learning opportunities'.

33. In 2009 QAA's *Handbook for Institutional Audit* honoured the 2002 settlement by stating that an audit team's judgement was not 'about academic standards (or the quality of learning opportunities) as such, but about the way that the institution *ensures* that its academic standards are secured and ... learning opportunities are of an appropriate quality'. In 2011, however, and possibly in response to the conclusions reached by the Select Committee (para 18, above), QAA's *Operational Description for Institutional Review* and its current *Handbook for Higher Education Review* have statements of purpose which suggest that teams will cut across the prerogatives of awarding institutions to make their own judgements on the quality and standards of a university's provision. The advent of these new review methods marked the demise of the confidence judgement; instead, institutions are now judged against *requirements*, review teams set the timescale for recommendations to be met, and institutions must publish action plans that address the review outcomes. Some would contend that QAA's current review method is more intrusive than its predecessors.

34. Writing in 2002, Andrée Sursock (Senior Advisor to the European University Association) argued that intrusive review methods merely 'induce compliance and window dressing'. She advocated an approach based on trust – one that would 'encourage institutions to develop an internal quality culture and meet better the goal of having a dynamic higher education sector'. Universities must, she concluded, 'take ownership (of internal quality assurance). It is only when they will, that the important role played by external quality agencies would be fulfilled. It is only then, that accountability can play fully its function' (Sursock 2002).

Conclusion – building a quality culture

35. Your final workshop task is to consider whether your institutions' quality managements systems are 'well-developed' and, more importantly, whether they are 'effective'. You are also asked to describe the 'quality cultures' in your universities. In this concluding section of my briefing paper I shall attempt to answer these questions from a British perspective.

36. There can be little doubt that UK institutions have 'well developed' quality management systems. They have reaped the rewards (and suffered the deficiencies) of the advice and guidance provided over thirty years by CNAA, AAU, HEQC and QAA. However, a 'well developed' quality management is not necessarily an *effective* one.

37. In my conference presentation I shall argue that an institution's internal quality system is largely shaped by, or is developed in response to, the character and demands of the regulatory regime within which it is placed. In this paper I have said that there have been periods when external quality requirements have been regarded as unduly intrusive. The consequences for institutions were drawn out in a report entitled *Higher Education: Easing the Burden* that was published in 2002 by the Government's Task Force on 'Better Regulation'. The report concluded that: 'the apparent lack of trust between Government and higher education institutions … seems to permeate some HEIs' internal systems, resulting in a lack of trust between HEIs' own quality assurance teams and their academic staff'.

38. For too long, the UK higher education sector has been beset by a compliance and audit culture which has encouraged the practice of what Onora O'Neill termed an 'unintelligent accountability'. Institutions have responded to external requirements by adopting bureaucratic approaches to quality management that are based on a lack of trust, and which undermine the professional commitment and motivation of staff. Too often, as Jethro Newton has observed, internal and external quality systems are regarded as 'beasts to be fed'. Staff respond by adopting 'satisficing' behaviours and by game-playing, resources and effort are diverted from the core activities of teaching and research, and as a consequence the effort to assure quality impedes its enhancement.

39. I have suggested (in para 19, above) that recent proposals signal a change in the funding councils' relationship with institutions. These proposals imply a greater degree of trust in a university's capacity to manage its responsibilities for the standards and quality of their provision. In my view, this is welcome and it should form the core of any new policy mix. Institutions will, however, need to honour their side of the bargain. The onus will be on individual institutions to demonstrate that they are applying their creative energies to the development and evaluation of internal quality management and governance arrangements that command the active and willing support of their staff and which are genuinely fit for institutional

purpose. It is only then that these institutions will be justified in claiming that they have developed a genuine 'culture of quality'.

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This bibliography lists the sources to which I have referred in this briefing paper. It also includes some books and articles that you may find useful in thinking about the issues that we shall be discussing at the conference.

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