International Journal of Information Technology and Management

Vol. IX, Issue No. XIII, August-2015, ISSN 2249-4510

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AN INTERNATIONALLY INDEXED PEER REVIEWED & REFEREED JOURNAL

International Journal of Information Technology and Management
Vol. IX, Issue No. XIII, August-2015, ISSN 2249-4510

A Comparative Study on the Quality Assurance Measures in India and International

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Abstract – Quality assurance is so omnipresent and its vocabulary so pervasive nowadays in higher education policy and discourse that one forgets how relatively recent the enthronement of the term "quality" actually is. Hence, before embarking on an attempt to trace the key paths and challenges which quality assurance will be facing in the years to come, it may be helpful to put the concern with assuring quality in higher education into context.

This should not just be a historical exercise, of course, but should also serve to emphasize that quality development in higher education is a great deal more than the formal quality assurance processes that policymakers like to focus upon when they speak about quality in higher education. Clearly, quality enhancement is the sum of many methods of institutional development, ranging from competitive hiring procedures, creating appropriate funding opportunities, to facilitating communication between disciplines and supporting innovative initiatives through institutional incentives.

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INTRODUCTION

The Bologna reforms may serve as a good case in point: while quality assurance is an important part of the Bologna reforms, the latter's relevance to quality goes far beyond the confines of quality assurance alone. Seen from their bright side, the Bologna reforms could improve quality in multiple ways: through the opportunities they offer to reflect and review curricula, to reform teaching methods (student-centered learning, continuous assessment, flexible learning paths) and even through strengthening horizontal communication and institutional transparency. Putting quality assurance into context thus means looking at quality concerns before Bologna, through Bologna, and beyond Bologna. Only then will we understand the value of quality assurance in Bologna and the conditions of its successful realization at universities.

Before Bologna, higher education debates in the 90s were characterized by multiple national debates on quality problems in higher education, largely due to the effects of under-funded massification. Complaints about overcrowded classrooms and student-staff ratios, which did not allow for individualized attention, coupled with outdated teaching methodologies and teacher-centered curricula, long study duration and high drop-out rates, were among the most prominent of the many complaints about a higher education sector that was not equipped to respond to the demands of its time.

At the same time, more and more systems saw the need for increased autonomy of higher education institutions to enable them to face the widening range of demands and accelerating pace of international research competition better. The introduction of institutional autonomy and the simultaneous cutting back of state control could only be realized, however, in conjunction with heightened accountability provisions. Hence, in many countries quality assurance agencies were either created or transformed to meet these new demands.

The 90s were also a decade of increasingly celebrated cooperation. The European Pilot Project on Comparing Quality Assurance Methodologies among five systems (1994, resulting in the Council Recommendations of 1995) was only one expression of the European optimism, which reflected the hope that increased cooperation and mutual understanding would ultimately result in quality enhancement of all parties.

We should note that the key methodological features which were elaborated then are still part of the methodological creed of today's European QA Guidelines. Finally, one should recall that the quality concerns of the 90s became all the more highly politicized as they became associated with the (lack of) competitiveness of European higher education, the latter being recognized as a key foundation of thriving knowledge economies. The concern with knowledge-intensive economies and societies moved higher education institutions, their problems and

challenges, to the foreground. Quality enhancement became a charged theme and quality assurance its key guarantor.

RESEARCH STUDY

The Bologna Reform Process which became the focal point of reform in most European countries, from 1999 onwards, brought a wide range of quality concerns into the central arena of higher education discourse. Beyond the issues of quality assurance in the more narrow sense of institutional processes, quality enhancement can be said to be at the heart of all Bologna reform aims. Indeed at its origins, the Bologna reforms were conceived essentially as a process of quality enhancement, at least by the initiators of the reforms at European and national levels.

The Bologna reforms were based on the assumption that the international readability of curricular structures and the underlying quality assurance systems would increase cooperation and competition, mobility and institutional good practice, with quality enhancement occurring as a natural consequence of wider and deeper comparisons.

A second assumption seemed to be that increased mutual trust in each other's 'quality assurance systems would result in increased trust in the quality of higher education provision in those systems, thereby resulting in cross-border movement. Most importantly, in addition to new curricular structures, Bologna was supposed to bring quality enhancement in teaching: many higher education representatives believed Bologna would accelerate or even trigger the move to outcome-based and/or student-centred teaching in the countries in which traditional less inter-active approaches of teaching were still dominant. Quality assurance processes were supposed to support an increased institutional attention to the hitherto often neglected quality of teaching.

Many students also associated the hope for more flexible learning paths with the Bologna reforms. Some academics welcomed Bologna curricular reforms as an opportunity for widening interdisciplinary courses. In particular, the possibility of disciplinary reorientation between the Bachelor and the Master level was seen as of benefit to the new degree structures. Some students and academics also hoped for more space for independent learning and were later disappointed to observe the opposite effect: the compression of longer degree programmes into shorter ones often led to content and work overload, thus leaving less time for independent projects and learning. To support these developments, quality improvements were also supposed to be brought about with respect to the transparency of student information and programme descriptions.

First, the ESG emphasize strongly that the primary responsibility for QA lies with higher education institutions themselves, rather than with any outside body. This was already officially acknowledged by the Education Ministers in Berlin and Bergen, but the ESG add the noteworthy remark that the external control should be lighter if internal processes prove robust enough, which is precisely what universities had been hoping for (see Trends IV report, 2005): "If higher education institutions are to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes, and if those processes properly assure quality and standards, then external processes might be less intensive than otherwise."

The second achievement consists in the emphasis that internal quality assurance should not be reduced to formalized processes but should be likened more to a set of institutional and individual attitudes, a "quality culture", aiming at "continuous enhancement of quality." Thirdly, the ESG, like the Bologna reforms in general, reflect a certain shift to student and stakeholder interests away from the pure supply perspective which had dominated universities for decades. This attention is reflected e.g. in the concern with student support and information, with graduate success and, of course, with the demand for including students as active participants in QA processes, even as members in agencies' external review teams.

At faculty and department level, the benefits of the evaluation relate, first of all, to the opportunity to connect curricular, institutional and research structures and activities around a common ground of the larger subject area which usually encompasses a wide number of fields, programmes and even disciplines but still within an orbit of rather compatible disciplinary cultures.

In addition to allowing the combination of teaching, research, and institutional development concerns, this subject area perspective offers the advantage that academics get more easily engaged since they expect some feed-back on contents and not just on the institutional conditions of their core activities and scientific development.

Furthermore, reflections on institutional development are often more substantial if they are related to scientific development. Benefits also consist in the attention paid to real strategic decisions like hiring policy, restructuring, new interdisciplinary initiatives. There is however an important precondition for effective feed-back, namely the link to institutional strategy and institutional autonomy (e.g. with respect to priority-setting in recruitment, infrastructural investment. Without an effective link back to institutional policies, the outcomes of a review may well remain without appropriate consequences.

Quality evaluations at institutional level can be an excellent way to sharpen strategic reflection, addressing such questions as, for instance: • How to help the development of beneficial institutional

perspectives in de-centralized institutions? • How best to combine disciplinary with interdisciplinary developments and institutional structures? • How to develop fair processes of rewarding performance in a non-mechanistic manner (leaving enough space for new initiatives) and still grant enough autonomy to de-central units? • How to combine bottom-up development drive with institutional quality standards? • How to identify and support institutional priority areas (hiring, infrastructural investment)? Of course, in order to be useful, such institutional reviews presuppose a sufficient degree of institutional autonomy, otherwise the recommendations and action plans which they are likely to bring forward cannot be realized.

If institutional autonomy and some resources for addressing the identified needs for improvement are given, however, they can contribute quite effectively to priority-setting and the professionalization of university leadership and management. Of course, relative autonomy or negotiation power with the decision-maker is a precondition for the effectiveness of any internal quality assurance process, at any level of institutional development. But other factors also play an important role for the success of the evaluation.

QUALITY ASSURANCE MEASURES

First and foremost, one should mention the time and willingness of academics, deans and institutional leadership to take the evaluation process and recommendations seriously. This attitude is based on the expectation that the reviewers will offer friendly well-informed advice rather than being perpetrators of a control exercise with an agenda that does not take the aims of the reviewed unit as the decisive reference point.

One should add that every quality review which does not lead to some constructive development decision will undermine the readiness of academics and institutional leadership to engage in future evaluation processes openly and constructively. A second success factor consists in the frequency of the quality assurance cycle. If the reviews occur too frequently, this may result in evaluation fatigue and routine which would negate the motivation and the willingness to engage in genuine dialogue.

Thirdly, a careful choice of peers is vital. They have to be sufficiently distant, i.e. without being too closely linked to the reviewed unit or in a conflict of interests toward it. Given the small size of academic communities in most countries, this usually means that international peers have to be included. A careful choice will presumably also include the attempt to make the peer group cover different disciplinary areas to allow for enlarged horizons.

Fourthly, a well-organized feed-back should ensure that there are well-reflected and well-argued consequences to ensure that institutional trust is built around the planned actions. In some form it would also be useful to create opportunities for feed-back of institutional reviews into national system reflections so as to influence framework conditions that are set at national level. Finally, at institutional and national level, resources should be reserved not just for the quality review process but also for implementing the recommendations and that the resources for the improvements should be significantly higher than the resources for the review processes. If this cannot be guaranteed, one should reduce the scope of the review accordingly.

Standards in higher education: quality control or quality development? As a concept, standards are rather difficult to grasp, and often get lumped together with similar concepts such as indicators, benchmarks, measures and norms. Definitions of standards vary internationally, which may be attributed to linguistic particularities as well as to differing contexts of application and use. Standards can become quality standards if actors/institutions reach an agreement to link them to quality.

Yet, since quality itself is a complex construct with various dimensions and different meanings (cf. Harvey, 2006, or the often-cited older version Harvey & Green, 1993), it is important to consider which quality notions they are built upon or aim at. Teaching quality for example has been frequently linked to student satisfaction standards or to competence standards. In each case, the implications for setting, changing or raising the respective standard differ substantially. Yet, in principle, all standards have a normative function (cf. Lassnigg & Gruber, 2001), whether they provide consistent scales and measures, regulate actions, set limits or facilitate comparisons. It is necessary, though, to take a closer look at how such norms are handled.

On the one hand, standards can be addressed as fixed parameters, which do not give much leeway to the actors involved while, on the other hand, they can be used as adaptable concepts which react sensitively to changes of their base of reference (e.g. in the case of upper/lower limit standards or standards with a broad range of tolerance). Extra consideration should be paid to the political aspects involved, especially if standards are mainly used to assist central management for controlling and steering processes.

Apart from their normative purpose, standards can be functionalized in various ways: • Easing manageability: This function is among the most visible ones, as it aims at verifying whether quality goals have been achieved. It provides orientation and establishes a basis for action routines. In this regard,

the compliance with standards is considered to allow conclusions about the quality of an institution, its activities, processes and outcomes which are assessed against the standards. Paradoxically, standards used in this way have some counterproductive effects as well: the more precisely they are defined, the more necessary it will become to specify them even further in order to include any potential circumstances (or exclude any unwanted alternative).

In addition, the actors bound to such standards are dispossessed of a considerable degree of autonomy as all important decisions are already pre-made (even though it is certainly possible to formulate such standards in a less prescriptive way by leaving at least some room for manoeuvre).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Standards can be used for comparative purposes as well as for assessments within various contexts (e.g. providing evidence whether certain quality goals have been met or presenting a basis for accreditation procedures). In order to make such comparisons/ assessments possible, standards should be defined quite clearly and allow easy verification whether they have been met (e.g. in the case of standard-based evaluations, cf. Stake, 2004).

On the other hand, this may cause some problems as well, because standards fulfilling this function tend to be restricted to aspects that are easily measurable (e.g. number of publications as a measure for research quality or student satisfaction scales as measures of teaching quality), potentially overlooking aspects that might be at least equally important but are also more difficult to assess (cf. Lueger & Vettori, 2007). And, last but not least, as most universities can be characterized as organizations with a high degree of internal differentiation/heterogeneity, comparative standards can rarely claim general validity.

Universities that want to claim (and prove) that they conform to the requirements for high-quality education, research and administration, can support such claims (and ‘provide evidence’) by formulating and implementing quality standards, thus making their quality efforts visible to the outside. Standards fulfilling such an accountability function ensure transparency and demonstrate what is being done in order to legitimate public trust (and financial support).

On the downside, this leaning towards externally accepted success factors and best practices may very well lead to increased levels of standardization and homogenization within the higher education community. Strategies and activities that have proven useful elsewhere get adapted and copied (cf. the work of Powell and DiMaggio, 1991, on mimetic processes, normative pressures and coercion as mechanisms of institutional isomorphic change) without sufficient reflection on contextual factors and aspects of organizational culture, potentially leading to completely different outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Quality standards can also direct the attention of institutional actors towards quality-relevant aspects of their daily work and interactions, thus encouraging them to consider these aspects in their actions and decision-making processes. Such process-oriented standards may unfold their full potential by supporting the development of localized, customized quality strategies which pay attention to the diverging interests, quality notions and subcultures within a university.

Quality standards within a participative quality culture framework The quality culture approach promoted by EUA (cf. EUA 2006, 2005, Sursock, 2004) differs clearly from more traditional quality management strategies, shifting attention to more development-oriented and value-based aspects. The approach demands the involvement of multiple internal and external stakeholders, underlining the fact that a quality culture cannot be implemented from above, yet on the other hand ambivalently stating that strong leadership may be necessary for starting and promoting the process in the first place. It is just this ambivalence concerning the relationship of top-down and bottom-up ideas (or differing management ideologies, respectively) that will pose one of the major challenges for the approach in future years. It has to be stated that the concept is still underdeveloped in terms of theory, especially with regard to the meaning(s) of culture within the overall framework, even though this deficit seems to have gained increased attention in recent times (cf. Harvey & Stensaker, 2007, Lueger & Vettori, 2007, Vettori et al., 2007).

We defined quality cultures as stakeholder-dependent, historically grown and learning oriented social phenomena that can be barely managed and make it difficult to predict future developments. Such a participative quality culture is never homogeneous since it reflects the complexity of the interactions and interpretation the culture(s) emerge(s) from. Interventions are possible, but often only in an indirect way that takes localized and sub-cultural differences into account, as the latent premises for perceptions and actions are only slowly changing and cannot be directly tackled. As a consequence, focusing on sustainable internal developments will demand a strategy which basically understands central management as a function for supporting the other institutional actors developing and unfolding their potentials. Such a strategy has to take the factual heterogeneity (i.e. subcultures) of larger universities into account and emphasizes localized and customized quality strategies.

As paradoxical as it may seem, within such a framework, standards can even lead to more

flexibility and inspire innovation instead of streamlining and homogenising individual efforts and thus losing much needed social acceptance.

Elements of this type of strategy may include: • Harmonising general (institutional) and local standards; general standards may work primarily as guidelines for orientation (e.g. the quality standards of the Swiss University Council (http://www.cus.ch/ Englisch/publikationen/richtlinien/) which have to be locally adapted and implemented • Involving all actors with serious claims, concerns and issues in negotiating and defining standards; here, the crucial factor is a common understanding of such standards, which can only be achieved through processes of continuous, reciprocal communication

Delegating responsibility (autonomisation of quality development) and empowering stakeholders to develop their own goal and measures; this may well increase the commitment of the actors involved, even though the decentralized objectives and actions must fit into the overall mission/framework

Allowing for the possibility that standards may change during various stages of development processes; this will require sufficient leeway for decision-making and an avoidance of inflexible process standardizations. Emphasising the signal function of standards; basically it is not the university management or some specialized quality assurance unit that 'produces' quality, but various other actors (students, teachers, researchers, administrators etc.). Used in a certain way, quality standards can sensitise them towards certain problems and raise quality awareness.

Considering latent and symbolic aspects of standards; quality standards will be interpreted ('read') and used in different ways and on different levels – it is important to acknowledge the fact that implementing them can have effects other than the most obvious or desired ones and to make provision for dealing with subsequent difficulties. It has been our main argument in this paper that different types of standards are differently suited for supporting and influencing quality assurance and quality development and that we should pay more attention to the ways they are adopted in order to realise the overall objective. Even if the quality culture approach may basically be a tool for analysing 'who we are' instead of 'who we want to be' (cf. Harvey & Stensaker, 2007), tackling the latter question is not beyond our influence. Dealing with quality standards in a cautious, reflexive and productive manner is certainly a step in a promising direction.

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