

A FEW GLOBAL TRENDS AND POINTS OF COMMONALITY IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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In this brief paper I offer a public policy perspective on quality assurance in higher education. I begin by arguing that there is a growing public interest in quality assurance and offer some reasons for this increased attention. I suggest that the forces and factors that have fostered this greater interest are common to many countries and that this commonality has led to a convergence of the fundamental principles underlying quality assurance in different jurisdictions. I conclude by suggesting how these principles might apply at higher education institutions in new nations and emerging systems of higher education in the region.

Is There Common Interest in Quality Assurance?

My argument is that there are some shared interests in quality assurance in higher education across developed and developing economies. These shared interests range from a concern for efficiency and effectiveness in the use of public funds as participation in higher education increases to greater academic mobility.

The most powerful source of increased interest in quality assurance is the increased size of the higher education sector. In the industrialized nations participation in higher education is growing. Greater proportions of each age cohort attend post school institutions. Higher education is moving from being a service for an elite to being a "mass" or "universal" good consumed by more than 50% of young people. (Trow, 2005). This growth in participation carries with it an increased public and private investment. Tax payers and the custodians of State funds want to know if they are getting "value for money". Individual investors, parents and students, also want to know if they are getting a reasonable return and a "good" education. Quality assurance is one way to satisfy these interests.

When the number of institutions of higher education was small and attendance the privilege of a few quality was less politically important. The sponsorship of the Church, Royalty or the professions of medicine and law were guarantees of quality. The participation of the children of the wealthy and powerful was also a source of presumed quality. Wider participation and more institutions, many of which are relatively young, generate demands for mechanisms that prove or demonstrate quality to the State and to other stakeholders.

The other stake holders include students, employers and those that rely on credentials and qualifications especially in trades and professions that directly affect the lives of individuals, be they engineers or doctors, nurses and dentists. Sometimes these interests are described in terms of consumer protection, for example, the need for laws ensuring that a patient is treated properly and ethically. The same language is sometimes used to refer to students as consumers and the importance of ensuring that they receive an appropriate education and access to the knowledge and experiences that will prepare them later life.

A different rationale for quality assurance is offered by those who advocate for greater transparency in the workings of institutions that serve the public. For example "public universities are highly visible functionaries of ...government" and should operate in ways

which enable "taxpayers to observe" how well resources are used. (Poliakoff and Hitt, 2010). Universities should be held to the same standards of openness and accountability as other agencies funded or operated by government. In practice this sometimes means simply the public disclosure of financial records and personnel policies and employee salaries. But it can also extend to making available information about admissions, tuition fees, course requirements, grade distributions and the employment destinations of graduates. It can also refer to information about research grants and the evaluation of teacher performance, although the later is controversial.

A third source of increased interest in quality assurance is increased academic mobility. Most attention is focused on the movement of students. More than 3 million students study outside their country of citizenship an increase over the 1 million who did 10 years ago. The number is expected to continue to increase. Quality assurance provides these mobile students with information that helps them make decisions about where to study and what programs to take. This is particularly important when choices are made at a distance because the potential students and the providers are far apart. The existence of quality assurance procedures gives a measure of comfort to the student choosing a program or an institution. It also indicates that degrees or credentials from these institutions are valued and valuable in the market place because they have some measure of credibility as a result of a process of review. Sometimes this is expressed through accreditation by regional or national bodies or by professional associations in cases like engineering, medicine and law.

Academic faculty and administrators are also mobile. The data on faculty mobility globally is less reliable but the US data shows that over 115,000 scholars visited US higher education institutions in 200/11. This is 30,000 more than visited ten years earlier (HE, 2003 & 2012.) Like students faculty benefit from knowing that the institutions they choose to visit adopt or use quality assurance and are accredited.

A fourth source is the mobility of graduates. In the case of nations with significant numbers of skilled and educated citizens living and working in other nations, quality assurance may increase the likelihood of their credentials being recognized in the host nation. This will benefit the individual by increasing opportunities and reducing "under-employment." It will benefit the host nation by easing skill shortages and it will benefit the home nation by lifting higher education standards as local programs are calibrated with global qualification requirements. These benefits flow to the general population in the form of better services and a more highly educated population

In addition to these broad public benefits that come from, and foster, quality assurance in higher education there are benefits to the institutions themselves. Quality assurance processes encourage self-evaluation and reflection on just how well the organization or its programs are performing. By benchmarking that self-assessment against recognized standards with the aim of identifying areas for improvement. Combined, these acts also enhance the reputation of the institution. Highly regarded institutions use their status and reputation to recruit and retain students and faculty. Their status will often give them access to government funds and grant competitions and help them attract private support.

The immediate beneficiaries of quality assurance are institutions and programs because most academic quality assurance focuses on improving practice within agencies or course of instruction or learning. Faculty and administrators learn from the various steps of the conventional cycle of quality assurance, self-study and documentation of practice

and procedures, alignment with the practice of others and the scrutiny and advice from independent but informed and knowledgeable peers. These lead to better academic programs inside better functioning settings and students and faculty benefit as a result.

Sometimes the quality assurance process is linked to accreditation but this is not always the case. It can be a standalone exercise in institutional improvement or as an instrument of public accountability that is diffused directly to the wider community, be they parents, donors, employers or competitors.

Most national systems of quality assurance and accreditation focus on the quality of domestic programs delivered by traditional institutions. They are often grounded in national legal structures and codes of practice that are based on in-person, same-time provision. Yet the benefits of these processes are not limited to institutions or agencies or students within a nation. Quality assurance and accreditation processes can also assist countries to ensure that foreign institutions and providers that deliver programs inside their borders deliver robust and recognized services and qualifications. And that these services and credentials are in line with national needs and the aspirations and interests of individual citizens. In this respect, establishing transparent and clear quality assurance and accreditation frameworks for national and foreign institutions is vital.

In summary there are significant benefits from quality assurance. Students benefit because accreditation means that the knowledge and skills in their program of study are those necessary for professional practice or for graduation. It also helps them and their parents choose between institutions and invest prudently in programs of an acceptable quality. Employers benefit because students from high quality or accredited programs are more likely to have the skills and capabilities needed for specific roles. This makes recruitment easier and more reliable, and reduces on-the-job training costs. The general public, as taxpayers and as users or consumers of services from educated people, benefit because their taxes are used in reputable programs and because service providers such as doctors and accountants have reached a minimum standard. And importantly higher education institutions, programs and faculty benefit.

Global Convergence of Standards?

These shared drivers of increased interest in quality assurance in higher education have also fostered approaches to quality assurance that are broadly similar across national borders. The most obvious example is the common framework for quality assurance in Europe, the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). These offer "mutually acceptable mechanisms for the evaluation, assurance and certification of quality". The ESG are a response to demands from governments, society, and higher education institutions for "mutually acceptable mechanisms for the evaluation, assurance and certification of quality" (EUA, 2010a). The ESG were developed to be applicable to all OA agencies in Europe, irrespective of structure, function, and size.

The key elements of the ESG are expressed on both internal (what institutions should have in place) and external (what national or regional quality assurance agencies should do) dimensions. Both are relevant to higher education policy makers overseeing evolving systems of higher education.

The internal dimension of the ESG is a set of policies and practices that institutions should have to ensure that quality and improvement are at the heart of the educational mission. They are phrased at a level of generality that accommodates the many differences between the culture, history and governance on the nations in the European Higher Education area. The polices include "formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring

of their programs and awards" and the consistent of explicit criteria, rules and processes for student assessment. They should also means by which institutions judge that those teaching students "are qualified and competent to do so" (ENOA 2005)

The external dimensions of the ESG are founded on two premises. First, that individual institutions benefit from processes of peer review and validation. Second that the public benefits of quality assurance are reinforced and realized by the existence of national or regional quality assurance agencies that act as a source of information and expertise. In practice this means the establishment and operation of external agencies which are singular in purpose; i.e., involved only in quality assurance and not in the design or delivery of educational programs. The external agencies should have sufficient intellectual and fiscal capacity; i.e., be solvent and appropriately staffed and should be separate and independent from state higher funding agencies. Ideally they should be not for profit and in good standing with the academic community, employers, and relevant professionals. Most importantly they should operate in an open and accessible way and be transparent in how they are financed and governed.

These internal and external dimensions constitute the quality assurance framework for 40 or more nations operating in the European Higher Education area. The general principles in the framework can be found in the criteria for accreditation adopted by the regional accreditation agencies in the USA (see for example the accreditation criteria for the Middle States MSCHE 2006) and in the US Federal government's criteria for recognizing accreditation agencies (US Department of Education 2012). They are also in the United Kingdom's "quality code" which places particular emphasis on the role of students. And they are embedded in the approach to quality assurance being pursued by the Arab nations. There is a convergence of principles across the developed nations about what constitutes good quality assurance. But that leaves the question of what does it mean for institutions of higher education who are moving towards academic autonomy and away from strong or close State control? What can they take from this commonality of approach? I offer the following seven maxims as points of reference for institutions developing or reviewing quality assurance procedures.

Seven Maxims for Developing or Reviewing Quality Assurance.

To derive the maximum benefit from quality assurance I suggest that an institution adopt the following principles to guide the development and operation its processes. Quality assurance should :

- i. align with the institution's accreditation aspirations which for many nations in the Central Asia seem to be participation in the Bologna Process;
- ii. align with the individual school's discipline accreditation at both graduate and undergraduate levels;
- iii. facilitate student aspirations for mobility and career entry;

- iv. align with national needs for
 - a. student mobility between a country's institutions of higher education,
 - b. student mobility across national borders, &
 - c. a labor market with effective signaling mechanisms which allow freedom of movement for skilled workers and professionals and assists employers making employment decisions;
- v. contain elements of external review and validation that are appropriate for the institution's stage of development or are necessary for recognition by internationally recognized professional standards bodies;
- vi. meet the information needs of students, employers and the public by providing accessible, understandable and transparent data on various dimensions of performance and quality; and
- vii. give voice to faculty, students and the wider community.
- viii. These seven propositions are not the definitive set. They constitute a beginning of an ongoing process of institutional improvement that aligns with national needs, the needs and aspirations of students and the professional responsibilities of faculty and higher education leaders.

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