

Chapter 20

Recent Trends in Global Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Globalization, massification of tertiary education, changing labor market and ICT revolution have radically altered the tertiary education environment posing new challenges to governments, higher education providers and other key stakeholders in terms of relevance and credibility of provisions. Quality assurance has evolved and became a prominent feature of higher education reforms worldwide. At the start of the millennium, a global quality assurance model emerged as regional and international networks of quality assurance agencies cooperated on setting pre-defined quality standards and criteria for self-assessments. However, with the radical alterations in higher education, it became clear that the traditional means for internal and external evaluations are no longer adequate to ensure the acceptable level of tertiary education performance. This chapter elaborates on the above issues by a) identifying the trends challenging existing QA models, and b) elaborating on innovative approaches to quality assurance to meet these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, the development of quality assurance (QA) systems has become one of the most important aspects of higher education reform worldwide. Since the mid-1980s, several countries around the world started to set up national QA agencies. A ‘quiet quality assurance revolution’ was gradually becoming a global higher education movement, carried out by various international schemes and projects (Salmi, 2015: 4, 2017: 8). A common QA model emerged from the cooperation among regional and international networks of quality assurance agencies. It combines self-assessment and peer review of either study programmes or higher education institutions (HEIs) based on a set of pre-established standards and quality criteria (Martin and Stella, 2007).

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QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ITS OBJECTIVES

QA is an all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions, or programmes ((Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, & Pârlea, 2007: 74). QA represents a host of mechanisms --managerial, procedural, or pedagogical-- that HEIs and the HE system they inhabit take to “assure” that educational standards or expectations are being met. These mechanisms can be internal quality assurance (IQA), i.e. intra-institutional practices to monitor and improve the quality of higher education institutions, and external quality assurance (EQA), i.e. inter- or supra-institutional schemes assuring the quality of HEIs and their study programmes.

Recent years has noted the change of focus of QA from mostly ‘input’ measures to “quality” of student learning outcomes and the “quality” of faculty teaching. (Shorb, 2021). Older “input” measures were now seen as insufficient and there was an increasing need for HEIs to provide utility to students in terms of tangible benefits to their career advancement. For this HE became increasingly learning-centered and HE “quality” had to demonstrate its educational value through demonstrable learning gains. This neo-liberal view of QA has heightened the need for “quality” evaluations to become more quantitative, universally comparable, and readily understandable (Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020; Shorb, 2021).

The objectives of QA can be grouped into three main categories: quality control, accountability and serving public interest, and improved practices. To achieve these purposes, QA employs a range of mechanisms. There are, however, three mechanisms at the heart of QA: evaluation, accreditation, and quality audits. Despite the diversity in the approaches and implementation modalities adopted by countries around the world, a global model has emerged (Bornmann, Mittag, and Daniel, 2006). Main elements of the model include a self-assessment made by the HEI based on set of quality standards and criteria, this is reviewed by a team of experts who subsequently submit their report and recommendations which is then reported to the HEI by the QA agency.

CHALLENGES FOR QA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The past era witnessed rapid change and disruption in higher education with new expectations being created for higher education, and, consequently, for QA. Higher education is increasingly being asked to ensure the relevance of provision and the recognition of outcomes and outputs – be it graduate qualifications, research outputs, or other kinds of knowledge production and transfer (Uvalic-Trumbic & Martin, 2021). This transformation raises questions about the need for a change to QA mechanisms and approaches. To remain relevant, QA must adapt and be responsive to the diversity and developmental needs of the fast-changing higher education sector.

The following paragraphs will outline major changes in HE and their impact on QA in addition they identify the challenges that have resulted from implementing QA systems over the past decades.

Recent years witnessed global expansion of higher education with worldwide enrollment numbers from some 100 million to 221 million between 2000 and 2017 (UNESCO, 2017/2018). By 2040, the number of students enrolled in higher education worldwide is expected to surpass 660 million (Calderon, 2018). Between 2000 and 2017, the global higher education gross enrolment ratio (GER), with some regional disparities, increased from around 19 to 38 per cent (UNESCO, 2017/2018). The rapid growth led to improved access and, to a certain extent, lower levels of inequality, however it also had profound

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