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Shaping or sharing? QA in a value-driven EHEA

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Short bio (150 words max): Professor Nataliia Stukalo is the INQAAHE Board Director and Vice-Head at the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance in Ukraine. She is well-known educator, quality assurance expert and researcher at national level. Nataliia has 10 years of experience in online education, gained working at UK universities. Before being elected as a member of NAQA, she spent 20 years teaching and managing at Ukrainian, British and German universities. Nataliia is the author of more than 100 academic papers. She completed her PhD and DSc in International Economics at Kyiv National Economic University.

Proposal

Title: Value-Driven QA: Does it Matter in the War and Post-War Times?

Abstract

The EHEA's fundamental values such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy, stakeholder engagement in higher education governance and fostering research are the core of modern internal and external higher education quality assurance. However, wartime and other emergency situations raise the question of whether value-driven QA of higher education matters when human and national existence are in mortal danger. How does value-driven QA ensure public confidence in higher education during the war? What key values should be enhanced to increase public confidence in higher education in post-war society?

The case of higher education QA during the Russian-Ukrainian war is used to open discussion with participants on the role of education quality in enhancing democratic values, human rights and sustainable development. Higher education based on these values will make substantial contribution and play crucial role in the post-war societies and strengthen democracy and piece in Europe and all over the world.

INTRODUCTION

Value-based quality assurance (QA) is the mainstream in the modern higher education. The QA agencies develop their strategies and follow the relevant values regardless the emergency situations and arising challenges at the national level and in the global environment. In the most cases QA Agencies share the values identified as European Higher Education Area (EHEA) fundamental values "...such as freedom of expression, autonomy for institutions, independent student unions, academic freedom, free movement of students and staff." (www.ehea.info). Reforms on higher education (HE) including QA are adopted on the basis of these common values. "Academic freedom, institutional autonomy and the participation of students and staff in higher education governance are key elements of our shared values and commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. They are also essential to fostering high quality education and research..... we recognise the role and responsibility of higher education institutions and we encourage them to engage in critical self-analysis and strategic value development." (BFUG, 2017). From the other side, it is recognised that societal changes require considering new aspects of the fundamental values, which go far beyond the legal relationship between public authorities and the academic community. Bergan (2015) at Yerevan Ministerial Conference during the presentation of the EHEA fundamental values mentioned that they are formed "... in the context of the current

political, socio-economic and demographic challenges: economic crisis, regional conflicts, technological developments, migration streams and changes in the labour market”.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is also evidence of academic discussion of the values in higher education and its quality assurance. For instance, Eaton (2021) argues that QA has always contributed to sustaining and improving the core values of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and social responsibility as well as it led peoples' commitment to these fundamental values. It happens through promoting new teaching and learning practices, creating new types of institutions and education providers. The issues related to academic freedom importance for the future of value-based HE and QA were discussed at the CHEA (2020) webinar. Considering national context of the QA Mishra (2007) discusses national development, fostering global competitiveness, ethical values, promotion of technologies and creating an atmosphere and quest for excellence as core values. Another example of value-driven QA at national level is case of National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance in Ukraine (NAQA). In addition to fundamental values of academic freedom and institutional autonomy NAQA identifies independence, trust, partnership, integrity and transparency as key values stated in its Strategy 2019-2022 (NAQA, 2019). Looking at strategies of the most ENQA member agencies there is evidence the similar EHEA fundamental values are shared and specific values formed to reflect national context and peculiarities.

From the other side, Eaton (2021) considers that emergency situation such as covid-19 pandemic as well as “the major and painful focus on social change around issues of race and equality” raise the role and importance of QA efforts. The higher education core values are formed in the context of societal requests and challenges, political, social and economic situation. So, pandemic and ongoing russian-Ukrainian war have potential impact on the value-based QA.

One of the earliest studies regarding higher education in war conditions is “Higher education and the War” by Robert E.Spiller was published in 1942 during the Second World War. The author argues that Universities and the whole higher education are supposed to make significant efforts and readjustments to survive and to be useful for the society. The study by Milton and Barakat (2016) investigates the role of HE in the post-war societies and argues “while the sector is typically a very low reconstruction priority, it has the potential, if addressed strategically, to act as a catalyst for effective and sustainable post-war recovery”. There is a focus on analysis of the relationship between higher education and four core intervention agendas in post war: stabilisation and securitisation, reconstruction, state-building and peace-building. Clarke-Habibi (2021) also states that HE can do more to transform conflict and build peace and believes that universities are critical actors in peace-building, sharing and promoting core humanity values, they also respond challenges enabling social inequalities, ethnic divisions and a culture of violence.

AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There is evidence of academic debate on the values in higher education and its QA as well as some studies devoted to HE at war. However, there is lack of academic dialogue if value-driven HE QA matters in the wartime and different emergency situations and during crisis. Thus, the aim of the paper is to identify if the value-driven HE QA matters during the wartimes and what values should be in the focus of HE QA in post-war society.

The research questions are:

How important is HE QA in emergency situations?

How does value-driven QA ensure public confidence in HE during the war?

What key HE values should be enhanced to increase public confidence in HE in post-war society?

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research uses both primary data and secondary sources and it is based on the case study and survey method.

The case study is a proven useful research method for education field of study which contributes not only to theoretical understanding of the research problem, but also to practice improving. This research method allows to explain outcomes of the particular case, to add descriptive richness, to formulate concept and to generate theory (Yin, 2014). The case study is also one of the most appropriate research methods when the practice is ahead of theory like in case of NAQA (Ukraine) which is the operational QA agency at full scale war.

In addition to this particular case study, results of three surveys conducted in Ukraine within the last 6 months are also considered and interpreted.

NAQA survey: NAQA questionnaire was distributed among the participants of the NAQA Forum on QA in wartime held in May 2022. Participants of this survey are Ukrainian educators, QA experts and practitioners from all over the world, students and the other stakeholders. 269 responses were collected.

The other two surveys were conducted by NAQA in partnership with Ukrainian State Inspectorate of Quality (USIQ) and School for Policy Analysis NaUKMA (SPA).

USIQ survey: 12003 respondents (both students and teachers of all types of higher educational institutions (HEIs) from different regions of Ukraine and subject areas) have participated and it was conducted in September 2022.

SPA survey: survey “Higher education in the wartime through the students’ eyes” conducted by School for Policy Analysis NaUKMA (www.spa.ukma.edu.ua) in partnership with NAQA in June-July 2022. 12019 students from 30 HEIs have participated this survey.

Data collection was followed by analysis, repeated process of critically reading, interpreting and reaching shared understandings of the data. After that the results obtained were compared with secondary sources, expectations and research questions, interpreted, contrasted and summarized.

HOW IMPORTANT IS HE QA IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS?

When the Russian war aggression has started and the life of all Ukrainian people, activities of all institutions and the whole country functioning had to be adjusted to the war conditions the need of external and internal HE QA was questioned. Does quality of education matter when the country is at war? How can HEIs ensure quality of study programmes under the war conditions when their premises are bombed, their staff and students are either in the armed forces or kidnapped or lost their homes or fled? The key argument to stop accreditation procedures was that the only important issue now is Ukrainian people’s physical survival. The contrary arguments were: nation can’t survive without quality education, the economy and industry can’t function properly without experts in the relevant fields, only well-educated people can rebuild the country in the post-war period.

NAQA is the only Ukrainian QA agency and it decided to remain operational regardless full scale Russian invasion into Ukraine started on February 24, 2022. NAQA keeps all its activities including external QA procedures and accreditations. So, from the first days of the war NAQA has demonstrated its commitment to the value of quality education and proceeded with the QA procedures to the possible extent.

According to NAQA Survey 91% of QA experts and stakeholders (73% of respondents strongly agree and 18% agree) confirmed that QA of higher education is important in the wartime. SPA student survey demonstrates comparable numbers - 64% of students strongly agree and agree on question ‘Even in wartime higher education quality assurance is important for me’ (40% of student respondents answered ‘strongly agree’, 24% - agree, 24% - neither agree nor disagree, 8% - disagree). These data confirm that quality HE matters regardless emergency situation and both internal and external QA procedures should be conducted to possible extent.

After a half of a year studying at war 47% of Ukrainian students consider that the quality of education has not changed in the wartime and 38% think that it has slightly deteriorated. Moreover 50% of respondents agree (23%) and strongly agree (27%) it is normal that quality of education is deteriorated during the wartime.

USIQ survey also demonstrates 83% of respondents believe that quality of HE has not changed (or even become better (9%)) during the war and 75% - that QA procedures are effective (43%) or partially effective (32%). 62% of respondents (including 12% formally involved) are engaged into QA procedures.

So, QA procedures remain effective and stakeholders are still engaged into them. From the other side, there is evidence of societal claim on changing role of QA agencies and making specific focus on supporting communication and consultancy. Thus, NAQA survey demonstrates that priority QA activities suggested by respondents are the following: updating teaching methods and learning approaches (75%), teachers’ professional development (71%), updating study programmes and courses content (40%), students and other stakeholders involvement (34%) and students surveys holding (35%). Respondents also suggest strengthening NAQA role as a platform for best practices exchange (70%), increasing consultative role (55%) and informational role (49%) and NAQA full membership in ENQA (39%).

These data confirm the findings presented during EQAF-2020 on changing and extending role of QA agencies in pandemic times, raising importance of QA flexibility and adaptability, QA consultancy and supportive functions in emergency times. Consultative, supportive and practice-sharing functions are becoming more significant, implemented at the meta-level and applicable locally, nationally and internationally. (Stukalo, 2020)

HOW DOES VALUE-DRIVEN QA ENSURE PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN HE DURING THE WAR?

The emerging HE QA systems are often characterized by a lack of confidence and trust among stakeholders at different levels. Global pandemic in 2019-2022 caused additional pressure on emerging HE QA systems due to abnormal changes in teaching and learning and external and internal QA of HE. In February 2022 Ukrainian QA system faced new challenge - full scale war invasion and this caused unprecedented level of uncertainty in society which has strong impacts on universities and the whole HE system.

Ukraine has a high scale HE system which includes more than 1000 HEIs and 1.2 million students. After being launched in early 2019 NAQA aimed to contribute to building trust among all stakeholders and increasing confidence in Ukrainian HE system.

To reach this aim supportive communication policy was implemented. It is based on transparency and trust values which are key to develop and to maintain trustworthy relations of QA Agency with the stakeholders and increase confidence in HE system. Our recent study published in QAR (Kvit & Stukalo, 2021) shares NAQA practice and extends debate on these issues in pandemic time. NAQA communication style based on credibility, reliability and engenders the academic public's trust is imperative in war times. There is evidence that the value of trust, openness, transparency created an atmosphere of confidence in the system and understanding among the academic society (Kvit & Stukalo, 2021). In the wartime NAQA proceeds with this policy.

Besides NAQA continues international dialogue and cooperation with foreign partners, keeps informed colleagues in Europe and all over the world about the current situation in Ukrainian QA system. A number of large-scaled international forums and other events were conducted. Among them there are International Forum on HE QA in the Wartime (May 2022) and QAA-NAQA Forum on Quality of Students' Learning Experience in the Wartime (September 2022).

Consistency in application of main principles and following the key values are in NAQA policy and it helps to maintain trust and confidence in the HE system of Ukraine.

Values of stakeholders engagement, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and partnership also can't be overestimated to ensure confidence in HE system. One of the key achievements in this regard is adoption of National Action Plan on Ukrainian External Higher Education Quality Assurance for 2022-2023 period (NAQA, 2022). It was initiated by NAQA and concluded with the Ukrainian Parliament Committee on Education, Science and Innovation, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, representatives of students, employees and the other stakeholders. The National Plan considers the current challenges associated with the war state in the country and includes actions to support HE trustworthy and sustainability. There are also continuous open discussions and consultations of NAQA with HEIs representatives, students, employers in what form and how to proceed with QA procedure during the wartime.

It has appeared that during the war the most challenging and questionable EHEA value is free movement of students and staff. This is because Martial Law prohibits men of military age (18-60) to cross the border to leave the country. Initially Martial Law allowed to male Ukrainians who are students of foreign HEIs to go abroad to study, however because of a number of cases with forged documents and unfair practices, this was questioned and there are a lot of public discussions on it.

According to the recent SPA student survey 73% of students find it challenging to plan their future under the war conditions, but only 14% of them think about studying abroad. 48% of students think that after the war HE system of Ukraine will become even better and 33% think it will not change. So, there is evidence of quite high students' confidence in the Ukrainian HE regardless all challenges and issues the full-scale war has waived.

WHAT KEY HE VALUES SHOULD BE ENHANCED TO INCREASE PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN HE in POST-WAR SOCIETY?

In 2015 United Nation (UN) Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development which provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet and includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries. (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>) Among them is SDG 16 - promote peace, justice and strong institutions. It aims to develop peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, to ensure access to justice for all and to create effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. The role of HE QA in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) is crucial (Stukalo & Lytvyn, 2021).

There is evidence EHEA values are relevant regardless the situation and remain a basis for QA even during the wartime. From the other side, the role of HE QA in academic environment and for the whole society is increasing and changing the focus to address all challenges resulted from the war, covid-19 pandemic, economic, migration and energy crisis. There is societal expectation and claim that HE prepares active critical-thinking citizens able to defend democratic values, to lead societal opinion and thoughts, to contribute to sustainable future and UN SDGs achieving. So, HE QA should increase its role in promoting democratic values, freedom of expressions, human rights, rule of law, SDGs.

CONCLUSIONS

Looking back at EHEA fundamental values they remain the same regardless the times and emergency situations. Respect and promotion of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, stakeholders' engagement in HE governance, fostering HE and research should be in the focus of internal and external HE QA. At the same time, there is evidence of critical importance and need to raise a role of QA agencies and HEIs in enhancing democratic values, human rights, the rule of law, social responsibility and sustainable development. HE QA based on these values will make substantial contribution and play crucial role in the post-war societies. Besides it will strengthen democracy and piece in Europe and all over the world.

Discussion questions for the session:

What are the best internal and external QA practices in ensuring public confidence in HE during the wartime and emergency situations and after them?

How value-driven QA and HE could contribute to the post-war rebuilding of the countries?

What is the role of values-driven approach for QA sustainability?

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