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**Abstract**

The complex and contested phenomenon of globalisation presents a fundamental challenge to higher education. Arguably, the development of quality assurance mechanisms during the 1990s and into the 2000s is one of the key globalising practices evident in many higher education sectors ? in both developed and developing countries. However, there are still too few studies on the implications of globalisation processes grounded in detailed examinations of particular historical times and geographical spaces. It is important to investigate context-specific differences in potentially globalising policies and practices, rather than simply assuming global homogenisation. This paper offers an analysis of policy on quality assurance in Australian higher education over the last decade. It points to the changing discourses on `quality' over the period from a management device to a marketing device. It suggests that, in essence, quality assurance mechanisms have provided the government with an avenue for `steering at a distance', where the controls over universities and academics have not lessened but have changed form. The specific mechanisms used are both similar to, and different from, those evident in quality assurance policies in other higher education systems.

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