Chapter 12
The Strategic Imperative of Quality Assurance:
The Case of the American University in Cairo School of Business

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the fundamental question: What is the strategic importance of quality assurance (QA) for higher education institutions (HEIs)? Divided into four main segments, the chapter begins by defining QA within the context of a continuum, ranging from entirely voluntarily QA—as a part of the HEI internal standard procedures—to more 'prescriptive' models, as mandated by ranking and accreditation bodies. Secondly, the chapter engages in identifying specific strategic functions of QA in light of two inherent objectives of HEIs: competitiveness and sustainable impact. Next, the chapter showcases the role of QA played in advancing the American University in Cairo (AUC) School of Business to the renowned triple-crown accreditation status (AACSB, EQUIS, AMBA), while highlighting both challenges encountered and implementable solutions. Last of all, the chapter discusses potential future changes to QA, given the 'new normal' of the higher education landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Quality Assurance - Defined

The main purpose of this chapter is to discuss the strategic importance of quality assurance (QA) for higher education institutions (HEIs), and to showcase a successful QA application. The introduction of the concept of quality in higher education was influenced by business settings (Newton, 2002). Harvey and Green (1993) emphasize the "relativism" of quality in higher education with regards to two aspects. First, different stakeholders would view quality through various lenses. Second, a form of benchmark

is needed to gauge quality. They further introduce five views of quality: quality as exceptional, quality as perfection or consistency, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value of money, and quality as transformation.

If one would consider higher education as an industry, differential quality among industry competitors should be expected. Quality naturally varies by geographical location, institutional history, program offering, pedagogies, resources (human, physical, and technological) and alumni network, among other factors. Furthermore, quality would typically be reflected in three different aspects of HEIs activities: teaching, research, and impact on communities, whether socially, economically, environmentally or politically. Regardless of the level of quality, assessment is always needed as a starting point. This is then followed by a set of strategies and actions designed to ensure that the level of quality is maintained or even enhanced, which constitutes quality assurance.

Stensaker (2007) theorizes, "Perhaps understanding the effects and outcomes of quality assurance is the most appropriate medicine for how one can best make use of quality assurance in the future" (p.9). QA has profound effects on HEIs in terms of strategies, operations and structures. Damian et al. (2015) focus on impact analysis of quality assurance agencies from Romania, Spain, and Germany, and they generally find commonalities among these agencies in terms of methodologies and units of analysis. However, identifying the impact of these QA activities is still lagging; they further argue that such impact should guide the design of QA activities.

Conventional wisdom posits that QA is needed in any HEI. Its degree of sophistication ranges from simple quality self-checks to more thorough processes with the objective of meeting certain targets set by accrediting and ranking bodies. This is referred to as the QA continuum. However, regardless of the degree to which QA is 'mandated', institutional buy-in and leadership support are always necessary conditions for reaping the benefits of QA. Using German HEIs data, Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018) empirically find that HEIs' top management and cooperation with other education institutions are positively associated with perceived degrees of quality assurance effectiveness. They also highlight the role of quality managers as promoters of QA and the negative affect of the counterproductive connotation that QA is merely a mandatory bureaucratic burden.

At one end of the QA continuum is accreditation with its 'mandatory eligibility criteria and prescribed standards. This external definition of quality (i.e. external to the HEI) is usually based on the educational ecosystem's consensus surrounding what constitutes quality. However, HEI should acknowledge the unique dual nature of accreditation; accreditation is both a means and an end. It is a means of QA in the sense that it drives different aspects of the HEI to conform to certain quality metrics, which are widely accepted by the industry. It is also an end given that bearing a sought-after accreditation seal is a signal of quality status. Accreditations are inherently prescriptive with varying degrees of acceptable maneuverability of HEIs. Phillips and Kinser (2018) caution against a potential negative side effect of accreditation, which is that it may impede innovation by promoting a 'status quo' mentality. International accrediting bodies are sensitive to this sentiment, which some HEIs might have, and many are constantly engaged in relevant conversations within their networks. For example, Sporn et al. (2021) discuss the position of the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) regarding their accreditations, with respect to the recent switch to online teaching given the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. They highlight the importance of flexibility vis-à-vis restructuring and reconfiguration of business schools. Ultimately, a very delicate balance has to be struck between the HEI's commitment to accreditations and its genuine desire to maintain its unique identity, based on innovation and creativity.

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