

Chapter 3

Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Fertilizer for Academic Enhancement or a Luxury of an Ideal World

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines whether post-crisis regions can benefit from quality assurance in higher education. To this end, it defines what notions of quality exist and how quality can be improved. Special attention is given to the formalized process of accreditation of study programs. From the perspective of neo-institutionalism, it is argued that quality assurance as a rule-based process requires functioning state structures. For post-crisis regions, it is therefore of crucial importance whether or not crises and traumas have an impact on the existence of the state. It is postulated that without an effective administrative and legal system, accreditation or other forms of legally binding quality assurance are not useful. Rather, low-threshold procedures based on the principle of fitness for/of purpose would be recommended in such cases.

INTRODUCTION

In an ideal world, higher education is a driver of progress and development for humanity. Through the combination of teaching, research and practical transfer, individuals build up their competencies, which on the one hand results in individual satisfaction, but on the other hand also contributes to cultural, technological, political or social improvements. However, investing in education and training only pays off in the long run, and the intended positive impact is achieved with a time lag. Given limited resources, spending on education is competing with other, also important, financial expenditures. This is particularly the case in developing and emerging countries, but above all in all kinds of regions in

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crisis. Countries and regions affected by natural disasters or man-made crises are usually confronted with the decision whether to focus political and social attention and resources on vital areas such as the provision of food, public security or infrastructure. Education - especially of the elementary level - is one of the most fundamental requirements for a modern society. Higher education, by contrast, has a subordinated status. Nevertheless, at a certain level of development, such education is also required to establish resilience to crises and to promote know-how in a country. Once a country has reached this stage, it is not only the mere provision and availability of higher education that is relevant, but also ensuring that it is of adequate quality.

This chapter will discuss the importance of academic higher education for states and societies in crisis from a societal perspective. In this context, a special focus is given to the function of quality assurance (QA) in higher education institutions. A critical reflection is made on whether QA should be considered as a key component of academic work in global higher education, or whether it is only a “luxury” in a highly developed educational landscape with stable structures in society.

The reasoning is presented in three steps. First, some basic perspectives on quality and quality assurance in higher education are introduced. Quality goals are almost naturally linked to the goal of being among the best compared to other universities. Thus, higher education institutions (HEIs) want to prove their *excellence*. While this aspect of competition is perfectly reasonable in the long run for strategic developments, it appears to be problematic for higher education institutions in post-crisis regions. Here, it must be about establishing and consolidating structures and processes at universities that guarantee stability and reliability. Against this background, the notion of quality should be defined as “*fitness for/of purpose*”. The emphasis is less on comparing the university’s own performance with other universities in top ranks, but rather on achieving and adapting individual objectives. With recourse to practical examples of German accreditation agencies which carry out quality assurance activities in emerging and developing countries, perspectives on market effects and the development of quality cultures will be examined. This is done by contrasting the emphasis of external quality assurance in the German home market and the goals pursued by the agencies in non-domestic regions. Here, it will become clear that there is a balancing act with regard to the application and interpretation of quality standards. In a second step, QA with the instrument of accreditation is discussed as a means of institutionalization. The analytical framework of neo-institutionalism is used to illustrate which conditions must be in place to gain the benefits that accreditation can bring. In the third part, the findings are applied to quality assurance and accreditation in crisis-ridden higher education systems. As soon as there is a common understanding of quality - but also of its limitations - higher education will achieve what makes it so special: long-term, global cooperation. Quality assurance opens the doors for cooperation and promotes mutual trust. The basis for the creative and visionary work of HEIs is, first and foremost, academic freedom. This includes scientific freedom to follow ideas and interests according to one’s own inclination. In addition, it means the political freedom of unhindered publication, discussion and dissemination of research results. In this sense, academic work is global and not limited by national or regional borders. From this point of view, higher education and context-appropriate QA are characterized as essential components for sustainably (re-)building crisis-ridden regions in a modern world. These insights then lead to a conclusion in which recommendations for politicians and university managers are made.

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