EUA
Case Studies 2013

How does quality assurance make a difference?

22-24 November 2012

A selection of papers from the 7th European Quality Assurance Forum

Hosted by Tallinn University, Estonia

EUA European University Association
ENQA EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION
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Edited by Fiona Crozier, Maria Kelo, Tia Loukkola, Barbara Michalk, Allan Päll, Fernando Miguel Galán Palomares, Norma Ryan, Bjørn Stensaker and Luc Van de Velde

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Foreword and Acknowledgements

The European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) has been organised by the E4 Group (ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE) since 2006. The 7th Forum, held at Tallinn University, Estonia, proved that this kind of event is needed as much as ever and thus confirmed the organisers' conviction that the event has established its role as the main annual discussion forum for all interested parties in the field of European quality assurance (QA). It has continued to attract participants from approximately 50 countries, including academics and administrators responsible for internal quality, students, representatives from QA agencies, national authorities, intergovernmental organisations and researchers in quality development in higher education and research.

This year's edition focused on the theme 'How does quality assurance make a difference?' Over three days, the majority of the plenary and parallel sessions discussed the impact of external and internal QA on higher education policies and institutional realities. New developments in QA at institutional and national level were also explored within the sessions together with the increased international dimension of external QA (e.g. cross-border accreditation and recognition of joint programmes). One of the conclusions of the final plenary was that QA as a whole is a highly politicised field, and by no means an exact science, but perhaps this is part of its appeal to those involved in QA.

This publication gathers a sample of the contributions to the Forum. It includes some of the keynote presentations as well as a few of the many excellent papers that generated lively discussions in the parallel sessions. The Forum Steering Committee hopes that this publication will inspire those involved in QA in their daily work.

On behalf of the Forum Steering Committee, I wish to thank the following for their support of this activity: Tallinn University that hosted the Forum with wonderful organisation and hospitality; those actors in the field of QA who submitted 75 papers and workshop proposals to the Forum; the keynote speakers and staff of EUA's Quality Management Unit and Events team, who spearheaded the organisation on behalf of the E4.

The next European Quality Assurance Forum will be held from 21 to 23 November 2013 at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. We look forward to welcoming you then.

Norma Ryan
Chair, Forum Steering Committee

Chapter 01

Making a difference: perspectives and lessons learnt

Is quality assurance leading to enhancement?

By Jethro Newton[1]

Introduction

What has been the impact of quality assurance on learning and teaching in terms of enhancement in the last two decades? What has been the contribution of quality assurance, and what have been its limitations? In addressing these matters, this paper considers how and in what contexts quality assurance and quality evaluation have been used: by national agencies; by higher education institutions; by quality practitioners; and by academics. It also addresses the question of their impact. Particular attention is paid to the notion of quality enhancement. The paper argues that this is best seen as a process rather than as a result, or as an end product. Given that what we are all probably most interested in is improvement, and making a difference, the underlying question considered here is: have quality assurance and quality enhancement led to improvement?

The paper also focuses on the challenge of creating conditions for supporting enhancement and change. Here, however, a cautionary note is introduced. It will be noted that change is complex, that there are no quick fixes, and that we need to be realistic because managing the enhancement enterprise is a "messy business" (Newton, 2002a). Further, it is proposed that the results of enhancement can be very difficult to evaluate. Arguably, these are matters that are under-theorised and under-researched. We therefore need to problematise (rather than "take for granted") notions such as "improvement", "impact", and "enhancement" when applied to learning and teaching, not least to the student dimension. The paper concludes by setting out some of the lessons learned over the past two decades, and by putting forward some of the implications arising from research and from practice to date: for the "quality research community"; for national and international quality bodies; and for higher education institutions and academic departments.

A note of caution

While the leading question here is "Is quality assurance leading to enhancement?" another question arises: enhancement or improvement of what? And how do we know if the impact on student learning and teaching and pedagogy can be described in terms of improvement? In practice, there is probably a tendency for this to be treated as an act of faith. Often, it is too readily assumed that quality assurance *does* lead to enhancement, or that enhancement *does* lead to improvement. But all this needs to be unpacked and deconstructed. As noted, some ten years ago the present author argued that "enhancement is a messy business" (Newton, 2002a). In part, this was an attempt to inject a sense of realism into quality thinking, especially in the area of enhancement as that notion became more prominent in quality discourse in higher education. The underlying argument was that the pursuit of enhancement goals is undertaken in a higher education world which is "messy" and complex. This demands recognition of the ambiguity and unpredictability that characterises academic life in today's universities. This perspective was also shared by Tosey (2002, p.4) who argued at the time that we work at the edge of chaos and "things simply don't work out as we intended". In other words, as quality practitioners will know from experience, there is a gap between "policy" and "reality". This requires, amongst other things, that quality enhancement initiatives are underpinned by effective leadership and also effective communication. This is even more salient when we look in detail at even small-scale interventions that are intended to produce enhancement and improvement.

1 Emeritus Professor, University of Chester, UK

About "enhancement"

As the emphasis on the enhancement of quality grows, it becomes even more important politically. Some national and international bodies are revising their quality assurance processes to reflect this. We can also observe within individual universities in some national higher education systems in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) the emergence of enhancement mechanisms and enhancement infrastructure. So does this mean that there is a shift taking place from quality assurance to quality enhancement? This might appear to be so, at least in some national systems and some universities, and increasingly in quality discourse and debate. However, this is certainly not the case universally. Where accountability and regulation continues to predominate, as is the case in some national systems and national agencies, an emphasis on enhancement does not appear to be an uppermost priority. This much can be deduced from the various methodologies adopted across Europe for institutional evaluation, review, and accreditation. Arguably, there remains significant variability in the levels of confidence amongst national agencies, mediated by national governments, in terms of their abilities to assure quality and standards effectively. This has increasingly become the case in some national contexts with the entry of increasing numbers of private providers into the higher education marketplace. As a consequence, the level of trust in higher education sectors varies, as does the emphasis placed on enhancement.

At this juncture the discussion might be assisted by some clarification in our terminology. Quality assurance is taken to be a deliberate process to check, evaluate, and make judgements about quality and standards. It may also indicate directions for enhancement and improvement. Quality enhancement is viewed as a deliberate process of change that leads to improvement; for example, in the student learning experience. This includes both strategic initiatives and the small steps taken to make things better. Improvement is taken to be the outcome of enhancement; it arises from enhancement activities, and from mechanisms designed to support enhancement. From the foregoing, it is apparent that quality enhancement is a process. If we enhance something, we change it; and the results may be seen as an improvement. It is the learning that this involves — whether personal, professional, or organisational — that we seek when we want to identify good practice for the purposes of dissemination. Viewed sequentially, this involves creating conditions for change, implementing it, and then evaluating it. Has it improved what we intended it to improve? An improvement in institutional procedure perhaps; or an improved aspect of academic practice; or perhaps some aspect of the student experience?

The relationship between "quality assurance" and "enhancement"

The relationship therefore, between quality assurance and quality enhancement, is not a simple one. And it is not helpful to represent quality assurance practice only in terms of accountability. Quality assurance is an important driver for quality enhancement, and quality assurance practitioners can and do work developmentally, with academic colleagues being amongst the beneficiaries from new thinking and new practice that emanates from a quality assurance domain. Moreover, it should be acknowledged that where external or internal quality reviews or evaluations have succeeded in engaging staff in new thinking, this may not have occurred had there not been any quality assurance!

This indicates two things: first, awareness-raising and the quality assurance experience are themselves significant (European-wide) forms of enhancement; second, without this experience we are less likely to make progress in improving the practice of learning and teaching. Even so, when we reflect on the question of the impact of quality assurance, in terms of enhancement, we have to acknowledge that national systems in the EHEA differ, contexts differ, and audiences and stakeholders differ. For example, whereas some place more emphasis on compliance, others emphasise enhancement. Such variability in emphasis affects institutional behaviour and, in turn, the nature of the impact. In other words, how quality assurance is used, or the impact it might have, at various levels, can vary quite markedly. It may lead to "better" regulation, or to improved practices and enhancement, or there might be a reputational risk in terms of national or international rankings. But it is indisputable that there have been substantial benefits deriving from quality assurance. There is the learning from others that arises through peer review processes, and there is the awareness of different ways of doing things that can be gained from the quasi-benchmarking that often comes with evaluation and review processes. The general focus on teaching and learning policy and process holds great potential for assisting the functioning of HEIs. Enhancement can be facilitated in institutional change agendas by obtaining evidence for improved decision-making, from policy makers, students, academics, employers, managers and administrators.

Learning from research and experience

This is an appropriate juncture at which to consider what research, supported by experience, tells us about the impact of quality assurance in terms of enhancement and improvement. My own research on the Welsh experience of external quality monitoring in the mid-1990s showed that while the internal quality assurance system was viewed as meeting both external and internal accountability requirements, it was less likely to be associated with staff or student-related quality improvements. Various contributory factors were shown to influence academics' views and responses, and the research revealed a divergence of views between "managers" and "managed", and between external and internal views (Newton, 1999). Work by Vilgats and Heidmets (2011) on the Estonian experience of curriculum accreditation during the late 1990s and 2000s, provides equally valuable insights into the impact of external quality monitoring over an extended period. In this work, interviews with curriculum managers and analysis of accreditation reports point to a generally low level of impact, with the exception of the curriculum and the study process, where some positive impact was apparent. The researchers found less influence on university management or on quality assurance policy or procedure. Echoing the work of Harvey and Newton (2004), the paper also highlighted the problem of *proving* the impact of external quality assurance. Vilgats and Heidmets remind us of Stensaker's (2003) observation on the lack of evidence for the impact of external quality assurance on organisational culture.

Recent work undertaken by Haapakorpi (2011) on the Finnish experience of audit adds a further perspective to our understanding of the impact of external review processes. Document analysis, interviews with senior managers, administrators and faculty members points to both direct and indirect evidence of the impacts of the audit process. Examples of direct impact, both intended and unintended, include greater transparency, collegial learning about quality processes, and enhanced status of work. In contrast, indirect and emergent impact is evidenced by a reported increase in the routine discussion of quality issues in areas not included in the focus of the quality audits.

Even though the abovementioned examples are interesting, they are not untypical of such studies where the evidence falls some way short of demonstrating clear impact on or improvement of learning and teaching and the essential experience of higher education. Conveniently for present purposes, in 2010 the editorial team of the international journal *Quality in Higher Education (QHE)* undertook a review of fifteen years of research in this area as manifested in successive issues of the journal (Harvey and Williams, 2010a; 2010b). Of particular interest is the matter of what the research over that period could reveal about the impact of quality assurance in terms of enhancement and improvement. This comprehensive review, set out in two special issues, revealed a consistent focus over the life of the journal on the quality of teaching and learning and on promoting and researching quality enhancement. The various papers provide valuable insights into a variety of quality topics such as student assessment, teaching quality and student learning, staff development, the curriculum, and student engagement and retention. However, it is noteworthy that in considering matters around policy reception, impact, and improvement, the issues raised by Baldwin (1997) in an early issue of *QHE*, such as bureaucratisation, administrative burden, and lack of trust, have evidently been recurring themes in many papers of the fifteen-year period. Some of my own work reinforced this, whereby quality was seen by system users and policy recipients as being more about improved systems and better bureaucracy, than improving the quality of learning and teaching (Newton, 2002b).

In contrast to these findings, other journal contributors revealed more optimism about the potential of quality assurance to stimulate improvement. Askling's work (1997), covering a seven-year period in Sweden, pointed to the indirect impact of external monitoring. Evidence from the Welsh quality agency's subject review method, based on a partnership model between institutions and the agency, indicated that this approach encouraged team-based action planning, dissemination of good practice, and perceived improvement in aspects of the student experience (Newton, 1997). Wahlén (2004), presenting a later perspective on the Swedish national audit experience, reported some modest cultural changes.

In reflecting on this rather mixed picture, it is important to acknowledge the research which, in various ways, stresses the complexity of "impact". For example, Stensaker (2003) queried whether quality improvement can actually be shown to be the result of external quality monitoring. He rightly argues that data is ambiguous and that in any case it is difficult to isolate the side effects of external quality processes. Moreover, as has been argued elsewhere, compliance and control are more frequent rationales for external monitoring than improvement (Harvey and Newton, 2004).

When looking at the fifteen years of research findings gathered together in *QHE*, what are the principal messages and lessons learned? The body of evidence in the journal indicates that internal processes in many national and institutional contexts are still developing. Further, it is claimed that "the link between external processes, internal processes, and improvements in teaching and learning seems to be tenuous and patchy" (Harvey and Williams, 2010b, p.107). Moreover, over the fifteen-year period under review in the special issues, there had actually been very few impact studies, thus reflecting the general paucity of significant research into the impact of quality assurance processes, not least on learning and teaching and the student experience. This confirms a general and disappointing deficiency in significant research into the *impact* of quality assurance processes. The journal also pointedly poses the question as to whether the quality of higher education could have been enhanced more efficiently and effectively without the need for what it refers to as "elaborate quality assurance systems" (Harvey and Williams, 2010b, p. 107).

Stimulating change and enhancement

The discussion so far has given consideration to what we have learned about the relationship between quality assurance and enhancement from research and experience during the "quality revolution", and to some of the challenges of working towards the achievement of better enhancement and improvement outcomes from quality assurance. At this juncture we turn to the question of how we might create conditions for stimulating change in support of enhancement, focusing in particular on the institutional level. Initially, some thoughts are put forward on how the outcomes from quality assurance and evaluation might be improved. Two matters are considered: first, the balance between "regulation" and "enhancement", and the case for less emphasis on regulation; second, the case for an evidence-based approach to quality-related policy and practice.

Arguably, what Roger Brown stated some ten years ago, when he called for "More enhancement, a little less regulation" (Brown, 2002, p.8), remains the case today, i.e. the priority attached to accountability still outbalances that for improvement and innovation. As Brown argued at the time, much quality assurance and evaluation has been and continues to be conservative and not enhancement-led, with the former inhibiting the latter. Arguably then, it follows that if there is an imbalance between regulation and development, this will put obstacles in the way of improvement. We should apply a strict test in these matters: does quality evaluation (external or internal) lead to quality enhancement and then to improvement? The challenge here is to find ways of generating evidence to illustrate where quality evaluation has led to quality enhancement and improvement. To assist reflection, discussion and debate on these matters, a simple proposition is put forward: most quality evaluation systems do not generate a robust evidence base to illustrate what works in practice for quality enhancement, and why it works.

What, then, might research-informed quality policy look like? While this might be easier said than done, we should at least include the following: evidence should be gathered from the best available sources; a long-term view should be taken of the likely or potential effect and impact of policy; policy, or a particular initiative, should be reviewed regularly to ensure it really deals with the problems it is designed to resolve; and we should be prepared to learn from experience of what works and what doesn't work in practice, and in particular contexts, through systematic evaluation. It should also be made clear whether the focus is on improved process or procedure, or improvement in student learning or the student experience, or improved teaching or academic practice. It may of course be a combination of any of these.

So, what are the implications of this for universities seeking to manage change and to create conditions to support and facilitate enhancement? What are the messages for managing the enhancement enterprise at institutional level? In addition to identifying institutional enhancement mechanisms, it is important to recognise that while quality enhancement has to be managed in systematised ways, it is also facilitated in informal and culturally dependent ways. Further, it is important to develop a capacity for institutional research to enable evaluation of quality enhancement policy and practice. In addition to being central to changing and improving what we do, such research also helps to avoid impressionistic judgements about enhanced or innovative practice even if professional judgement must play its part.

How to move forward: big steps, or small bites?

How then, might higher education institutions or national quality agencies, or even both working together, move forward with an enhancement-led change agenda? Is this a matter of big strategic steps or a "small bites" approach? The answer is, probably both, but it is likely that progress will involve taking small steps and putting small-scale initiatives in place. Indeed, as educational change expert Michael Fullan has argued: "Educational change is technically simple and socially complex" (Fullan, 2001, p. 69), a view shared by Yorke who reminds us that "There is no quick fix" (Yorke, 2006).

This emphasis on "small steps" is illustrated here with a brief case study which draws on the experience of the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) method, as used by the Quality Assurance Agency in Scotland. This sector-wide thematic approach to enhancement is not put forward as a panacea but rather to highlight an example of an attempt to align a national focus on enhancement with what is happening at institutional and department levels within universities. In the ELIR method there is an explicit focus on themes that impact directly on the student experience, such as the first year experience, assessment, employability, curriculum development, and so on. There are also regular update reports from universities on enhancement initiatives, together with testimonies from practitioners (academics, learning support, quality support etc.).

This illustrative case study focuses on a 2010 ELIR-sponsored national seminar, *Little things that make the difference* (ELIR, 2010), which showcased what might be termed "enhancement voices", or practitioners bearing witness to the small steps they were taking to improve the student experience. For present purposes, one of the things that resonates is the pre-seminar task which all participants were invited to undertake: "Describe one thing that you currently do that you feel makes a difference to the students' learning experience or the development of their attributes, skills, or qualities." The post-seminar record of participants' discussions or contributions revealed a similar focus on professional experiences of enhancement. There the task centred around the question: "What are the little things that you do that make (or have the potential to make) the difference between a student being successful during their time in higher education or not?" The examples provided by participants were all directly related to learning and teaching and the student experience in four areas: assessment and feedback; transition and induction; curriculum; and learner support. What is most noticeable here are the outcomes: a rich collection of enhancement-focused testimonies and cameos, from a range of practitioners. One message that emerges for present purposes is that, not only does this provide an example of a deliberate attempt by a national quality agency to stimulate enhancement, it also provides an example of practice that can readily be captured, recognised and encouraged in quality monitoring, review and evaluation methods, whether annual or periodic, and whether internal or externally driven.

Problematising key concepts: "impact", "improvement" and "enhancement"

One of the implications of the discussion in the previous section is that while quality assurance can provide a context for the quality enhancement of learning and teaching, there are no simple solutions. It is to this that attention now turns. As has been argued earlier, concepts such as "impact", "enhancement" and "improvement", need to be handled with care. This, and the importance of problematising these notions, can be illustrated with two brief examples.

The first example relates to what happens when one wants to introduce change into the curriculum in order to maximise student success. On the surface, as an attempt to enhance both academic practice and the student experience, this seems relatively straightforward. However, as Yorke (2006) points out, this actually involves some significant steps. It requires that a case is argued with colleagues, that implications are explained, and that sufficient support is obtained (in practice as well as in theory). Moreover, as Yorke suggests, in effect this involves a change in pedagogic practice and in student behaviour, and probably in the local academic culture and "ways of doing things". The message from this example is that changing a curriculum structure to enhance the student experience is not a simple technical matter.

The second example is drawn from some work undertaken at the University of Edinburgh in the 1990s on student feedback. Here, the researchers posed the question: "does student feedback make a difference to subsequent student learning?" (Powney and Hall, 1998, p.13). As we know, obtaining student feedback is seen

as essential for quality purposes, but little is known about the impact of student feedback on teaching, on the quality of students' learning, or on standards achieved. Indeed, given the number of variables involved there are inevitable problems in demonstrating a causal relationship between student feedback, on the one hand, and improved quality or standards on the other hand. At best, for various reasons, evidence may only illustrate an association between student feedback and improvement in teaching, learning, or standards; for example cohorts of students do not share exactly the same characteristics; entry requirements may change (making comparisons difficult); course content, teaching staff and assessment change (and not only as a result of feedback); and, in any case, improvements seldom affect present students and are often directed at future cohorts.

We can sum up these two examples by saying that we problematise notions such as "impact", "improvement" and "enhancement" because the results of enhancement-related actions can be difficult to evaluate. In other words, we engage in activities that we intend, hope and anticipate will lead to improvement, but this may be difficult to quantify (particularly if changes are complex), or the results may not be apparent, or improvement may not happen, or may happen in a way not anticipated. Also, improvement in one area may impact adversely on quality in another area. This is all part of the "messiness", complexity and ambiguity referred to at the beginning of the paper.

Conclusions and implications

What conclusions can we draw from the foregoing discussion, and what are the implications in terms of supporting and facilitating enhancement? If our question is, "is quality assurance leading to enhancement", and if our interest is in the enhancement of learning and teaching, then from the perspective adopted in this paper there is work to be done. This work and these challenges should be placed on the agendas of national agencies, higher education institutions, and the "quality research" community. For the "quality research" community, as has been argued, "impact", "improvement" and "enhancement" are under-researched and under-theorised. Moreover, the quality revolution has been marked by a lack of "impact" research, particularly the impact of quality assurance processes on academic practice, the student experience and student learning. There is undoubtedly a need for longitudinal, case study research, including perhaps insider research and also comparative, cross-context research. Students should be involved in the research process. For national and international quality bodies, the most obvious message perhaps is to build quality assurance processes around a culture which values and supports quality enhancement in an unequivocal style and manner. Other considerations include the need to fully appreciate the complexity of enhancement-led change, and being sensitive to the difficulty of measuring the results or impact or sustainability of such change. Then there is a need for agencies to stimulate professional dialogue about enhancement of learning and teaching, and to support the adoption of practices that are known to work. Finally, implications for higher education institutions and academic departments include the need to agree on enhancement mechanisms and to align them with or even embed them in quality processes. Institutional research, or even internally-driven audit, should be designed to identify enhancement and improvement. Here, external and internal data can be used to build an evidence base of "what works". The institutional promotion and encouragement of reflection and evaluation related to teaching and student learning can be used to support a focus on evidence. Then, to support and underpin this, an institution's approach to enhancement should be evaluated to establish whether enhancement mechanisms are effective and are perceived, by various stakeholders, to be working.

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I would also like to thank Nora Skaburskiene, Lithunanian Centre for Quality Assessment, for our discussion of the work of the ENQA Working Group on 'Impact of quality assurance' during my visit to Lithuania in October 2012.

The future of accreditation in the US

By Sylvia Manning[1]

Recent discussions in the United States on the future of accreditation may reflect issues of interest to quality assurance in Europe. To understand the forces driving those discussions, it is helpful to begin with the origins and present circumstances of accreditation.

Accreditation in the US

All accreditation in the US is carried out by independent, not-for-profit entities; it is not governmental, though, as we shall see, there is much governmental influence. Institutional accreditation is carried out by two types of organisations: regional accreditors and national accreditors. This terminology creates confusion, because people may assume that regional accreditation is valid only within the region, or because it is intuitive that "national" must be a higher standard than "regional". That is not the case. The country is divided into six regions and although institutions are accredited by the accreditor for the region in which the institution resides, the accreditation is valid throughout the country. The technical difference between regional and national accreditation lies in the jurisdiction claimed by the agency: regional accreditors will not accredit (within the US) outside the states of their jurisdiction; national accreditors operate across all 50 states. National accreditation is more recent, is often believed to carry less prestige than regional accreditation, and in fact is excluded from certain formulations that require institutional accreditation (for example, a medical school might require for admission a Bachelor's degree from a regionally accredited institution).

Programmatic accreditation was developed later and separately, growing out of professional or disciplinary organisations. There are several dozen of these specialised or professional accreditors and they accredit programmes ranging from law and medicine to engineering, education, business, the arts, and the numerous health-care fields. They operate on a national basis.

Regional accreditation has been the primary focus of the debates.

The development of regional accreditation[2]

In the late 19th century a group of colleges in New England formed an association of colleges and schools. In the years that followed, similar associations were formed in the midwest, the south, the states to the east that are not New England, the northwest and the west. The sizes and shapes of these associations were determined over time by historical happenstance: it is futile to seek any logic to the distribution.

At the start of the 20th century, these associations began to include in their activities the accreditation of their membership, to the extent that membership in the association came to mean accreditation and the primary, even exclusive, purpose of the association became accreditation. Thus today one might describe the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association, for example, as an association whose membership agrees to set standards of quality, to admit only institutions that can and do meet those standards, to hold one another accountable by those standards, and to seek continuous improvement in light of those standards.

For about a half-century, accreditation proceeded in this way; a private undertaking of institutions of higher education, entirely voluntary, with no governmental dimension. The evaluators came from the institutions themselves; they were academics who were paid either a token honorarium or nothing for this service. Institutions

1 President, The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association, United States

2 The best source for this history is Peter T. Ewell, *U.S. Accreditation and the Future of Quality Assurance: A Tenth Anniversary Report from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation*. Washington, DC: Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), 2008.

sought accreditation because it offered a form of discipline towards self-improvement and because it carried status. It was an obscure corner of the higher education enterprise; that was no inconsiderable advantage, since obscurity brings with it a degree of autonomy.

The US constitution specifies the powers of the federal government and then leaves all other powers to the states. Since education is not mentioned in the constitution, by default it belongs to the states. Therefore, when the US developed a programme to provide educational assistance funds to veterans after World War II, it did not have a federal bureau or ministry to assure that veterans would spend these funds at reputable institutions. A couple of methods of assurance were tried and found wanting, until in 1952 it was decided that the simplest way to have such assurance was to require that the funds be spent only at accredited institutions. Now for the first time there was a connection among accreditation, federal law, and an institution's revenue. For a while that connection made no difference.

By 1964, however, accreditation had become an obvious vehicle for governmental regulation. It had been apparent early on that it was necessary to have someone accredit the accreditor. Otherwise a rogue college could be accredited by the president's rogue brother-in-law, the accreditor. Accreditors, therefore, would be "recognised" by the federal government, today in the person of the Secretary of Education. Theoretically, all sorts of conditions could be attached to this recognition, and over time, they were. (We may contemplate the difference between this oversight of accreditors, which rests entirely with the federal government, and the structure of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education, EQAR, with its roles for students, universities and quality assurance agencies.) An institution remains free to decline the funds for which accreditation is required and then ignore the conditions — and a few do — but for the most part institutions have taken the money and accepted the rules. Accreditors have accepted the rules because otherwise their accreditation would not qualify institutions to receive federal student-aid funds.

Some of the conditions that have been attached to the federal recognition of US accreditors are with regard to what they are required to do, others are what they must require the institutions they accredit to do. By the first decade of the present century, these requirements had become the subject of intense lobbying with Congress and serious, often tense negotiation with the Department of Education. And the once entirely independent accreditation associations had taken on responsibility for the enforcement of a number of federal government regulations, a number that would grow with every decade.

Thus we have in US accreditation what may be a unique phenomenon: institutions of higher education both publicly-owned and private are accredited by associations that are private but subject to regulation by a federal bureaucracy. The notion that accreditation is voluntary is still technically true but in practice a fiction: only a handful of institutions can afford to forego the funds that require accreditation, because the students who depend on them have extended over the decades well beyond the veterans of the mid-twentieth century. Not surprisingly, this circumstance produces tension. We like to say that the tension is creative; sometimes it is.

This is the context in which the recent discussions of the future of accreditation in the US have taken place. But if this is the cauldron, what has fuelled the fire?

Fuelling the fire

People understand regulation and they also understand absolute standards: if you get at least 15 out of 18 questions correct you get a driver's license, if you get four wrong you don't get a license. But when the answers to the questions are neither right nor wrong but only better or worse, when even that better or worse is a matter of complex judgement, when context may radically shape judgement, when the point is less to test and more to improve, and yet it all somehow adds up to a license to operate — then people have difficulty understanding. Yet that is what accreditation is.

The presence of students in the EU quality assurance systems implies that they are participants. In the US they are generally regarded as consumers. This notion is usually rejected by the academy with some vehemence, but held elsewhere no less strongly. In so far as students are in fact consumers, in that they purchase a service, we have an unbalanced marketplace because there is great asymmetry between the knowledge of the service held

by the provider, the academy; and the consumer, the student. This consumer, therefore, needs information and, as it were, protection. In the US consumer protection generally falls to the states. Thus far I have described quality assurance for higher education in the US as shared, albeit uneasily, between two actors, the federal government and the accreditors. But there is also a recognised third actor, the states. The states are charged primarily with consumer protection, assuring that students receive sufficient and truthful information with regard to both state-owned or public institutions and private institutions within a state's borders. There is considerable variability in the extent to which the states have discharged this responsibility. That aside, many people assume that accreditation is responsible for consumer information and protection, or at any rate should be.

The focus of accreditation, in contrast, has been the twofold purpose of assuring minimum quality and furthering continuous improvement, with a strong emphasis on the latter. The focus is on the institution and on making it better, not on guiding the public. Indeed, for that reason accreditation in the US has a long tradition of confidentiality. In a society that for the most part believes that all deliberation affecting the public or paid for by the public should take place in an open forum, accreditation is therefore likely to be attacked as secretive, the guild protecting itself. This view is intensified when people learn that the accreditors are funded by dues and fees paid by the institutions they accredit, and that the evaluators and their governing boards come from the institutions as well. Surely, they say, these are conflicts of interest. Surely you are kind to another so that the other will be kind to you in turn. Surely the accreditor is loath to deny or withdraw accreditation because it will lose revenue. In fact, none of that is the case, but the reasons are difficult to explain.

Enter for-profit higher education. For-profit tertiary education has been in existence in the US for several decades, but it was for a long time largely limited to non-degree career education for jobs in areas such as hairdressing, truck driving, or secretarial work, and for certification in fields such as travel agency or real estate sales. Gradually it moved into career-focused degrees at all levels. It grew slowly, not attracting much attention. But the development of distance education through the Internet created a sea-change. Suddenly higher education seemed scalable in a way that, rightly structured, could generate significant profit. The federal government removed restrictions on the use of federal student-aid funds for distance education, and now there was a huge potential market of students and a source of funding for them. Corporations became interested, including publicly-traded corporations. These new institutions, largely but not exclusively online, grew at an astonishing pace.

In the for-profit sector there has been abuse. There has been aggressive marketing to many who were unqualified and in ways foreign to other higher education sectors, such as late-night television ads, billboards and direct solicitation by employees regarded as a sales force, not an admissions staff. Literally hundreds of thousands of people have flocked to these institutions as students, but many others, policy makers in particular, dislike the tactics and distrust the outcomes. And the issue has been politicised, making it hard to come by solutions that are focused squarely on education and students.

Accreditation is brought into this issue as the failed watchdog: accreditation has let these bad developments happen. Moreover, defenders of for-profits have demanded that any judgements made of for-profits be applied in the same way to the other sectors, and so accreditors have been asked how it could be that any institution they accredit is allowed to have *x* percentage of its students (you name the percentage) leave without a degree. Or take six years to complete a four-year Bachelor's degree.

Accreditation issues of 2011-2012

And so we get to the polarities of the current debate. There are several dyads buried in this debate, dualisms that recur: government regulation as opposed to self-evaluation and improvement; a regulatory, as opposed to voluntary, approach; inspectors as opposed to peer evaluators; accountability as opposed to improvement; data on which simple, bright lines of demarcation can be drawn, as opposed to complex judgement and its grey areas.

There are three fundamental questions in play: (1) What is Quality? (2) What is Assurance? and (3) Who gets to say? Logic might lead us to ask first "What is Quality" but in a political world, "Who gets to say" comes first.

Who gets to say?

Because of the constitutional framework noted above, the question of the degree to which the federal government gets to say what quality and quality assurance are is necessarily the narrower question of the eligibility of institutions to receive federal student-aid funds. At the extreme there are those who argue that accreditation should no longer be a factor in that eligibility. They believe that accreditation has proved itself incapable of making the difficult decisions our times require; it is costly to institutions and dysfunctional for the government's interest. Instead of relying upon accreditation as the arbiter of academic quality, the federal government should establish a set of clear standards, collect the data to determine compliance with those standards, and make its decisions. Accreditation would then be free to go back to its roots in self-managed, peer-reviewed improvement, unencumbered by a federal role.

Twin fears oppose this position: either there will be a vacuum, with no arbiter of quality beyond opinion polls and the marketplace, or the government, seeing the vacuum, will attempt to fill it, imposing a federal set of standards that will create distorted measures with distorting effects and thus do damage to higher education. The latter fear is well supported by federal attempts in the past decade to impose quality standards on primary and secondary education.[3]

The current situation is a compromise between the impulse of governmental authorities to regulate and the preference of the higher education community to establish its own norms: accreditation, managed by technically independent organisations, conducts quality evaluation based upon institutional mission and peer review grounded in an agreed-upon set of standards, but the federal government, through its recognition process, imposes a number of requirements upon both accreditors and institutions.

The compromise is uneasy and, some would argue, unstable. The number of federal requirements has grown significantly, and the detail of interpretation of those requirements developed into ever narrower regulations. From the institutions' point of view, accreditation was created by and for universities, not government, but in the past few decades government has taken hold of accreditation and altered its shape. From the federal regulator's point of view, accreditation could and should be an instrument of its oversight but instead it is part of the problem.

Can a single set of evaluators present themselves to an institution as both colleagues seeking to guide improvement and inspectors determining compliance? To some extent, yes, but what are the limits of that extent and have we reached them? Which holds more sway over the accreditors' standards today, the government or the institutions of higher education that constitute the membership of the accrediting associations? We call ourselves *associations*, but the government calls us *agencies*. Which are we? Which should we be?

A fundamental concern here is the autonomy of institutions of higher education. Whereas the Bologna Process appears dedicated to increased institutional autonomy, in the US there are many forces that believe autonomy is antithetical to accountability, that there has been too much autonomy, for institutions and their accreditors alike, and that this autonomy has contributed to the erosion of quality. Regional accreditation builds upon an institution's statement of its mission and allows institutions great latitude in determining that mission. Regional accreditation is based primarily on standards or criteria, which are to be met, in contrast to regulations, which are to be obeyed. In the view of many, these conditions have been crucial to the development of the very diverse enterprise that constitutes American higher education and that diversity in itself is a key strength of the enterprise. Regulatory systems, in contrast, prefer uniformity and thus discourage innovation and adaptation.

The tension here is something deeper than a political struggle arising out of the particular circumstances of accreditation in the US. In so far as those who assure quality assess it with any degree of specificity, quality assurance starts to shape the objects of its evaluation. The more quality assurance shapes, the more conforming and hence the less innovative become the entities under evaluation, because those who would otherwise be innovators see risk in failing to meet the quality assurance requirements. Innovation, adaptation, energy, can only come from the institutions; quality assurance must therefore respect the field. How do we find the line between asserting a valid and valuable standard and constraining or defeating innovation and energy?

3 For a full critique of these efforts, see Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, New York: Basic Books, 2011.

What is assurance?

Much of regional accreditation consists of the assessment of an institution's own quality assurance systems. Such systems must exist and must be effective. With regard to student learning, for example, we do not set standards for particular academic abilities and prescribe how they are to be measured or what is an acceptable level of achievement for an institution's students. Rather, we expect the institution to set standards, to assess how well students are meeting those standards, and to make adaptations to improve student achievement. Many, however, think the former approach would be more appropriate.

A different concept of quality assurance looks not to student learning but to credentialling. What proportion of an institution's students complete their studies and receive the degree or other credential they were seeking? This important question has come to the fore only in the last decade or so. It has become the "completion agenda", propelled by the perception of a national loss of leadership in educational attainment. One way to assure quality is to set minimum standards for the graduation or completion rate. It turns out not to be a simple measurement, but there are ways to make it fairly valid. The question that remains is how true a measure this is of the quality of the education.

A similar and somewhat related approach to assurance is to measure the employment of an institution's graduates. This too turns out to be more difficult and more complex than some would wish, but there are ways to reach useful approximations, particularly outside the liberal arts.

No accreditor would take issue with the importance of both degree completion and employment. For the regional accreditors, the bone of contention is the notion that these measures are sufficient and universal. Accreditors understand that degree completion will depend as much upon the students an institution admits as what the institution then offers those students. They accept the notion that some students may fail or quit, for a host of reasons. It is easier to obtain Harvard's rate of student success if you admit Harvard's students, and it is much more difficult — in fact, arguably impossible — to obtain that rate if you open your doors to any student with a high school diploma. Accreditors also subscribe to the notion that much of the finest undergraduate education is not directed towards employment and therefore its quality cannot be measured by employment outcomes, and certainly not in the short run.

Might quality assurance be achieved by identifying a set of such quantitative measures and specifying points on each measure and on the set of measures collectively at which an institution passes or fails? Could we devise something like a standardised test for institutions, with the same benefits of reliability and clear conclusions? Or is quality assurance ultimately the exercise of informed judgement on the part of educated professionals?

Is quality assured only if all institutions are treated in the same way, through the same processes and by the same standards, or does quality assurance require the ability to adapt processes or standards or both to the context, mission, and circumstances of an institution?

Accreditation in the US has developed as the action of institutions of higher education holding one another accountable to standards of quality. Its focus has been on improvement: once an institution has passed the bar to gain accreditation, if it slips the first impulse is to help it regain its standards, not to punish; furthermore, even an institution well above the bar is expected to find ways to improve, and to use the accreditation process to that end.

The assumption that all institutions can and should improve through accreditation is not wholly accepted within the academy. As accreditation in recent decades has become focused, largely by the pressure of outside forces such as federal regulation, on quality assurance at the minimum level, it has inevitably moved to concerns that are somewhere between irrelevant and insulting to the best institutions. For many at those institutions, the accreditation process is a waste of time and resources. Moreover, for causes partly of their own making, the time and resources for large institutions have become large. And so in recent months there has been growing dissent amongst elite universities in several of the regions. They have been offended by less than stellar accreditation reviews or by requirements from accreditors that they felt violated their autonomy.

Finally, the question is asked whether a system of regions, with their relative independence from one another, can assure quality. The geographical segmentation into regions is arguably anachronistic in an age of jet travel and electronic communications, while the differences in approach among the regions suggest inconsistency and hence, by definition, something wrong. While EQAR seems comfortable embracing the diversity of quality assurance processes among nations, in the US some view the lack of uniformity among regions with suspicion, raising doubts as to validity. Perhaps there should be a single, national accreditor. Or perhaps accreditation should be segmented not along geographical lines but by institutional type.

A different argument seeks to break the effective monopoly of regional accreditors, an issue that may have parallels in the European question of allowing institutions to seek quality assurance from different agencies, including agencies in other countries. In this argument, institutions should be free to seek accreditation from any of the regional accreditors, without the jurisdictional confines that now rule. The idea here is that competition, as in the marketplace, would encourage accreditors to become better so as to attract institutions, and "better" would mean rigor and consequent prestige. Many think that the effect would be quite the opposite: a significant number of institutions would seek the easiest accreditor, not the most rigorous, and in certain regards, such as interactions with state agencies, the work of accreditors would become more costly.

Finally, what is quality?

Can we define quality? It is easier to talk about quality assurance if we skip the anterior question, "What is quality?", and that is what we usually do. At the root of disputes over assurance is the unspoken dispute over what is being assured. It may be that this dispute is unspoken for good reason: that any precise articulation of a concept so complex as quality in higher education is inevitably reductive and hence inevitably distorting. If that is the case, then perhaps the wisest approach is to allow for interplay among forces that one may assume represent complementary if differing and sometimes opposed notions of that quality. From this outsider's limited knowledge, that may be the genius of the European four-party system for oversight of quality assurance.

Does EQA really make a difference in Flanders higher education?

By Daphne Carolus,[1] Dieter Cortvriendt,[2] Dries Froyen[3] and Patrick Van den Bosch[4]

Introduction

After 16 years of external quality assurance (EQA) in Flemish higher education, the quality of higher education programmes has increased. At least, that is what everyone believes or hopes. Nobody, however, is actually able to prove that the quality of the higher education programmes has improved significantly.[5] In fact, little or no research has been conducted over the years in Flanders — or elsewhere for that matter — to measure the outcomes and areas of impact of EQA on the quality of higher education.[6] As such, the impact and outcomes of EQA remain unclear. Our goal is to give a nuanced, but critical impression of the impact of EQA in Flanders, based on (in)formal feedback from numerous stakeholders and many years of experience of VLIR and VLHORA.

VLIR and VLHORA, the agencies responsible for the organisation of EQA in Flanders regarding universities and university colleges, monitor the entire quality process in a systematic fashion. Both conduct surveys to get a better view of the levels of satisfaction among the actors involved in the programme assessments. There are obvious signs that EQA makes a difference when looking at these survey results. Panel members and programme directors clearly state that EQA is of vital importance to assure the quality of programmes. Or, in other words, without programme assessment no incentives, or too few, would be present to assure the quality of programmes systematically. At the same time, many respondents state that the overall effects of EQA are rather limited, and that with the current multiple finality of EQA — improvement, judgement *and* accreditation — EQA fails to foster an encompassing quality culture.[7]

We believe that one can argue whether the current EQA system assures minimum levels of quality, but also whether it does too little to enhance the overall quality of higher education. This raises questions on the current Flemish system's efficiency to serve all its aims (improvement, judgement and accreditation) and on the importance of EQA for the establishment of a quality culture. In short: how *can* and *does* EQA contribute to the overall quality of higher education programmes? We do not want to give a comprehensive answer to these questions; rather we will develop a typology of "perceptions" to address the merits and flaws of EQA in Flanders.

EQA in Flanders

At the moment, the QAUs (quality assurance units) of VLIR and VLHORA are responsible for the organisation of EQA in Flanders. Both units are autonomous but embedded bodies, established by the umbrella organisations of the Flemish universities (VLIR) and Flemish university colleges (VLHORA). The current EQA system is characterised by eight-yearly joint or clustered programme assessments, each carried out by a panel of peers. Programmes are grouped by discipline (for example History or Biology) and evaluated in situ by a panel. While the QAUs organise external quality assurance, the universities and university colleges (HEIs) are in charge of setting up internal quality assurance (IQA), which includes writing a self-evaluation report (SER). In turn, that report serves as input for the EQA. The panel's assessment report, listing both improvement recommendations and quality judgements, is public and subsequently used as input for the assessed programmes' IQA as well as for accreditation decisions by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). A positive accreditation decision results in a further funding of the assessed programme by the Flemish government for eight years. A negative accreditation can eventually result in the programme's discontinuation.

All in all, one can distinguish three interlocking "phases", each with their corresponding aim. In Flemish higher education, one discerns IQA (the responsibility of the HEI and programmes), EQA (organised by the QAUs) and accreditation (carried out by the NVAO), which correspond respectively to improvement, judgement and accreditation. The recommendations listed by panels probably have the highest impact during this three-phased

1 Staff member Quality Assurance, VLHORA, Belgium
2 Staff member Quality Assurance, VLIR, Belgium
3 Staff member Quality Assurance, VLHORA, Belgium
4 Staff member Quality Assurance, VLIR, Belgium
5 Quality is not an unproblematic concept, let alone easily quantifiable, see for example L. Harvey (1995), J. Warn & P. Tranter (2001) and K. Watty (2003).
6 For a similar account, see for example B. Stensaker (2008).
7 See also J. Kohler (2003).

process, at least on the quality of teaching and learning. Of course, improvement is not only a direct result of a panel's recommendations; it also originates in the programmes' internal dynamics and the HEIs' IQA scheme. This is one methodological difficulty when measuring the impact of EQA on the quality of programmes: one cannot easily isolate the impact of EQA. Moreover, given that the quality improvement of programmes is the individual programme's responsibility, panels and the QAUs have no clear view on their outcomes. At least, not until the next programme assessment that will take into account to what extent programmes have undertaken action regarding previous recommendations. In sum, no short-cuts exist to monitor or "follow up" how programmes address panels' recommendations.

Perceptions of EQA

Numerous objectives of EQA have been defined. These differ from place to place and from time to time. As mentioned above, Flemish EQA has multiple finality, namely improvement, judgement and accreditation. The QAUs of VLIR and VLHORA function as a pivot point between demands of enhancement and accountability, serving the HEIs programmes as well as the accreditation body, NVAO.[8]

We will come back to this multiplicity later on. Here, we believe it is important to stress that EQA is not only about defined objectives, but also about the different actors' expectations.[9] From this point of view, EQA is a field with different and conflicting expectations, interests, perceptions and so on: EQA is what we make of it (Wendt, 1992). We believe that a homologous view that takes into account this multiplicity will give a more nuanced, critical and above all dynamic view on EQA. In our view EQA is not one-dimensional, but multi-faceted. At least five expectations or perceptions can be discerned regarding EQA in Flanders: EQA as a *calendar*, a *magnifier*, a *mirror*, a *catalyst* and a *label*.

When EQA is perceived as a *calendar* by stakeholders, it serves as the opportunity to set up a definite timetable. This forces programmes to "disengage" from daily routines and to monitor their practices. It also obliges panels to interact and come to have a common view on programmes. In many cases, EQA as a calendar appears to be a rather formalistic approach. In fact, a risk exists in a perception of EQA as a procedural, or even ritual, undertaking — i.e. "doing things properly". At the same time, EQA as a calendar enables both programmes and panels to reflect on what quality ought to be.

When EQA is perceived as a *magnifier*, panels give programmes usable feedback on their practices. Being outsiders, panels confront programmes with their daily routines. By pinpointing programmes' merits and flaws, programmes get a better picture of their quality level. This is often already partially done by programmes through a SWOT-analysis. As a magnifier, however, a panel's view is not internalised. Assessment is seen merely as "ticking boxes". At best, it enables programmes to compare their quality vis-à-vis others and to set up benchmarks.

When EQA is perceived as a *mirror*, the views of panels are internalised by programmes, or at least by some staff. This enables programmes to reflect in a more systematic way on their quality. Panels offer programmes a toolbox to get a better understanding of their practices and uncover more details. In this way, the mirror perception fosters introspection, while the magnifier perspective refers to inspection. For programmes and panels this can be confronting, so high levels of trust must exist to carry out assessments in such a critical self-reflective fashion.

When EQA is perceived as a *catalyst*, panels' views are not only internalised but also shared by most staff. In fact, programmes become identities as staff become increasingly aware that all educational practices are a collective responsibility. Subsequently, a shared vision on quality emerges, which is the very prerequisite of a quality culture. Therefore, panels not only activate programmes to reflect on their practices in a systematic way but also quality itself becomes a systematic reflex. An open dialogue and high levels of information sharing among panels and programmes are needed.

Finally, when EQA is perceived as a *label*, programmes will focus on the visibility, or even marketability of their quality. EQA becomes a means to inform stakeholders about the quality of programmes and eventually will turn instrumental for the creation of rankings. Subsequently, levels of trust in HEIs and programmes may rise, and the label may provide recognition for panels. However, emphasising EQA as a label remains dangerous as

8 On the inherently contradictory aims of enhancement and accountability and the contradictory roles panels encounter in such a situation, see L. Elton (2001).

9 For a general social constructivist approach, see for example P. Berger and T. Luckmann (1966). For a social constructivist approach on quality assurance, see J. Ratcliff (2003).

it overshadows other perceptions of EQA. The need for mere compliance to quality criteria may sneak in as well and EQA will become only instrumental.

Perceptions among programmes and panels

No doubt one can distinguish more categories of perception on EQA. Although the above list is not exhaustive, we believe that this exercise renders a better, and above all more dynamic, understanding of EQA. We also believe that the above categories reflect most perceptions present in the Flemish EQA field, although they are not meant as isolated perceptions. In fact, many programmes see EQA firstly as a formalistic endeavour, subsequently as an opportunity to get feedback, then as a toolbox for improvement and so on. Most programme directors see EQA as a bit of all the above categories.[10]

We notice that many programmes are reluctant towards EQA, especially when being assessed for the first time. Our surveys show, however, that once they are assessed, and certainly if they have been assessed before, programmes see EQA system's benefits more clearly and levels of trust between programmes, the QAUs and panels increase, giving way to EQA as a mirror. Although most programme directors see EQA in its multiplicity, they also state that a panel should merely act as magnifier, pinpointing strong and weak points. For programmes, elements of enhancement are subordinate to perspectives of accountability. A very similar observation can be made about panels. Based on the surveys and the feedback we receive it could be argued that the panel members often perceive their role as a magnifier at first, and later during the visits, as a mirror more so, stimulating critical self-reflection within programmes. It is hard to tell whether there is a dominant perspective on EQA among panel members, but for most panels aspects of enhancement prevail over accountability. We also observe that panels try to install a task division, in which some panel members act more like a magnifier, while others act more like a mirror.

If we take the different perceptions into consideration, we can say that in Flanders, where most programmes have been assessed, EQA is mostly seen as a magnifier and/or mirror. There are clear signs that many HEIs and study programmes have internalised aspects of EQA and that they see EQA as a vital element in assuring the quality of programmes. However, when we critically reflect on the EQA system in Flanders, the current state of affairs looks more like a *quality assurance culture* than a *quality culture*. EQA as a catalyst therefore doesn't seem to be the dominant perception for programmes and panels. First, programmes focus too often on compliance — or even find themselves in the practice of "window dressing". In addition to that, programmes are selective about what information is shared.[11] Surveys show that a substantial part of the panel members observe such "ritual" behaviour during assessments.[12] Secondly, many panel members also find it very frustrating that a number of programmes underperform in terms of taking the recommendations for improvement to heart. Some programme directors state that the overall formalistic character of EQA — with its focus on accountability — is overriding the core of what EQA should be: stimulating innovation and creativity.[13] Because EQA has been increasingly linked to accreditation, many programme directors hesitate to agree with the recommendations listed by panels and often go into defensive mode. Additionally, programmes often make clear that panels should merely act as magnifiers because every listed recommendation risks downplaying the panel's judgements. Panels are also not always eager to formulate recommendations because it may weaken their judgements in the face of accreditation decisions. Is accreditation curbing innovation and creativity? Let us have a quick look at the rationale of accreditation in Flanders.

Accreditation, quality and quality culture

There are very different reasons for the general acceptation of accreditation in the European Higher Education Area.[14] An overview will not be given here; rather there will be a focus on accreditation's rationale in Flanders. Why does Flanders have an EQA system including accreditation? It provides a way for the government to guarantee a quality threshold. Society at large is asking for a validation of the quality of study programmes since some public funds are going into it. Accreditation, as an appendix to EQA, operates in this regard as a label, informing stakeholders and society. This is only possible because accreditation is a "hard power", able to stop programmes that perform below a certain quality threshold. In fact, accreditation has been effective in eradicating those programmes at the very bottom of the quality spectrum. The validation of basic quality can also attract (international) funds, partners, employers and students to programmes and

10 This runs largely in tandem with the idea that quality assurance generates no "pure effects" but is rather a "messy business" that must be brought in relationship with the many different expectations, interests and perceptions that exist, see also J. Newton (2002).

11 On compliance, see P. Hodson & H. Thomas (2003); for the notion of "game playing", see L. Harvey (2002); on trust and information, see M. Beckers, D. Cortvriendt & P. Van den Bosch (2011).

12 On this ritualistic nature of our "audit society", see M. Power (1997).

13 See also R. Melton (1996).

14 See for example D. Westerheijden (2001), L. Harvey (2004) and T. Saarinen&T. Ala-Vähälä (2007).

HEIs.[15] Finally, one can argue that accreditation provides a means for panels to see their findings taken seriously. Although many panel members are rather reluctant about accreditation (especially about the assessment reports being used as input for accreditation decisions), it provides them with a whip.

So far we have argued that EQA is very useful to assure healthy quality levels in higher education. A well-constructed EQA system will also provide an effective framework for programmes and HEIs to align their IQA schemes. Furthermore, EQA can enhance the quality of programmes; it can make the actors involved in a programme more aware of the procedures (calendar), detect strengths and weaknesses (magnifier), make them reflect on their programme (mirror), and at best, stimulate them to develop a quality culture (catalyst). At the same time, there is always a possibility that after an assessment, a programme does not take into account the panel's recommendations because they might not experience a "sense of urgency": Why strive for excellence when one already complies with the criteria of accreditation? Regarding the above meanings of EQA, accreditation becomes simply a label, which risks paralysing other perceptions of EQA.

Of course, the effectiveness of accreditation resides in the fact that it ensures that programmes that do not meet a certain quality threshold will cease to exist. In our opinion the mediocre, good and excellent programmes do not — automatically or necessarily — become better due to accreditation. Moreover, accreditation is not an added value to those programmes that focus already on enhancing their quality; it might make programmes "play it safe". To illustrate this, let's have a look at the different categories of EQA that we have defined. If the label of accreditation becomes the primary perception, the consequence, for example, is that when writing a SER, programmes will use the accreditation criteria as a "checklist" (cf. notion of "magnifier"). This sometimes results in formalistic approaches (cf. notion of "calendar") covering practices more than uncovering them. It also entails strategic ways of writing reports that only share information that is instrumental for compliance. Writing a SER, in such a case, becomes an unimaginative process, a compulsive stimulation that exterminates the prerequisites of developing a quality culture.

In sum, we believe that the biggest threat for the current EQA system in Flanders is a one-sided focus on the quality assurance process itself, instead of on educational practices (teaching and learning) that make up the quality of higher education. It may not come as a surprise that in some cases EQA will be increasingly perceived as the "assurance of quality assurance".[16] In other words, with the "stick" of accreditation, EQA risks becoming a self-referential instead of a self-reflective endeavour. This, we believe, explains why a substantial group of actors (both programme directors and panel members) are disappointed and the overall impact of EQA in fostering a quality culture has been rather limited until now.[17]

Conclusion

In Flanders, EQA is basically perceived as a valuable, even vital, element for the quality of higher education. Programmes as well as panels perceive EQA as more than just a calendar or a label. Both agree upon the idea that EQA as a catalyst would have the biggest impact. At the same time, a substantial number of the actors involved are disappointed, mainly because the current EQA system focuses too little on enhancement and too much on accountability. In terms of enhancement, it is not clear that the merits of accreditation are bigger than its flaws. Moreover, innovation and creativity are often annihilated by the practice of accreditation. It could be argued that accreditation results in a "quality assurance culture" in the short run, but that it limits the pursuit of a quality culture in the long run.

Based on our experiences in EQA the *conditio sine qua non* remains the willingness of a programme's staff to become increasingly aware that all educational practices are a collective responsibility. EQA only makes a big difference when it is perceived as a catalyst for change (by both programme directors and panel members). The challenge is not only to convince HEIs that EQA is meaningful only when it is more than just a calendar or a label, but also to split up the "soft power" and the "hard power", or to separate enhancement and accountability.[18] Panel members should also be asked to focus more on the need of fostering a quality culture, which means that they should have the relevant experience and expertise. Finally, many panel members are very eager to formulate improvement recommendations, but have no guarantee that programmes take them seriously. A decent follow-up, including publicly available legible reports, can be a first step towards taking the enhancement of teaching and learning as the primary aim or finality of EQA.

15 On the acceleration of globalisation and marketisation of higher education, see for example D. Hartley (1996) and P. Scott (2003).
16 On this aspect, see also L. Harvey & J. Newton (2007).
17 An extensive account of this "disillusionment" can be found in L. Harvey & J. Williams (2010).
18 See for a similar analysis E. Van Kemenade & T. Hardjono (2010).

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Measuring the impact of external quality assurance — Or: Preparing external quality assurance for a greater impact on higher education

By Josep Grifoll,[1] Theodor Leiber,[2] Christian Moldt,[3] Julia Salado-Rasmussen,[4] Martin Sørensen[5]

Introduction: external quality assurance in higher education and its impact — where we are

External quality assurance (EQA) procedures are carried out in higher education institutions (HEIs) with increasing intensity and extensiveness. For various reasons groups, stakeholders and quality assurance (QA) agencies that are involved are increasingly asking for the efficiency and effectiveness of QA. At the same time, it seems that our knowledge about the impact of EQA on HEIs is still rudimentary.[6] One reason for this is that causal analyses of the corresponding sociological processes[7] are missing to a large extent — presumably because such analyses are very laborious. Their complexity is particularly evident when we focus the problem in a micro-level approach perspective — a corresponding causal social mechanism hypothesis might look as follows:

> The EQA measure M_i contributed to the generation of the intended or non-intended effects E_j (to the extent of p_k%) after a time span of Δt_l via the beliefs B_m and desires D_n of actors A_o under the structural conditions S_p (i; …; p = 1, …, n_i; …; n_p).

The complicated structure and multiplicity of such hypotheses and its key variables makes it clear that we still lack information and knowledge (e.g. information from EQA participants and HEI members, or about organisational process types in HEIs) to adequately tackle the problem. (From a very critical perspective the micro-level approach might even seem to be hardly feasible.) Therefore, at least for now, any ideas and information about communicational, decisional, and organisational processes taking place in the specific organisation type of HEIs[8] when they are met by EQA measures are most welcome.

Against that background, at the 7th EQAF in Tallinn, EVA (The Danish Evaluation Institute, Denmark) as well as evalag (Evaluation Agency Baden-Wuerttemberg, Germany) together with AQU Catalunya (Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency, Spain) each conducted a workshop on the impact of EQA in HEIs.

Workshop on the empirical study of impact of accreditation in Denmark

Goals

The intention of EVA's workshop was to communicate the Danish suggestion on how the impact of EQA is to be captured, made visible and comprehensible. Furthermore, EVA wanted to present the preliminary results of the Danish study and facilitate a discussion on the expected impacts of EQA in HEIs. The workshop was meant to function as a forum for the exchange of experiences, analytical arguments and methodical reflections, thereby contributing to the enhancement of EQA across Europe.

Analytical framework

EVA's research project focused on how programme accreditation has an impact on learning, organisation and management in HEIs in Denmark. It is based on the assumption that the three actors involved in accreditation — the government, the agency and the institution —all influence the potential for learning in the accreditation process (see Figure 1).

1 Head of Quality Assessment Department, AQU Catalunya, Spain
2 Scientific officer, evalag, Germany
3 Managing adviser, The Danish Evaluation Institute, Denmark
4 Evaluation officer, The Danish Evaluation Institute, Denmark
5 Evaluation officer, The Danish Evaluation Institute, Denmark
6 cf., e.g., Leiber 2011
7 cf. Hedstrøm & Yliko-ski 2010, Little 2011
8 cf. Musselin 2007

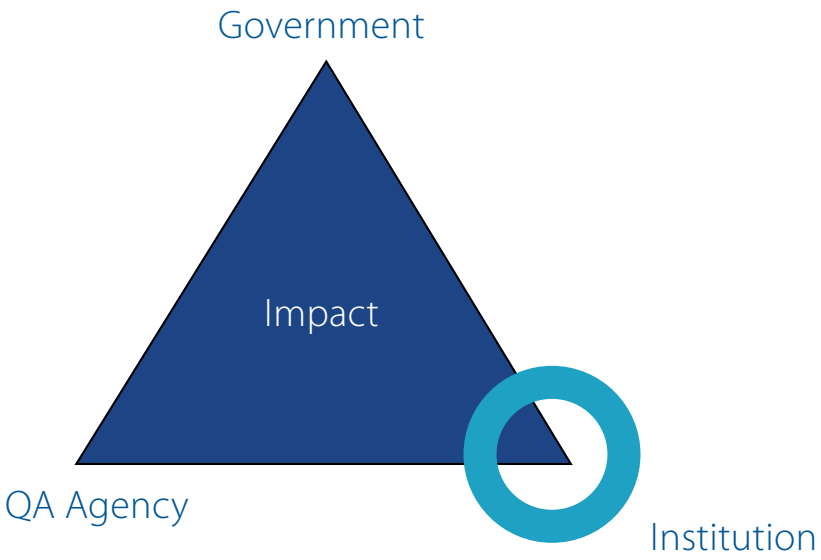

Figure 1:
Main actors and impact field in the accreditation process

From this perspective the impact of EQA depends on a larger context which includes:

- the legal framework for accreditation laid down by the government, including the criteria and the time schedule for re-accreditation
- the QA agency's implementation of the accreditation concept, including the guidelines for the self-assessment report, appointment of experts and dialogue with the institutions
- the institutions' capacity and motivation for participating in the accreditation process.

This illustrates that it is a very complex task to fully investigate the impact of a specific QA process.

EVA decided to analyse the impact of EQA through a qualitative process focusing on the institutions' perception of the impact (the circle in Figure 1). The effect of the QA agency's procedures and the legal framework were therefore perceived through the eyes of the HEIs.

The analysis was done through semi-structured (individual and group) qualitative interviews with leaders, teachers, QA staff and students in five HEIs in Denmark. In total 68 people were interviewed. The interviews were carried out by EVA staff.

The preliminary results of the project indicate that the EQA initiated improvements on specific quality problems. For instance, many of the interviewees mentioned that the institutions' contact with graduates and the students' possibilities to go on exchange had been improved as a result of the EQA. Many of the initiatives were already set in motion in the preparation process to the EQA whereas others were initiated as follow-up processes as a consequence of the assessment in the accreditation report.

The accreditations also led to changes in management systems and QA culture; for instance, the institutions had implemented new internal QA (IQA) systems mirroring the EQA requirements and they reported that they had become more systematic in the way they worked with IQA. They also reported that preparation for accreditation procedures had become integrated into their IQA systems. Further, the EQA led to a more open QA culture and understanding of quality because the preparation for accreditation had led to dialogues and shared understanding. In EVA's interviews with the institutions it was reported that this dialogue was especially fruitful for the newer staff who got access to information that otherwise would have been tacit. These preliminary results are in consonance with other studies which show that EQA leads to discussion about quality, professionalisation of HE support structures and information systems on quality (Stensaker *et al.* 2011).

Some negative effects of accreditation were also reported. Most importantly, it was widely expressed that accreditation can lead to internal and external bureaucratisation. For instance, the process of writing the self-evaluation report was seen as very time-consuming. According to the HEIs, some of the time and resources spent made sense because they led to improved IQA, but other activities were seen as solely bureaucratic, requiring time and resources without leading to better quality.

Furthermore, the preliminary results indicate the circumstances under which EQA improves the institution's quality work. One positive circumstance that was mentioned by the leaders was when they could link the EQA with internal agendas. Some of the leaders had, for a long time, wanted to establish a more open quality culture and the EQA helped them in getting that, e.g. by stressing the importance of sharing international evaluation results. In an article from 2012 Brennan also stresses that major impacts typically come about when leaders and staff use the internal self-evaluation process to address known problems. Another positive circumstance was when the institution had a learning-oriented approach to EQA and organised the process with a wide involvement of staff and a wide support from the leaders. The preliminary results also indicated the circumstances under which EQA did not lead to improvement of the quality work. Some interviewees' perceptions of quality were not in accordance with the accreditation criteria and concept, and other interviewees just did not value the EQA as very important.[9] They were therefore only interested in spending minimal time and resources on the EQA process and, consequently, got less out of the process.

EVA's preliminary results indicate that it is easier to assess the impact on structural and managerial processes than to see the improvement in the actual study programmes' teaching and learning. This has also been indicated in other studies (e.g. Stensaker 2008). This is presumably because teaching and learning is such a complicated evaluation objective and is therefore hard to assess (Dahler-Larsen *et al.* 2001).

Cases, views and recommendations formulated by the participants

The abovementioned analysis of effects and impacts of accreditation in Denmark is still preliminary, the final research report will be completed in 2013. However, the purpose of the presentation was to introduce and discuss the work in progress in order to get interesting perspectives and views that can be beneficial for the finalisation of the research.

The presentation served its purpose. There were many interesting remarks and questions which were primarily directed at the method used, and more detailed questions about the results.

The participants were also asked to discuss in smaller groups their own interest in the impact of EQA. Finally the discussions were shared in the plenum. The discussions led to surprisingly many different perspectives. The most prominent statements can be summarised as:

- it is very fruitful to focus on impact in order not to forget that in the end EQA should lead to better study programmes and not just serve as an accountability tool;
- one important impact of EQA is that dialogue during the process leads to new shared understanding. For instance, students, teachers, QA staff and leaders get a chance during an accreditation process to share ideas and perspectives and learn from each other;
- one might use the results of programme accreditation to provide information on the quality of study programmes to students and other stakeholders. In other words, how the impact of (E)QA can be enhanced and lead to new and improved uses of (E)QA.

There were also other ideas and perspectives which added to the impression that the discussion of impact leads to many refreshing and valuable perspectives even though it can be difficult to find a very good way of actually measuring the impact.

9 Many QA systems are based on a management approach. The central values within this perspective are innovation, collective orientation and system control. In contrast to this perspective is professionalism (with its central values of tradition, individual specialisation and self-determination) which typically is dominant among academics (Bering *et al.* 2011).

Workshop on the causal analysis of external quality assurance

Goals

evalag's and AQU's workshop provided an opportunity for all stakeholder groups concerned to discuss possible impacts of EQA on teaching and learning, institutional structures and HE policies, and to analyse what mechanisms may have led to these impacts.

The main objectives of the workshop were:

- bring into discussion perspectives on impact analyses of the different groups and stakeholders of HEIs;
- contribute to the identification of European topics of impact analysis of EQA in HEIs;
- collect information about the perceptions of the effects of EQA and how they are valued.

Analytical framework

The workshop made use of an analytical matrix for impact analysis (see Figure 2) and introduced some key questions for triggering and inspiring the debate: e.g. Can you name/describe any mechanisms relating to EQA measures and their impacts? Which EQA measure seems to be most important to you? Relating to which EQA process? Could you evaluate different EQA procedures according to their intended, non-intended, achieved, positive and negative effects?

Figure 2:
Analytical matrix for discussion of impact analysis

HOW EQA MAKES A DIFFERENCE		Where EQA makes a difference		
		Quality of educational process	Institution (e.g. governance, IQA)	HE policy (e.g. policy of science/ education, involvement of public)
EQA measure	E.g. preparation of EQA process; self-evaluation report			
	E.g. site visit(s); assessment report; follow-up			

Cases, views and recommendations formulated by the participants

The workshop participants worked in three breakout groups which focused on the three matrix columns (see Figure 2). However, their interest was very much oriented towards the two impact regions of the quality of educational processes and the institutional governance and QA processes.

At the same time, the workshop debate was concentrated on tangible topics. One focus of the discussion was devoted to the question on how HEI staff use EQA to improve the sector.

Participants paid attention to the possibilities of using EQA of the educational process for improving current teaching and learning practices. In particular, they identified three areas that should have priority when linking EQA and possible impacts:

- teaching (methodology and didactics of teaching)
- programme (organisation and content)
- institutional support (for teaching and learning processes).

Accordingly, for the case of educational processes, the workshop participants highlighted two EQA elements that can produce positive impacts:

a) Assessment methodology (in particular, self-assessment and external assessment)
b) External assessment report

Taking the role of EQA as a provider of information (e.g. fulfilment of standards, identification of good practices or recommendations for improvement) it is clear that the external evaluation report has been traditionally considered as the key tool in producing impact on the quality of higher education. The participants, however, highlighted the importance of the assessment methodology in the EQA process to generate important impacts from its very beginning.

a) The significance of the phase of preparing the evaluation process within every HE unit (programme, department, faculty, etc.) was emphasised.

First of all, it seems very important to know the motivation and expectation (as well as the previous knowledge) of HEI staff when it comes to organising the self-assessment process in the HEI, because motivation and engagement of staff (in particular of leading staff) seem to be strongly influential on possible effects of EQA. This was considered crucial during the workshop discussion. Accordingly, it was suggested that the measurement and stimulation of that motivation could probably be explored with the help of making the goals of the EQA process more explicit. For example, the question of whether it is possible, beforehand, to link the exercise (IQA and EQA) with the possibility to promote additional developments in a certain area was put forward.

Moreover, the workshop participants mentioned other possible strategies to increase that motivation. A good example of this is the use of the self-evaluation phase as an opportunity for the (staff) members of the HEI to learn more about each other's activities and goals, and the strategic options of HEI units. This seems to be of particular relevance for young staff members (teachers and managers).

Other aspects that emerged from the discussion are that a methodology with well-founded assessment criteria and standards makes visible the external expectations, for now and the future, and thus gives transparency and rationality to the EQA process, which in turn support motivation. Further possible motivation for HEI staff to undertake IQA and EQA comes into play when a new strategic plan is being set up. According to transparent standards, organisational units can get information about their status quo, and this facilitates the identification of possible tracks for the future development and strategy.

b) There was consensus among the workshop participants that the most evident tool for promoting quality enhancement is the external assessment report.

Some of the participants mentioned that external reports do not always generate new information. According to that opinion, HEI members sometimes already know many of the conclusions and recommendations of the review report. Nevertheless, according to the experience of participants the reports are appreciated because they are considered an external source of information that comes from independent experts, and with that confirmation required changes can be addressed.

The question here is how to make this type of assessment for confirmation and/or reconfirmation compatible, which is needed, with a parallel activity for quality enhancement in which innovation in teaching and learning is promoted. This second activity perhaps requires a different framework with less pressure to fulfil standards and more constructive and formative approaches.

Another perspective brought up in the workshop was linking the external evaluation with the possibility of undertaking benchmarking exercises with other national or international programmes and/or institutions. Workshop participants highlighted the importance of organising assessments in clusters of programmes working in the same discipline. This was considered a very interesting element to generate greater impact,

because good practices can be easily spread out and decision-makers can have more consistent information to choose and to develop strategies, or to put in place new policies.

Workshop participants also mentioned how interesting it is to link EQA with follow-up processes. For different reasons follow-ups are not always adequately implemented, although they are an integral element of methodological EQA standards. In that respect, participants argued that the motivation of HEI staff can promote the establishment of management structures to facilitate the incorporation of recommendations.

Concerning the management level, the debate was focused on the possibility to link funds with the case of positive evaluations. This is a controversial issue, because it can be argued that those presenting weaknesses need to be supported with additional funds. In any case, the discussion suggests, without judging which policy is the best, a reflection about the interest of having more explicit funding instruments and mechanisms from the beginning: First of all, should EQA be linked with the distribution of funds? And if so, to what extent should that policy be made explicit?

The workshop participants also pointed out how important the establishment of a quality culture is within the organisations and the permanent development of the IQA units and systems in the longer term.

Conclusion and common message from both workshops

Some of the key questions which motivated the two workshops were:

- How can we measure and assess the impact of EQA?
- Which EQA measure seems to be most important?
- Can you describe any mechanisms relating EQA measures with their impacts?
- What are typical "learning outcomes" during EQA processes?
- What negative effects of EQA may occur, and how can they be avoided?

We think that the two workshops generated answers to all of these questions — although a comprehensive workup of the complex problem field is not achievable in two workshops.

The main goal of systematic impact analysis of EQA in HEIs is seen in improving EQA (and IQA) in order to enhance the ability of self-governance and the quality of the core processes of HEIs. Improving EQA processes implies the enhancement of the work and methodological reflection of QA agencies.

During their discussions the breakout groups identified the phase of preparation of the self-report and the delivery of the final assessment report as the most influential EQA measures.

However, it turned out to be somehow difficult to name and explicitly describe "social mechanisms" relating to EQA measures and their impacts. The main reasons for this seem to be that the "mechanisms" are very complex and there is a certain lack of knowledge about communicational and organisational process types in HEIs.

Important learning processes, identified in both workshops, are that HEI leaders and staff are brought into discussions about the academic core processes as well as QA being an integral part of HEIs. The relevant groups of learners are the HEIs, the QA agencies and policy makers. It seems that the impact of EQA on HE policy (and policy development) was a matter of rather distant interest to a majority of participants. This is also reflected by the fact that the participants' interest in the analysis of EQA impacts on HE policy was considerably lower compared to other impact areas.

From the discussions it turned out that a typical negative effect of EQA, which many HEIs seem to be afraid of, is (over) bureaucratisation.

In summary, the two workshops have shown that there is a broad consensus that impact analysis of EQA in HEIs is a very important (and timely), but also very complex topic that deserves and still requires quite a lot of research effort.

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Chapter 02

How to make a difference: strategies and tools

Benchmarking — An appropriate tool for decision-making and improving or just another hype?

By Hilde Sels[1] and Nine Hooge[2]

In higher education in Flanders the signals are obvious: benchmarking will eventually become one of the criteria for Quality Assurance (QA). This has triggered Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to initiate a benchmarking exercise as part of the KONDOR project. KONDOR stands for '*Een Kwaliteitssysteem inzake ONDerwijs Ontwikkelen en Realiseren*' (develop and realise a quality system for education). This project was carried out by HEIs that are members of the KU Leuven Association, which unites the University of Leuven with eleven university colleges. The Association financed the KONDOR project with a special fund for educational development. This project began in September 2010 and was completed in August 2012. A working group supported the benchmarking exercise.[3]

A definition of benchmarking

Benchmarking is a concept with many definitions and an equal variety of possible approaches (Epper, 1999, pp. 24-31; HESA, 2010, pp. 7-9; Jackson & Lund, 2000, pp. 6; Schofield, 1998, pp. 11-12). From the beginning, the working group decided against metric, informal and competitive benchmarking. It had to be more than that.

Literature provides us with some useful definitions. The most interesting among them have elements in common. They state that benchmarking has to be a voluntary and internal process (in contradiction with ranking). Furthermore they indicate that benchmarking is about collaborating and comparing: the final goal has to be to learn from each other and to improve the process.

In the end, the working group chose the definition used by the European centre for Strategic Management of Universities (ESMU, 2008, p. 35).

> The voluntary process of self-evaluation and self-improvement through the systematic and collaborative comparison of practice and performance with similar organisations.

This definition has been developed by and for HEIs and contains everything we consider essential to benchmarking. In addition, the approach described in the ESMU *Practical guide* and *Handbook* turned out to be very useful and became the basis of our approach (ESMU, 2008; ESMU, 2010).

At the beginning of the benchmarking exercise, a short survey demonstrated that the HEIs involved had limited experience and expertise with benchmarking. Therefore the first aim of the exercise was building expertise. The exercise had to be designed in such a way that it would and could involve quality managers. This was accomplished by selecting a benchmarking theme within the domain of quality assurance. In 2009, a gathering of quality managers from the association highlighted issues that everybody was still struggling with. One of these issues was selected to be the theme for the benchmarking exercise: 'How to effectively handle results of surveys and performance indicators.' Choosing this theme had some important advantages:

- it was of interest to quality managers;
- it was strategically important in the light of QA and accreditation;
- everybody was looking for answers one way or another.

However, there were also considerable disadvantages. We will return to them later.

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2 Staff member Quality Assurance, Leuven University College, Belgium
3 The benchmarking project was supported by a working group. Members of this group were: Hilde Sels, Thomas More University College, leader of the benchmarking project; Nine Hooge, Leuven University College, project researcher; Kurt De Wit, University of Leuven; Reinoud Vandervelden, Limburg Catholic University College; Kim Waeytens, Leuven University College

Getting ready for the exercise: call for participants and code of conduct

In May 2011, a call for participants was launched. We did a presentation in which we informed quality managers about the purpose and the commitment we expected from participants. The working group decided to perform the benchmarking at programme level, and not HEI level. Every participant had to have two representatives, a quality manager and someone involved in the programme. Participation in the exercise required attendance at every meeting, performing preparatory work in-between meetings and being prepared to deliver all relevant information. We planned five day-long meetings; one in October, November, December, March and May. These requirements were strict and raised questions: is it necessary to have five meetings; is it necessary to have two representatives when everybody is complaining about lack of time and work pressure? Nevertheless, the call for participants turned out to be a huge success. Nineteen programmes from eight HEIs wanted to participate. This led to the challenge of managing such a big group. Would it be possible to perform the benchmarking exercise with so many participants?

At the start of the exercise, participants were asked to sign a code of conduct to ensure that everybody was aware of the conditions. It also created a "safe" environment where participants could exchange information without any risk of it being misused by other participants or by the project leader. All parties agreed upon the text of this code of conduct.

The five stages of the exercise

Stage one: definition of the theme

The exercise was performed in five stages with each stage concluding in a one-day meeting. In the first stage, participants were asked to think about the theme and the process of handling results of surveys and performance indicators in order to divide the general theme into smaller subthemes.

During the concluding meeting this information was put together and discussed. The group decided to benchmark three subthemes: effective analysis and interpretation of results; development of an action plan; and closing the circle, i.e. guaranteeing that in the process of handling results there is also a systematic evaluation and a link to the strategic plan. Once the subthemes were agreed upon, the participants worked together in three groups to make a long list of possible indicators. These indicators can be quantitative or qualitative and have to contain elements that give a good indication of the level of quality.

Stage two and three: definition of the indicators and benchmarks

Definition of the indicators

In stage two and three the group tried to develop a relevant set of indicators regarding handling results of surveys and performance indicators. Firstly, participants had to agree on narrowing down the long list they had made in stage one to have the final list of indicators. In doing so they had to take into account some criteria for these indicators.

They should be:

- relevant
- defined in a proper way
- specific enough without being too specific
- able to indicate relative performance levels and to be used to compare the participants' organisations
- realistic and the organisation should have a possible impact on them.

Besides all this, the complete set should be a mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators and it should be able to provide a complete view of the performance of the organisation in the chosen subject.

This part of the exercise was hard. Many questions were raised and answers proved hard to find.

Questions raised during stage two and three

According to ESMU, the set of indicators should contain qualitative and quantitative indicators. In the long list there were some attempts to introduce a quantitative indicator, but these were soon removed from the short list as they were not relevant. For example, one of the quantitative indicators in the long list was "the number of surveys that lead to actions for improvement". But what is the relevance? What does this tell you? In the end we did use some ratios, e.g. the percentage of surveys for which there is a communication plan.

ESMU advises to consider the complete value chain. In our project however there was a clear focus on the process, not on input, output or outcome. This was partly due to the fact that the project had to be completed within a year and therefore the scope had to be limited.

The group of participants consisted of quality managers on the one hand, and people from a programme on the other. This mix was most certainly an asset, but sometimes the dialogue between the two groups became difficult because they were not always speaking the same language.

Participants were having difficulties finding the appropriate level of specification for the indicators. If an indicator is too specific, it will not be applicable in every situation; if it is not specific enough, people will not recognise their organisation in it. There is no easy answer to this question; for example one of the indicators covered the analysis and interpretation of survey results. Depending on the organisational structure of the HEI this analysis and interpretation is performed at a central level or at the level of faculties. This, of course, had an impact on the definition of this indicator.

At this stage, it became clear that it would have been interesting to attract an external expert to guide the group through this difficult task. Unfortunately, this was impossible.

The selected indicators

Nevertheless the group reached a consensus within due time.

For analysis and interpretation the consensus indicators were: professional level of the analysis team, the process of analysing and interpreting, communication of the results to stakeholders.

For developing an action plan they were: the availability of decision criteria and targets, formulation of goals, the action plan itself.

For closing the circle, these indicators were: evaluation and adjustment of the tools used to measure, effectiveness of actions for improvement, link between actions and strategic goals of the programme.

Elaboration of the benchmarks

However, defining the appropriate indicators was just part of the task. The next step was to elaborate them further. For every indicator there should be a description of four levels of performance: basic, standard, good and excellent. The excellent level was the benchmark: the best possible performance. The standard level was what one might consider the normal level of performance. With that in mind the basic level would be less than satisfactory.

As an example, these are the descriptions of the four performance levels for the indicator "communication of results to the stakeholders":

- basic: the programme informs stakeholders occasionally about results of surveys;
- standard: in less than half of the surveys the programme communicates the survey results and actions taken to the stakeholders;

- good: in more than half of the surveys the programme communicates the survey results and actions taken to the stakeholders;
- excellent: the programme always communicates the survey results and action taken to the stakeholders.

Again, this task really took a considerable amount of time and because of time constraints and the size of the group it was not possible to finish this task with the group as a whole. Therefore, during the third meeting it was decided that the working group who prepared and coordinated the benchmarking exercise would make the last adjustments themselves.
Based on these indicators the working group also prepared scoring cards. These were meant for the participants to be used to score their programme, in other words, to decide the level of performance of the programme for each and every indicator.

1	2	3	4
There is no communication plan available. The programme decides on an ad hoc basis about communication.	There is a communication plan for less than half of the surveys performed.	There is a communication plan for more than half of the surveys performed.	There is a communication plan for all the surveys performed.
	The communication plan contains information about who's responsible for communication as well as a schedule for the survey results. Furthermore the communication plan contains information about at least one of these three aspects: • What will be communicated • How results will be communicated • To whom results will be communicated	The communication plan contains information about who's responsible for communication as well as a schedule for the survey results. Furthermore the communication plan contains information about at least two of these three aspects: • What will be communicated • How results will be communicated • To whom results will be communicated	The communication plan is comprehensive and contains information about all these aspects: • Who's responsible for communication • Timing • What will be communicated • When communication should be done • How results will be communicated • To whom results will be communicated
…			

Figure 1:
Example of an indicator card: communication of the results towards the stakeholders

Stage four: benchmarking

In between the third and fourth meeting, every participant had to compare their own practice with the levels of the indicators: they had to do some self-evaluation and scoring. The project leader who was present at the moment of the final scoring guided them in this process. Participants also indicated their ambition, i.e. the level they wanted to reach in the future. Finally they made a list of strengths and points of improvement. During the fourth meeting, the results of the scoring were presented. There were some remarkable similarities, e.g. concerning the effective communication of survey results to stakeholders; or the use of procedures for analysis and interpretation of the results of surveys. This resulted in low average scores for these indicators. On the other hand, for some indicators most participants showed good practices which resulted in high average scores for these indicators. For a third group of indicators there was more discrepancy between the scores of the participants.

During this meeting, participants also presented what they believed to be their best practice and there was enough room for discussion and asking questions.

Subtheme XXXX	Performance level				What's good? What could be improved?
Indicators	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	
Indicator 1		X			
Indicator 2					
Indicator 3					

Figure 2:
The positioning card. The blue line starts at the minimum score of the programme for this indicator and ends at the maximum score. The cross indicates the average score of the programme. The orange indicates the ambition level of the programme for this indicator.

Stage five: development of an action plan

In the final stage participants had to develop an action plan based on the results of the benchmarking. Although we did not ask them to hand over this action plan, we know that they developed some very specific actions for improvement.

During the scoring stage, everybody had to indicate their ambition for every indicator and the intended actions linked with it. Some of them appeared to be very popular: starting to work on elaborated targets and cutting edges for every survey and performance indicator; effective communication to all stakeholders; development of a procedure for analysis and interpretation.

In the last meeting, some of the participants talked about their experiences or presented a more in-depth best practice.

Lessons learned

The benchmarking exercise was initiated in order to build experience in benchmarking itself. One of the first lessons learnt is that it's necessary to have someone with benchmarking experience to support and advise the group. It is also a good idea to involve someone who is an expert in the domain of the subject being benchmarked.

Nineteen programmes participated in this exercise. Every participant had two representatives. The size of the group forced us to adapt the working methods in order to guarantee real involvement of everyone.

The group consisted of a mixture of quality managers and programme coordinators. These different backgrounds sometimes caused friction in the dialogue between the two groups.

Especially during the stage of developing the set of indicators, the group needed guidance to find the right balance concerning the level of specificity and to formulate the benchmarks and the other levels of performance.

Although a good mixture of qualitative and quantitative indicators is important, it is not always possible to reach this balance. In the case of this project, it turned out to be almost impossible to define relevant quantitative indicators.

What was good?

The mixture between quality managers and programme coordinators was a challenge, but it was also perceived as an asset and led to increased mutual respect and better understanding. Participants indicated that they really learned a lot from each other.

The stage of developing the indicators plays a very important role for the participants to get better insight into the processes in relation to the theme being benchmarked. This might be the hardest stage in the exercise, but it is also the most important one to make sure the exercise is a success. Participants testified that in the end the indicators were relevant and provided a good image of the organisational processes. The use of the scoring cards really helped the programmes to get an insight into where they stand.

Participants testified that they were already working on an action plan. In fact, one of the participants acknowledged at the moment of the scoring that they had already taken measures based on what they had learned during the exercise. This had a positive impact on their scores.

The benchmarking process is very demanding, but it ensures that people really reflect on the subject: where are we now, what do we want to achieve, which aspects are involved?

Challenges

Benchmarking does not replace common sense: it is impossible to just implement good practices from others into your organisation. You will have to adapt whatever lessons learned to the specific context of your HEI.

The rationale for the benchmarking must be very clear from the start. Benchmarking can be initiated for several reasons: accountability, optimising processes, quality improvement. In this paper focus was on the latter. Confidentiality is an absolute condition for a quality-driven benchmarking exercise. If participants cannot rely on the group and be sure that their information is kept safe and confidential, they will be reluctant to be as open as is necessary for a successful benchmarking exercise. Furthermore there are possible side-effects of benchmarking, including window dressing amongst others. These can be avoided if there is strict confidentiality.

Benchmarking is not a ranking tool: benchmarking is an internal governance tool; ranking is a marketing tool (Gaetghens, 2012, p. 12).

Benchmarking is not a goal in itself, it is just another instrument. Organisations should carefully consider the pros and cons before they participate in benchmarking. They should also carefully consider the best approach to benchmarking, given the theme selected. The approach described in this paper will not always turn out to be the most efficient one. In 2010 Östling presented a completely different approach at EQAF (Östling, 2010).

Every step in the process is important and deserves equal attention. Due to circumstances, heavy workload and organisational changes, there might be pressure to skip certain steps. This can cause the exercise to become a failure.

Sense and nonsense of benchmarking

If an organisation just wants to learn from another organisation, benchmarking is too demanding a process. There are other techniques available that allow exchange of experiences and good practices. Benchmarking involves a lot more than just learning from each other.

It is a systematic, formal, analytical and continuous process. The aim is to formulate challenging, but realistic goals; to develop an action plan; and to identify good practices, organisational deficiencies and priorities for the future. Therefore benchmarking is a tool for decision-making. It leads to networking, collaboration and mutual respect; it leads to better performance; it leads to better understanding of processes and how to improve them; and it leads to the introduction of good practices.

Benchmarking should always lead to action. In a quality-driven exercise the action plan is aimed at improvement. Because of the confidential character of a quality-driven exercise it is not possible to use the results of the exercise for accountability reasons or external quality assessments. Nonetheless it will be possible to indicate that certain actions for improvement are based on the results of benchmarking.

Benchmarking is a very expensive and demanding tool. Therefore, it should be used only for strategically important issues. Then again, it should only be used if there is a real intention to learn and improve.

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Quality enhancement through shared institutional responsibilities: A case study on how to use student and graduate tracking for strategic development and quality enhancement

By Hanne Smidt[1] and Kristina Josefson[2]

Introduction

At the beginning of 2011 Lund University initiated a project that set out to identify or map how the eight faculties and the central administration collect and use the tracking of students and graduates for quality enhancement and strategic development. The intention of the project was to gain a deeper insight into Lund University's own practice; to develop a better understanding of the possible impact of tracking the progression path of students and graduates and identify a minimum level for student support and student support service throughout the university. The objective was to create the foundations for a common knowledge base at Lund University for tracking of students and graduates (national and international), and draw up recommendations for how to strengthen the university identity as a world-class university by introducing common routines for all faculties. The project was inspired by the participation in the EUA project: "Tracking Learners' and Graduates' Progression Paths" (EUA 2012).

The European project found no agreed definition at European level of what tracking actually is. It therefore adopted an empirical, deductive approach, in analysing a wide range of monitoring and surveying initiatives, related to data collections and support services at institutional and national levels. Initially it considered tracking all systematic approaches that a HEI introduces to follow:

- students' progression paths during their studies towards gaining a qualification
- entry and progression of graduates in the labour market
- entry and progression of graduates in other educational programmes.

The project developed an approach to tracking that formed the framework for the mapping exercise at Lund University:

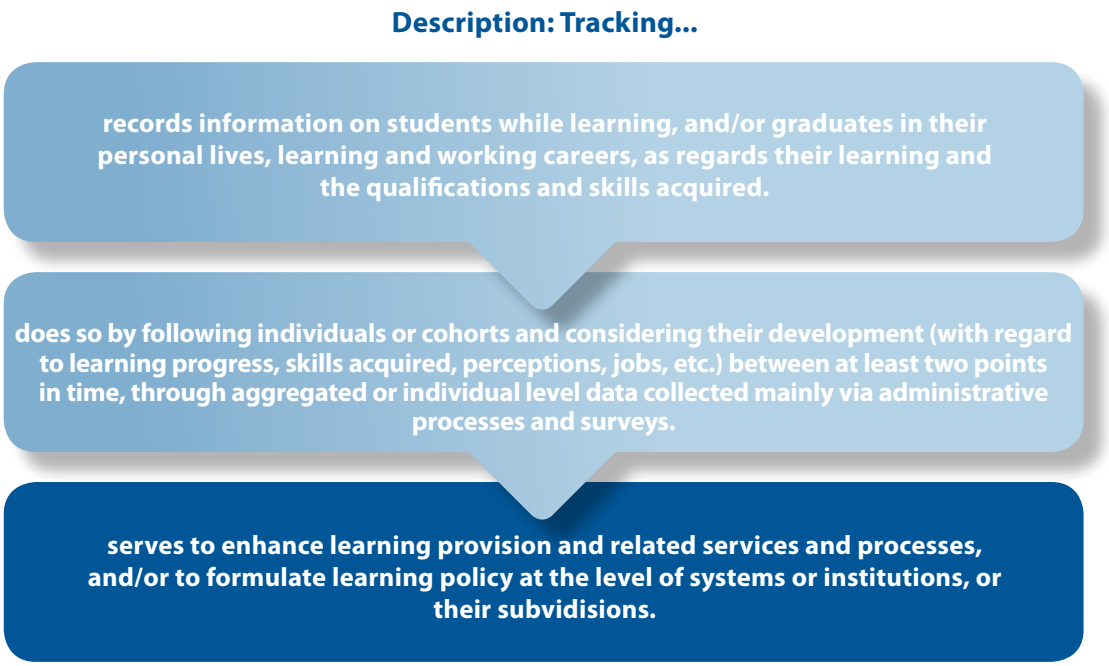

Figure 1
Description of tracking

1 Project manager, Lund University, Sweden
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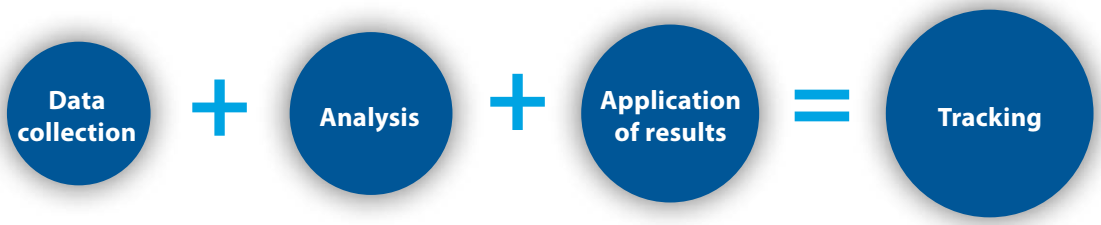
The report identified that tracking consists of three stages: data collection, analysis and application of results. The EUA report found that these three steps are not always necessarily carried out by the same actor. For example, tracking might use data established by other initiatives for other purposes, raising the important question of how it is shared within institutions, national bodies and beyond, and later published.

Figure 2:
Three stages of tracking



Global and local drivers

European higher education looks back on a decade of reform, under the umbrella of the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy. As the structural parts of the reform, i.e. the introduction of three degree cycles, have been widely implemented, one of the core goals — the move towards student-centred learning — is receiving increased attention, and questions both at institutional and European level are increasingly being raised on what the impact has been. This focus has been one of the drivers behind the European project on mapping approaches to tracking the progression paths of students not only during their studies, but also on their background and progression on the labour market.

The Lund project identified a number of common global and local drivers within the university that corresponded to the external drivers found in the EUA project:

- the Bologna Process (in Sweden this has resulted in the introduction of a new degree cycle: the Master degree (in 2007) and an increasing need to know what the implementation of a new degree cycle has meant for students and for the university);
- rapidly growing number of students (student numbers increased by 30% at Lund University between 2007 and 2012);
- growing diversification in types of students (Sweden has a long tradition of lifelong learners, but has only since 2007 started to actively recruit international full-degree students);
- increased focus on quality assurance (Sweden has introduced a new controversial national quality assurance system that focuses solely on examination outcomes);
- increased focus on autonomy and accountability (Sweden introduced an autonomy bill in 2011).

The global and local drivers illustrate the increasing complexity that higher education teaching and learning is facing. Unlike in the past, today's higher education institutions not only have to convey academic and professional knowledge and research skills, but a wider range of generic skills, including the ability to self-learn because in rapidly changing economic and social contexts graduates will often work in jobs for which they have not been specifically educated or trained.

At Lund University trends in global higher education have become interchangeable with institutional and national trends and these have led to greater interest in tracking the progression paths of students and graduates in order to determine who the students are, how they progress and what they do after graduation. Developing methods for assessing throughput and success rates of students and their employability has taken on a greater importance for the strategic development of programmes and courses for the growing and increasingly heterogeneous groups of students. A more systematic knowledge about students and graduates is considered essential to generate the necessary information for a continuous improvement of the content

and quality of courses, programmes, and support functions (student information, study and career guidance, international desk). The global and national trends also means greater demands for accountability (nationally and internationally) and Lund University is responding to the demand by using the results of student and graduate tracking to enhance the strategic profile of the university, but more importantly to enhance the quality of the student experience.

Methodology

The Lund project is based on interviews with representatives from different parts of the central administration (the student administration and student support unit, the quality and evaluation unit, the external relations unit (internationalisation), the planning unit and the leadership support unit), their counterparts at the faculty level (vice-deans, student counsellors, programme coordinators and academics) and student representatives to map out practices in place and to understand how these were used either to support students and graduates or how the data was used for strategic development work. The main questions were:

- How are key figures collected and to what end?
- Which initiatives are in place to track students before, during and after their studies?
- How can a better coordination of practices on student tracking and student support services enhance and contribute to the long-term development of teaching and learning and student support services?
- How can the tracking of students and graduates be used to develop a minimum level of student support services for all Lund University students?

The responses from the different representatives were presented in figures for each faculty. The interviews and figures made it possible to identify best practices. The material was analysed and used to formulate recommendations on a minimum threshold for tracking students and graduates (see Figure 3) to the newly established Council for Education.

Diversity in practice — Identifying key performance indicators (KPIS)

The collection of student data at LU is organised centrally in a joint database (LADOK) for all faculties and is part of a common database co-hosted by the Swedish higher education sector. In some faculties this database has been enhanced by supplementary data as they saw fit. A common problem voiced by both faculty representatives and the central administration was that it was very difficult to extrapolate statistical data or key performance indicators (KPI) from this database. Coinciding with the Trackit project LU initiated the development of a data warehouse that could run KPI reports based on LADOK and thus produce targeted reports for specific target groups (Institutional Leadership, Deans, programme managers, student counsellors etc.). The interviews revealed a great need for more readily available KPIs and for tracking the progression path of students, but also pointed to a great diversity in approach and practice between faculties, partly due to historical reasons, the structure of the programmes within each faculty and partly due to the question of available resources to carry out tracking and using the results for quality enhancement (human and financial). Three faculties faced particular problems in tracking their students as their students had a large degree of freedom to combine courses (free-floating courses) within their degree.

Despite the diversity in practice the faculty representatives identified three common internal driving forces underlying the need for identification in relation to the development of programme development at Lund University: (1) demographic changes, (2) increased focus on retention and (3) development of educational environments. The interviews also revealed agreement on a fourth point (4); that a modified approach in terms of the university's commitment to its students and of students' attitudes toward the university was under development.

Identified common challenges, routines and tools

Based on the interviews the project group developed a recommendation (see Figure 3) for a joint institutional policy that was adopted by the Council for Education in May 2012. It is currently being implemented and is considered "work in progress". It builds on the recommendation that a common policy regarding the collection and use of KPIs is introduced and a minimum level of student support is identified, but respects the diversity between the faculties. This requires a close collaboration between the leadership, faculties and central administration, and where some faculties share their practice and others adopt. Furthermore it requires the availability for funding the development of new student support initiatives at faculty and institutional level. The central administration provides all faculties with data, and surveys that follow the students through the student life cycle at LU collected through a Customer Relation Management System (CRM), an analytical survey tool (including a course evaluation system) and the data warehouse. The faculties can concentrate on using the results of the new routines and tools to improve their student monitoring and support. An expected (side) effect is that these initiatives will also provide better data and information that can be used to enhance the pedagogical development of teaching and learning.

New routines and tools

The policy is to develop common institutional procedures for the collection and analysis of KPIs on students (national and international) before, during, at the end of and after their studies using the data warehouse and CRM system supported by the central administration:

- the transfer of data from LADOK to the data warehouse should be improved, especially when it comes to providing data for early alert/early warning. It will lead to a simplification and savings of (human) resources at faculty and departmental level that can be used for student support;
- define institution-wide KPIs that can be broken down to faculty and department level. The definitions will take into account both common and specific follow-up needs at programme, faculty and university level and create opportunities for follow-up over time. This will be done through the education and quality dialogues;
- the existing student and graduate surveys have a good balance between common, specific and long-term questions. This will be the model for the development of the common internet-based questionnaires (welcome survey, thematic student and graduate studies, course evaluations and exit poll) and will allow for benchmarking between department and faculties;
- the university will ensure that all students are offered targeted student support independent of which faculty they attend (early alert and early warning system). Specific attention should be paid to ensuring a minimum level of student support at all faculties during the first semester which can promote retention: access/invitation to student counselling, study planning, Supplementary Instruction (SI), career planning and guidance, etc.;
- KPIs and the derived information will, where appropriate, be used in the university's marketing and information for future and current students;
- introduce differentiated follow-up systems for different groups of students: international full-degree students (has already been introduced), students with a non-traditional background, as well as lifelong learning students;
- build on existing networks for study and career guidance counsellors, alumni coordinators and internationalisation to share knowledge and experience in a comprehensive and systematic manner for sharing best practices and working methods around issues such as retention, widening participation and internationalisation.

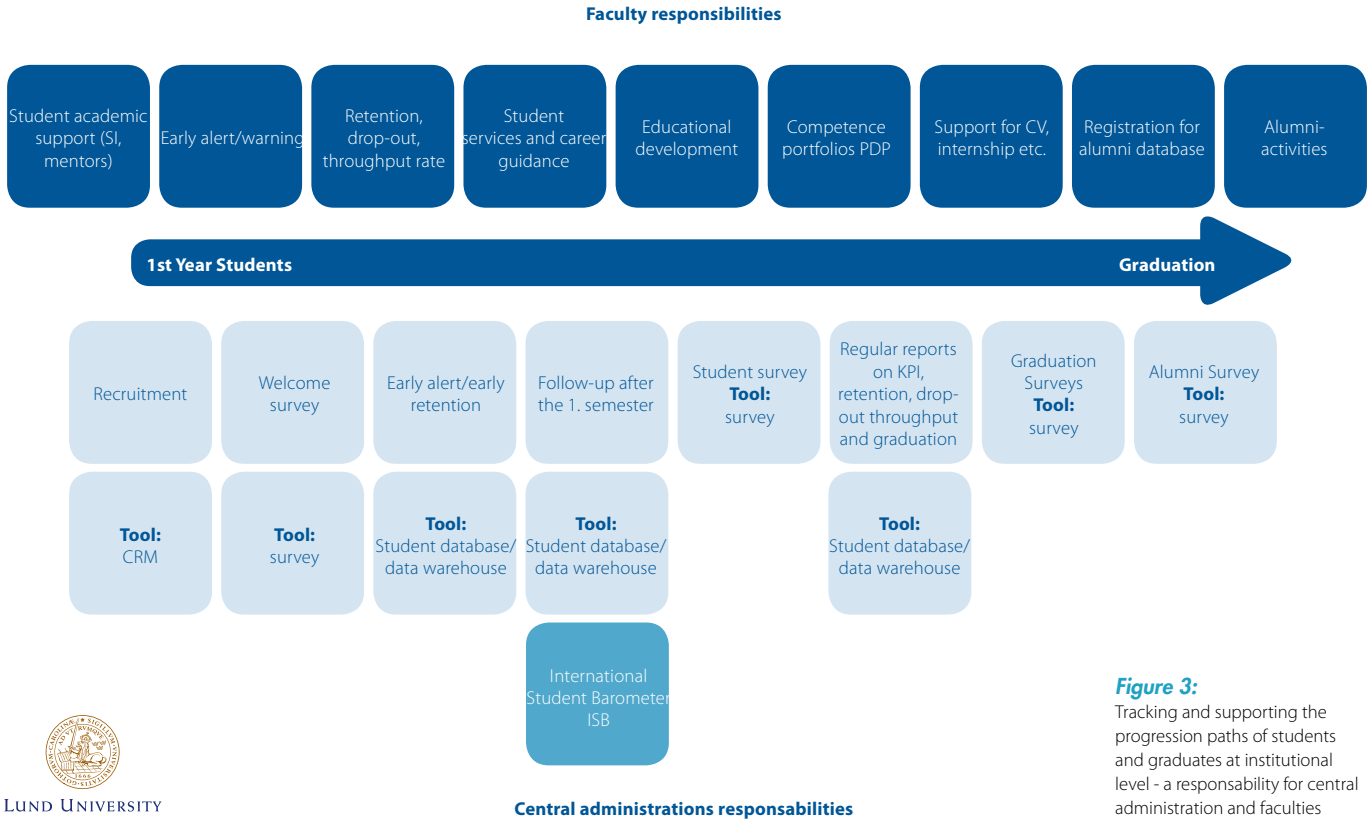


Figure 3:
Tracking and supporting the progression paths of students and graduates at institutional level - a responsability for central administration and faculties

Communicating the goals

The positive outcome of the project is based on extensive communication of the goals and progress of the project and the involvement of a great number of representatives from different parts of the university (bottom-up involvement) and the use of an outside project coordinator with no vested interest. The focus was maintained by frequent presentations to different university boards on teaching and learning and widening participation, and by publishing articles in the internal university journal. The project has been able to create a common understanding of the importance of developing a university-wide policy for tracking at all levels within the university and the need to use the results to enhance the student experience.

The policy is based on the identified joint responsibilities and collaboration between the central administration and the faculties (see Figure 3). The simultaneous introduction of new analytical tools has made it possible for the central administration in cooperation with the faculties to develop surveys and KPIs based on LADOK, CRM and a data warehouse that can be used by the faculties to enhance especially the crucial first year experience and promote retention. The project group was inspired by Tinto and Thomas' theories on the importance of early retention and creating inclusive study environments especially for non-traditional students.

The result of the mapping exercise is an important step towards identifying, building and sharing knowledge about best practice with regard to the collection and use of key figures, in order to develop recruitment, promote retention and support students when it comes to both academic and social integration. The project revealed a plethora of good practice, but only a couple of the faculties had an overview that allowed them to track the whole student life-cycle and use this to adjust their practices.

Fit for purpose — creating a quality enhancement system

The faculty that had the best practice for tracking students and graduates and introducing the derived information into quality-enhancing initiatives and developments made a very important point during the interviews; that it was essential to only collect data and information that can be used directly for quality enhancement, rather than focus on all the "nice to know" questions. The faculty used the example of information on student background. It had found it very difficult to use this information in a targeted way and found that the access or welcome survey could be used to identify students who had queries and concerns that could lead to direct contact. It had found over the past decade that it was much more difficult to develop initiatives that singled out specific students because of their background if they did not themselves indicate that they needed support. The faculty therefore had ceased to request information on social and economic backgrounds and instead formulated questions where the student could indicate that they had concerns or questions. It also inspired the faculty to develop a host of welcome activities with student teachers and readily available student counsellors. The student background information that was useful was related to the secondary school and the area this was located in. The information was used to actively engage and recruit potential students from schools where the percentage of students who go into higher education is low, whereas in other faculties it was used to attract students from secondary schools that in general proved to have a high retention rate when at university.

Taking control of the narrative and engaging the students

In the words of Lee Schulman (2007), Lund University has started to "take control of the narrative and engage their students" by accumulating more knowledge about LU students and using the information for quality enhancement. The project was thus also inspired by Shulman's seven pillars of assessment for accountability. The seven pillars include: (1) be explicit about the story you need to tell and the rationale for choosing it; (2) not think that there is a "bottom line". An early step in the deployment of any instrument, new or old, should be a process of locating the instrument in a larger conceptual framework that explicitly stipulates what it measures and what it does not; (3) design multiple measures; (4) work on combining multiple measures; (5) remember that high stakes corrupt; (6) embed assessment into ongoing instruction and assess early and often; (7) become an active and collaborative site for research on new forms of assessment, new technologies to support such work, and better strategies for integration of such approaches with instruction (Schulman 2007).

Through this project LU has acknowledged its institutional responsibility to collect and publish reliable data and information, and does not want to leave it up to other stakeholders to tell its story (e.g. the employers' organisation that may have a biased view). In general national data collection was found to have the problem of not being able to break the data down to faculty level and programme level, and if that is not possible it is of little use institutionally for strategic development, for quality enhancement and for taking charge of the narrative. The project has made a particular point of maintaining the importance of the specific profile of the individual faculties and at the same time creating boundaries that all faculties have to find their own way of introducing.

Making a difference by creating consensus and sharing the responsibility

The results of the different tracking initiatives (KPIs and survey results) and discussions on how to improve or sustain student support and student support services are included in the education and quality dialogues that the institutional leadership carries out annually with all the faculties and have contributed to the development of a sense of shared responsibility for quality assurance and strategic development and actively used to enhance quality of the student experience.

The quality dialogues are prepared by collecting KPI on retention, student support services, and internationalisation and graduation rates. These are discussed and consolidated in a pre-meeting so that the discussions during the dialogues are not focused on the validity of the data, but rather focus on relevant themes. Other results from surveys and other quality enhancement projects are included in the discussion. The next step in the development of a shared responsibility for quality enhancement is that the Deans carry out their own quality dialogues with the departments/programmes before the quality dialogues between the leadership and the faculties — thus including all levels in developing a responsibility for quality assurance.

In an internationally-oriented university with 47,000 students, eight faculties and 6 800 employees divided into three campuses the commitment to take responsibility for its own narrative is challenging as it has to introduce a policy that is "fit for purpose" for all faculties and build on developed practices on how to best track students and graduates. Lund University partnership in the recent EUA project: "Tracking Learners' and Graduates' Progression Paths", 2012, was an inspiration and a driver to develop a common policy spanning the whole university and ensuring the development of a joint responsibility between faculties and the leadership. The project has inspired other Swedish universities to engage in similar exercises promoted by the same drivers for change that the staff identified at Lund University, which sum up a need for continuous quality enhancement of teaching and learning.

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Gathering student feedback: How can it make a difference?

By Tina Harrison[1]

Introduction

Student participation in quality processes underpins the validity and reliability of both internal and external review processes (Gvaramadze, 2011) and has been demonstrated to be a value-adding factor for improving quality in higher education (Coates, 2005). Student participation occurs in a variety of ways, but one of the central pillars of most European quality systems is the collection of feedback from students on their experiences of higher education.

In recent years the amount of such student surveying has increased with the desire from different stakeholders to survey students at unit/module level, subject or programme level and institution level. Add to this the increasing range of sector-wide surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS), the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and the International Student Barometer (ISB) widely in use in the UK. Not surprisingly, we find that students at the University of Edinburgh are asked to complete on average six to eight surveys in any given academic year; an experience that is not uncommon across the sector.

A number of key factors have contributed to the increase in student feedback surveys including: the expansion of the higher education sector; expectations by quality assurance agencies; increased consumerism and marketisation; and increased concern over the quality of education. Enabling factors such as the advent of web-based survey tools have made it easier to administer surveys to students. On the whole, however, there has been the realisation that in order to improve the quality of the educational experience institutions need to take account of the experiences, attitudes and opinions of those who are on the receiving end of the education — the students — and enhancement is a partnership approach.

Having established that feedback from students is widely collected in institutions, it is not always clear how fit for purpose it is (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007) or that it is being used to its full potential (Harvey, 2003). Harvey (2003) notes that feedback from students serves two main purposes: (1) internal information to guide improvement; (2) external information for potential students and other stakeholders, including accountability and compliance requirements. Data collection is one of the key stages in quality enhancement and this has long been a focus of evaluation systems in the higher education sector (Young *et al.*, 2011). However, Harvey (2003) notes that the move from mere data collection to the production of meaningful information capable of supporting decision-making and targeted actions for improvement has proved a challenge for many institutions.

A central purpose of this paper, therefore, is to critically examine the feedback gathering practices of institutions in the UK higher education sector, to answer the following questions: To what extent is student feedback being transformed into effective management information? To what extent does student feedback have the potential to make a difference to the student experience? Set against this background, the University of Edinburgh

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embarked on a study to explore the methods used across the UK higher education sector to gather feedback from students and, in particular, how those methods are being used, in order to benchmark its own practice and identify areas for improvement. This paper reports the findings of the study and the recommendations proposed. The study provides a template that other institutions can use to benchmark and reflect critically on their own practice.

Method

In order to ascertain the range of methods used by higher education institutions (HEIs) in gathering feedback from their students and using this as a means of benchmarking the University of Edinburgh's own practice, two comparable questionnaires were developed: one aimed at external institutions in the UK HE sector and one aimed at internal schools/support units within the University of Edinburgh. The questionnaires were designed to capture the following information: the range of survey methods used (survey in this context is not restricted to questionnaires, but includes a range of methods both qualitative and quantitative, formal and informal for surveying the student voice); the perceived effort involved in administering the surveys and the relative value attached to the information derived; the purpose of the surveys (and key motivations); the survey content; methods of data analysis, distribution of findings and how findings are used. The questionnaire was concluded with open-ended questions about respondents' ideal methods for surveying students and whether they had discontinued use of any particular methods and the reasons for this.

The questionnaires were administered via Electric Paper's EvaSys software. The external questionnaire was distributed to quality professionals via key Quality Assurance networks in the UK. The precise number of institutions in the population is not possible to ascertain, but 28 respondents in total from a range of HEIs in the UK completed the questionnaire: 75% completed the questionnaire on behalf of their institution. Most of the others (21%) completed it on behalf of a support service.

The internal questionnaire was distributed to quality practitioners within each of the university's three college offices (and their respective schools, 22 in total) and various support services. In total, 33 respondents completed the survey: 33% in the College of Humanities and Social Science (HSS), 18% in the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine (MVM) and 24% in the College of Science and Engineering (CSE), broadly consistent with the relative size of each College. The remaining 24% of respondents were from support services. Within schools, most respondents completed the questionnaire on behalf of their school as a whole (63%) with a significant proportion completing it on behalf of a programme (20%). Colleagues in support services completed the questionnaire either on behalf of the service as a whole (56%) or on behalf of a key service subunit.

Findings

Survey methods used

The study reveals that a wide range of methods are used for gathering feedback from students. Overall, the most common methods are electronic questionnaires, paper questionnaires and formal meetings (such as committee meetings, staff-student liaison meetings), used by 79%, 64% and 75% of HEIs respectively. The University of Edinburgh's questionnaire revealed findings broadly consistent with the sector respondents in terms of use of formal meetings and paper questionnaires, but showed a substantially higher reported use of informal contact and a slightly lower reported use of electronic questionnaires. Table 1 presents the full range of methods used, but does not indicate how much use is made of each method.

Table 1
Survey methods used

Method	Sector response (%)	UoE response (%)
Paper questionnaires	64.3	61.8
Electronic questionnaires (using external open access survey software)	78.6	58.8
Electronic questionnaires (using bespoke software)	42.9	29.4
Social networking: Facebook, blogs, Twitter	21.4	17.6
Electronic dialogue: bulletin boards, web-based response forms, WebCT	17.9	44.1
Formal meetings: focus groups, one-to-one meetings, staff-student liaison meetings	75.0	79.4
Informal contact	46.4	82.4
Personal response systems (i.e. clickers in class)	21.4	20.6
Other	3.6	11.8

Respondents were then asked to indicate from the range of methods used the one that they made the most use of. Questionnaires clearly emerged as the single most used method, 89% of the sample, with electronic questionnaires taking up two-thirds of this use. While formal meetings seem to be widely used (in Table 1) only 15% in the internal sample and 7% in the external sample use them as their main method. The findings indicate that there is a distinct bias towards questionnaire types of data gathering with much less focus on qualitative data gathering methods, such as meetings/focus groups. This may have an impact on the nature of data gathered and its potential effectiveness.

Effort versus value

Respondents were asked to rate the survey methods they use in terms of the amount of effort taken and the value derived, on a scale from low effort/value to high effort/value. In terms of effort, both the internal and external samples rated paper questionnaires (81% external and 50% internal) and formal meetings (70% external and 59% internal) as high in effort. Additionally, the external respondents rated electronic dialogue as high in effort (60%).

The survey methods rated lowest in effort were informal contact (43% external and 63% internal) and social networking (43% external and 57% internal). Additionally electronic questionnaires were rated low in effort by almost half the respondents of the external sample.

In terms of value, none of the methods were deemed to offer no value at all. The methods rated highest in value across both external and internal samples are formal meetings (89% internal; 90% external), informal contact (82% internal; 78% external), electronic questionnaires (79% internal; 74% external) and paper questionnaires (66% internal; 80% external). Social media and electronic dialogue both received mixed responses, suggesting that some value is being derived in pockets, but not consistently.

Overall, the findings suggest that methods are perhaps used based primarily on effort over value, which raises some concerns over the usefulness of information derived. There seem to be opportunities to make greater use of methods that are perceived to offer greater value.

Purpose of surveys

The questionnaire then asked respondents about the primary purposes of the surveys. The use of surveys for understanding the student experience of the programme and its units/modules is clearly seen as the primary purpose and highly important (see Table 2): rated important by more than three-quarters of respondents. The use of surveys to understand the wider student experience beyond the programme of study is perceived to be important but less so than understanding the student experience of programmes. Externally, surveys do not seem to be regarded as very important as management information tools to understand the usage of services and are considered unimportant for the purpose of staff performance review.

Method	Sector response (mean)*	UoE response (mean)
Students' experience of the overall programme of study	1.6	1.4
Students' experience of a module/unit of a programme	1.8	1.5
Students' experience of a key stage or level of the programme of study (e.g. the first year)	2.0	2.0
Students' experiences of other services/facilities not directly provided by their programme (e.g. library, IT, Careers, Accommodation)	2.3	2.2
Information/opinions from staff	2.6	1.9
Providing management information relating to usage of particular services/ facilities	3.0	2.1
Providing management information for the purposes of staff performance review	3.7	2.5
Fulfilling the requirements for Quality Assurance	2.4	1.6

Table 2
Purpose of surveys

*Based on a 5-point scale 1= very important, 5= not at all important

A key concern is whether surveys are being used to understand enough about the wider student experience, in particular those aspects of the student experience that cut across programmes and courses (such as student support, careers etc.). With so much surveying being conducted at the module/programme level, there is the risk that information is being generated in silos without obtaining a holistic overview of the student experience.

Question format and content

Specifically with regard to the use of questionnaires, respondents were asked about the nature and type of questions asked of students. Three key findings are evident in terms of (1) the format of questions used, (2) the degree of standardisation of questions and (3) the extent of benchmarking or reference to external surveys. In terms of question format, closed-ended questions tend to be used more than open-ended questions, although open-ended questions seem to feature as a more major component at the University of Edinburgh compared to the external sample.

Externally the extent of standardisation of questions seems to be higher. This may contribute to the perception of lower effort reported above by the external sample in relation to electronic surveys. The findings suggest that a degree of standardisation exists within a survey in order to enable comparisons from year to year and identify trends, but that standardisation perhaps forms a lesser role across surveys within an institution. However, the content of surveys externally does tend to closely mirror the National Student Survey (NSS) categories which means that a high proportion of questionnaires used in the external sample contain questions directly comparable to NSS.

Analysis of data

Differences in the analysis of data are evident between the internal and external samples. The internal University of Edinburgh questionnaire suggests that more use is made of automated statistical analysis and presentation, but that less attention is paid to comparing the data to key benchmarks, in particular external benchmarks: 68% of the external sample respondents reported comparing survey data to annual internal benchmarks and 59% to external benchmarks whereas 68% of internal survey respondents reported comparing survey data to internal benchmarks but 81% do not compare data to external benchmarks. Benchmarking may be facilitated by greater standardisation of questions and closer alignment of questions to the NSS survey.

Distribution and use of survey findings

In both the external and internal University of Edinburgh samples respectively only 21% and 26% of respondents reported that survey results were retained by the author of the survey. Almost all (96% and 94% respectively)

reported making results available to all with management responsibility for the activity to which the survey relates. 79% externally and 50% internally reported making the results available to management outside the immediate academic unit or service section. Fewer (63% and 40%) make the results available to all the respondents of the surveys. Only 25% and 13% make the results publicly available and less than a quarter make the results available to external bodies (such as external examiners and professional bodies).

The distribution of results shows a fairly consistent picture between the internal and external samples: distribution of findings is mostly among those involved in conducting and managing the teaching. Smaller proportions overall make the results available to students or make them publicly available.

The primary uses of the findings are for Quality Enhancement (QE) and Quality Assurance (QA): to inform local decisions on changes in teaching and to satisfy QA requirements (54% externally and 77% internally reported this as important). Secondary uses appear to be to inform departmental planning (27% in both surveys noted this as important). Around half of each sample reported that the results were not important in the appraisal or personal development process.

Ideal surveys

Respondents were asked to indicate their ideal survey method and the reason. Similarities across both samples are evident in terms of the desire for greater use of electronic surveying and also the desire to make surveying more efficient. A small proportion of respondents in both samples still want to use paper methods. Triangulation seems to be a key feature, in particular ensuring that different methods feed into a common purpose, and being able to derive greater value from existing (high effort) mechanisms like staff-student liaison meetings and student representatives. The general trend seems to be the abandonment of paper surveys in preference of electronic methods, although some report returning to paper surveys because of lower response rates with electronic surveys. The extent to which paper or electronic methods are used depends largely on class sizes and physical location of students.

Conclusion

The findings clearly indicate that despite a range of survey methods being used, most institutions in the sample make heaviest use of questionnaires, in particular, electronic questionnaires. The findings seem to suggest that the choice is based on effort over value, which is reinforced by the increasing trend to move away from paper methods to electronic methods. This raises concerns about the overall potential of the surveys to achieve the primary functions noted by Harvey (2010). The key driver in the shift from traditional paper surveys to online has been cost implications and timeliness of data coding and reporting. Despite this, findings clearly indicate that there is room for improvement in the analysis and reporting of feedback results and its use as management information. Whilst both samples in this study suggest that results are being used effectively for QA and QE purposes within institutions, there are still gaps in the extent to which results are being reported externally and the extent to which the feedback loop is being closed.

The focus on questionnaires suggests an overreliance on quantitative measures based around a fixed set of closed-ended questions. Whilst such methods may yield feedback that highlights issues or problems, they are not always effective in helping to understand the potential solutions to the problems. In the spirit of partnership, institutions need to make greater use of the ongoing dialogue with students through both formal meetings and informal contact, to enter into a continuous conversation with students about the student experience and how to enhance it. On the basis of the study the following recommendations are made:

Holistic overview

Ensure feedback mechanisms provide a holistic overview of the student experience — from the student perspective.

Triangulate

Consider ways to triangulate feedback from different feedback mechanisms. Questionnaires are just one method and should not be mistaken as the only method. They need to be considered in the wider context of the student voice. Also need to ensure that the outcomes are known to student representatives and that the conversations around how to address the feedback are channelled through regular formal meetings with students and representatives.

Increase value

Consider ways to increase the value of "high effort" feedback mechanisms such as formal meetings, perhaps using them to discuss feedback results and suggest potential actions.

Benchmark results

Consider ways to increase opportunities for benchmarking results both internally and externally.

Disseminate results

Make results more widely available — in particular to students. Consider ways to make results more widely available externally.

Incorporate in planning decisions

Consider student feedback surveys as key evidence in planning decisions — in particular in teaching resourcing decisions.

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Institutional integration of quality assurance and enhancement in an Irish university context

By Sarah Ingle[1]

Introduction & objectives

The objective of this paper is to examine changes and developments in quality assurance and enhancement (QAE) that support the aims and objectives of Dublin City University (DCU), Ireland. In particular, the issue of "QA supporting institutional aims and profiles" within the context of DCU will be discussed in detail.

Quality assurance at third level has been a matter of scholarly and practitioner investigation for some time, and many authors have written in this field over the last number of years, from a number of perspectives (Solomon, 1993; Barnett, 1997; Galloway 1998; Pounder 1999; Tam, 2001; Kekäle; 2002; Narang, 2012). In this paper, the background to quality assurance at a national level in Ireland is first presented, followed by an examination of the development of a related system at DCU. A number of quality initiatives which have been introduced in DCU over the last two years are then outlined, and the supports and benefits that these have provided to the University are discussed. A summary with concluding remarks ends the paper.

Background to university-based quality assurance in Ireland

The 1997 Irish Universities Act (Universities Act, 1997) outlines a clear procedure including a number of steps aimed at improving the quality of education, research and support services throughout the Irish university sector. Although Sachs (1994, p.23) states that "Discussions about the quality of higher education start from the premise that no single, workable 'definition' about quality is possible; that quality in higher education is not a definable concept…", such legislative developments, nationally and internationally, changed the context in which Irish universities operated. Since 2000 there has been an increasingly cooperative approach in the development of quality assurance systems in universities, and the document a 'Framework for Quality' (IUA/IUQB, 2007), appropriate to the needs of Irish universities, outlines this approach.

Background to quality assurance, enhancement and promotion in DCU

In 2000, the decision-making body in DCU, Executive, set up a Quality Promotion Committee (QPC), currently chaired by the Deputy President. This committee is representative of all faculties and a wide variety of support/service offices within DCU. Its remit includes the promotion of an ethos of self-evaluation and continuous quality improvement within the university, thereby seeking to enhance the student and staff experience. QPC is also tasked with making recommendations to senior management, Executive and Academic Council on policies for quality assurance and improvement, arising from DCU's statutory responsibilities.

In 2001, the DCU Executive set up the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU), which was subsequently renamed the Quality Promotion Office (QPO) in 2011. The QPO is responsible for the organisation and facilitation of the internal quality review process, as well as promoting quality assurance and enhancement across the full range of university activities. An important function of the QPO is the presentation of annual reports to the two main Boards of the University, that of Governing Authority and Academic Council. Academic Council is a large group with about 90 members, and all academic issues have to have final approval at this forum. The Director of Quality Promotion representing the QPC and the QPC makes an annual report to both of these boards, outlining work related to the internal quality review process over the previous year, as well as other quality assurance and enhancement activities.

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In total, 28 internal quality reviews were carried out in DCU during the period 2001-2007. In 2007, a new faculty-based structure was established in DCU, and the 15 schools were brought together within four Executive Faculties, each headed by an Executive Dean. It was then an obvious step for the internal review process to mirror this strategic structural development, and over the period 2007 to date, each of the four faculties have been reviewed as an individual faculty, including the organisational elements involved in bringing a number of schools and research centres together under one umbrella.

Overview of the DCU Internal Quality Review Process

The internal quality review process in DCU, similar to the rest of the university sector in Ireland, has four main components:

- the development of a Self Assessment Report (SAR) by the area under review, under the leadership of the area head, facilitated by a quality review committee;
- a three-day visit to the campus by a five member Peer Review Group (PRG) both internal and external to DCU;
- the provision of a Peer Review Group (PRG) report with recommendations;
- the development of a Quality Improvement Plan (QuIP) by the area under review.

There are several benefits for an academic or support/service office in undertaking an internal quality review. First, it provides the opportunity to undertake a thorough examination of all sections and operations within the area. The development of the SAR ends up being a quality enhancement process in itself, and ongoing anecdotal and other evidence confirms the value of the process to both the area under review and the university. The second benefit of the review process is that it provides an update and endorsement to senior management and the wider university community of the commendable work being undertaken in the area. There are few fora where this kind of self promotion can take place, and this particular aspect of the review process is always commented on favourably by internal quality review committees. The third benefit is the opportunity to avail of national and international expert peer advice via the recommendations for improvement provided in the PRG report.

QPO and QPC supporting DCU's institutional objectives

In the following sections, a number of recently introduced initiatives aimed at improving quality assurance and enhancement in DCU are outlined.

Quality improvement and development funding

In 2012, following a suggestion by the Director of Quality Promotion, the QPC set up a new funding initiative in DCU entitled Quality Improvement & Development (QuID). The purpose of the initiative was to offer financial support to projects that will enhance, promote or develop quality in all areas of DCU. Funding is open to all DCU staff, including part-time and contract staff. Proposals submitted were confined to once-off, short-term projects, with costs of €4 000 or less.

The criteria taken into consideration in allocating the funds were that the project proposal:

- contributes to quality improvement and development in the applicant's area (50%);
- contributes to quality improvement in DCU, i.e. has the potential to be beneficial in the wider university context for staff and/or students (30%);
- has clear timelines and deliverables (20%).

A subgroup of the QPC is responsible for assessing the applications. This group is chaired by the Director of Quality Promotion, and makes recommendations to the QPC regarding potential QuID funding. In 2012, a total of 16 project applications were provided with QuID monies. From the university's perspective, the provision of

ongoing QuID funding on a yearly basis has a number of benefits, and clearly supports its ongoing quality and strategic objectives. University staff and the associated community are provided with an annual reminder of the quality enhancement process, and invited to submit proposals for quality improvement projects not related to an internal quality review process. As the quality review schedule for the university covers a seven-year time period, having the QuID process in place means that in-between formal quality reviews, staff can take a personal or group initiative on suggesting quality improvements and enhancements to benefit their own area of work, as well as potentially having benefits for the wider university community.

Quality review training

In 2011/2012, training seminars were initiated by the QPO for a number of staff groupings in relation to the internal quality review process. The first of these involved two members of each of the quality review committees undertaking quality reviews in the next academic year. These are typically held annually, in the January of the preceding year, and about 10 to 12 people are in attendance. The outline objectives of the seminar are to provide:

- a better overall understanding of the Quality Review process
- an outline of the steps to be taken for producing the Self Assessment Report (SAR)
- an appreciation of the timeline and associated deadlines
- key elements of preparing for a successful Peer Review Visit.

These seminars last approximately 2.5 hours, and plenty of time is allowed for participants to ask questions, and for those who have been involved in previous quality reviews to provide their experiences in an informal and participative environment. Our experiences are that these seminars "demystify", and clarify the activities involved for new stakeholders to the process, and also provide a dedicated forum for the quality review committees to engage with each other and provide encouragement throughout the quality review cycle which can range from 10 to 18 months from beginning to end.

Another set of seminars involves the participation of internal peer review group (PRG) members. The PRG is the review panel that visits the university over a three-day period having previously read the Self Assessment Report (SAR) developed by the area under review. One of the internal members is a senior academic or senior administrator, and the other is a member of the QPC, undertaking the role of rapporteur. As well as providing an outline of the internal quality review process, the main purpose of this particular seminar is to provide an understanding of the PRG's remit and the requirements during the review group visit, as well as discuss in detail the role of the internal PRG members, in particular the coordination of the final PRG report.

A third set of training seminars introduced in 2012 focuses on administrative support staff, in particular Personal Assistants (PAs) to members of DCU's senior management group (SMG). Confidential documents such as the area under review's Self Assessment Report (SAR) and the Peer Review Group (PRG) report are provided to SMG members via the PA, and their understanding and support of the process are very important.

A final method of communicating the workings of the quality review process in DCU is undertaken by the Director of Quality Promotion visiting a meeting of the quality review committee, or the entire staff of the area under review, to outline the quality review process and provide an update on the current quality assurance climate in the Irish higher education sector. The statutory, legal nature of the process is explained, but a clear emphasis is placed on the benefits of undertaking the quality review for the area.

Overall, the institutional benefits obtained from the provision of quality review-related training and presentations by the Director of Quality Promotion impact positively on the university from a number of perspectives. A major benefit is the wide range and level of staff involved in the seminars, from Heads of School and Middle Management to junior clerical staff in support/service offices. The ethos and mission of the quality review process is therefore promulgated throughout the wider university on an ongoing basis. Typically at least four training seminars are held in a year, in which up to 25 staff members, including those from the Colleges of DCU

participate. There is then further potential for the information provided to be widened out to other colleagues throughout the university and the staff of the DCU Colleges.

University representation on Linked Providers' Quality Promotion Committees

As a university provider of graduate and post-graduate awards, DCU has institutional linkage agreements and memorandums of understanding with a number of institutions, and provides the awards for these institutions. From a historical and geographical perspective, the three main linkages are with two local teacher training colleges, St Patrick's College Drumcondra (SPD) and the Mater Dei Institute (MDI), as well as All Hallows College (AHC). The Director of Quality Promotion in DCU has always been a member of these three committees, which meet at different periods of regularity. Since 2010, the current Director of Quality Promotion arranged for a member of each of the committees to attend and participate in all meetings of the QPC in DCU. There have been several distinct benefits to this initiative from the university's perspective, but the main advantage is that institutional knowledge from DCU has a clear transfer path with regard to quality assurance and enhancement developments. The Director of Quality Promotion brings details of quality-related changes and initiatives from the university to each of the linked colleges on a regular basis, and outlines and explains the potential implications for the colleges.

QPO Representation on Education Committee

In 2010, the Director of Quality Promotion was invited to become a member of DCU's Education Committee. This committee is responsible for the shaping of university strategy in relation to academic affairs, and is chaired by the chief academic officer, the Registrar. All of the Executive Deans are members of this committee along with the Dean of Teaching and Learning and the Dean of Graduate Studies. This committee is a key group within the university, and is highly regarded in terms of its remit, membership, and depth and breadth of its work.

Over the period 2010 to 2012 the Director of Quality Promotion was heavily involved in two major quality assurance initiatives undertaken by the Education Committee. The first of these initiatives was the development of a new university policy relating to the assessment of teaching quality. A working group comprised of Education Committee members and others, representative of all four faculties, was set up to research and develop a proposed policy and associated procedure. Following the work of this group, a policy entitled Quality Enhancement and Survey of Teaching (QuEST) was approved by the Education Committee, and began its implementation with an online survey of student views on every module in DCU for the second semester of 2011/2012.

The second area in which the Director of Quality Promotion had a key, and leadership involvement, was the development of a DCU policy and procedures document for annual and periodic programme review (APR/PPR). Although annual and periodic review had been carried out previously for many programmes on an informal basis, again, as a result of institutional and other reviews, a working group was set up to develop a clear policy, purpose, principles and procedures document, with associated timelines and templates. This policy will begin to be implemented during the academic year 2012/2013.

Summary & conclusion

Harvey and Green (1993, p.28) suggest: "At best we should define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken." DCU has always had a tendency to judge and perceive quality differently to other third level institutions, partly as it is a relatively young university, just 23 years old. It is also different to traditional universities in that it has a proactive aim of seeking to enhance the efficiency with which it "translates" its research activities into societal impact and commercial reality by developing strategic alliances with complementary partners (DCU Strategic Plan, 2010).

The quality improvement and enhancement initiatives outlined in this paper reflect strongly the aspirations of past and current strategic plans, and in 2012 continue to have increased relevance to DCU's institutional aims

and objectives. One example of this is the strategic decision taken to develop a faculty structure in 2007, and the internal review process was instrumental in building on the new structure by setting up a faculty review process which will be completed in 2012.

In summarising the main points of this paper, it is useful to address the overall question posed by EQAF 2012 — "How does QA make a difference at institutional level?" As already outlined, in DCU, the Chair of the Quality Promotion Committee (QPC) is the Deputy President, which indicates that the university takes the committee and the remit of the Quality Promotion Office very seriously, and views it as integral to the attainment of its aims and objectives, both nationally and internationally. The QPC plays a central role in the QPO, and is a key forum where suggestions for undertaking ongoing improvements in the internal quality review process are discussed and implemented. The Director of Quality Promotion is also tasked with advising the decision-making body of DCU (Executive), and the Senior Management Group, of relevant changes and developments in quality assurance and enhancement and recommending, via the QPC, new procedures and processes appropriate to the changing environment. Allied with her role she has a high-level involvement in key committees internal and external to DCU, and is encouraged to provide leadership on quality-related projects and developments.

Recently introduced quality assurance and enhancement activities such as the quality review training seminars and the QuID funding process, have certainly improved the relationship of staff with quality-related matters. Another benefit has been the further integration of the activities of the Quality Promotion Office into more areas within the university, as well as in the Colleges of DCU. This has led to an overall increased level of knowledge of, and involvement in, the range of quality assurance-related work being undertaken.

Although many positive quality-related developments have been completed in recent years, there is more that can, and should, be done to integrate quality assurance and enhancement throughout DCU. The involvement of students, both under-graduate and post-graduate, in this field is an area that could be improved. At present, for example, there is just one student representative on the QPC. Another suggestion would be to broaden the scope of the quality review process to include a wider range of peer reviewers, and/or include student representation on the internal quality review committees. This is being carried out successfully, for example in Scotland, and may be something that could be considered in the future.

To conclude, it is evident from the details provided in this paper that quality assurance and enhancement activities have made, and continue to make, a strong and vital contribution to DCU and are clearly related to the institutional aims and objectives. The ongoing challenge will be to maintain and increase this relationship, within a context of expanding student numbers and diminishing financial and other resources.

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Quality assessment of doctoral programmes as a supplement to institutional evaluation – Polish model and experience

By Maciej Markowski[1]

Introduction

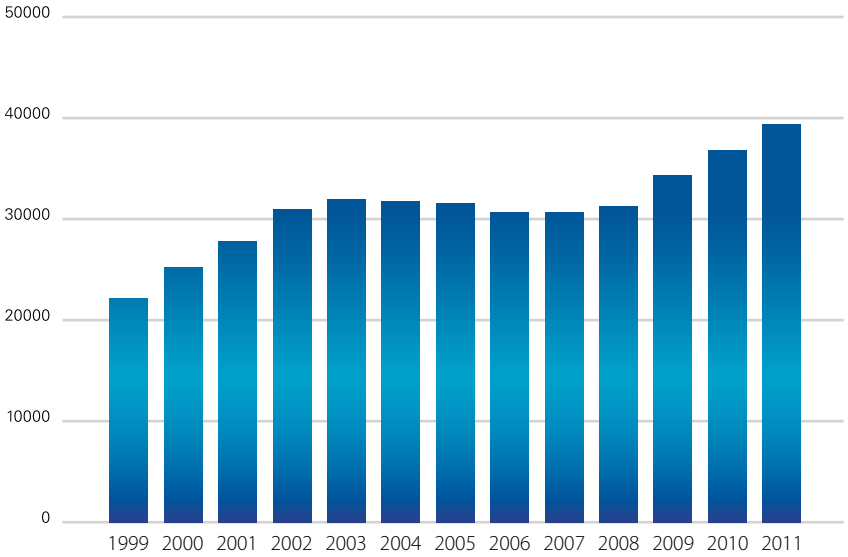
Doctoral programmes can be offered by organisational units of higher education institutions or scientific institutions which are authorised to confer either the academic degree of *doktor habilitowany* or the academic degree of doctor (PhD) in at least two different disciplines of a given area of science (Act of 11 March 2011, Article 195.1).

The subject of the doctoral programmes should correspond with the field of scientific disciplines in which the institution has the right to award degrees. Higher education institutions are in fact granted almost complete freedom to create doctoral programmes and choose the methods for their provision.

Doctoral programmes are offered by approximately 700 organisational units of more than 80 both public and non-public Polish higher education institutions. The number of doctoral students has almost doubled in the last 10 years, which is shown in the chart below:

Chart 1:
Number of doctoral students in Poland in 1999 – 2011

Source: Central Statistical Office, Poland. www.stat.gov.pl



Furthermore, part-time doctoral programmes are becoming more and more popular in Poland. They are fully paid by the doctoral students, and therefore some of them have become almost commercial.

The increase in the number of offered doctoral programmes, both full- and part-time, is due to economical reasons. Tuition fees and state funding for the programmes are considerably higher than for the first- and second-cycle programmes. It is important to mention that because of their exclusive character the doctoral programmes are very seldom included in internal quality assurance systems. This results in an increasing number of complaints from the academic community about the quality of doctoral programmes. It has been pointed

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out that some of the doctoral programmes are delivered without any structured programme, proper facilities or without enough qualified teaching and scientific staff.

Most of the doctoral programmes offered by Polish higher education institutions have never undergone any external quality assessment procedure. So far only randomly selected final PhD theses were externally assessed by the Polish Central Commission for Academic Degrees and Titles. This institution is also entitled to grant higher education institutions the rights to award academic degrees.

External quality assessment of doctoral programmes has become necessary. Therefore the assessment procedure of these programmes has been included in the amendment of Polish legal regulations.

The amendment of the existing Polish Law on Higher Education, adopted in March 2011, has enabled the Polish Accreditation Committee to introduce institutional assessment procedures. These legal regulations also include involvement of doctoral programme assessment in the institutional evaluation procedure.

Scope of the institutional assessment

With the amendment in the legal regulations the Polish Accreditation Committee has been obliged to evaluate the quality of doctoral programmes within the institutional assessment. The Minister for Science and Higher Education, by executive regulation, determined the conditions and the scope of the assessment (Resolution of 29 September 2011).

According to Polish legal regulations the programme assessment is mandatory for every study programme which results in qualifications of level 6 and 7 of the European Qualification Framework.

The institutional evaluation can be carried out in the organisational unit of the higher education institution which offers doctoral studies or meets the following conditions:

1. The unit has not received a negative assessment on the programme level in the five years prior to the institutional assessment; in case of a conditional assessment, the shortcomings of the internal quality assurance system were not the reason for the conditional assessment.
2. Most of the programmes offered by the unit have been assessed with a positive result.

The institutional evaluation includes the assessment of:

1. The relation of the strategy of the unit to the strategy of the higher education institution.
2. The internal quality assurance system, including its construction and impact on quality enhancement.
3. The quality of the non-degree postgraduate programmes offered by the unit.
4. The quality of the doctoral programmes education process offered by the unit.
5. Cooperation with external stakeholders.

Assessment criteria

In addition to the conditions and scope of the assessment the Polish Accreditation Committee has developed the general criterion for the assessment of doctoral programmes (annex to the Statute of PKA):

The unit uses a coherent description of educational aims and learning outcomes for doctoral (third-cycle) programmes offered, and applies an efficient and credible system to verify and confirm the achievement of the aims and outcomes.[2]

The level of fulfilment of the main criterion is verified by the assessment based on the detailed criteria:

- the unit ensures that the doctoral programmes offered lead to the achievement of learning outcomes relevant to the research area concerned and enables students to obtain a doctoral degree;

2 This general criterion also refers to the assessment of the non-degree postgraduate programmes, which was skipped in this text as it is not relevant for further analysis.

- internal and external stakeholders are involved in the process of defining learning outcomes;
- the unit applies ECTS where the number of credits corresponds to the workload of the doctoral student or the learner following a non-degree postgraduate programme, with the workload being proportionate to the learning outcomes achieved;
- the unit has put in place a credible and transparent system accessible to all, in particular students, doctoral students and learners following non-degree postgraduate programmes, which makes it possible to assess the extent to which the stated educational aims and expected learning outcomes have been achieved.

The assessment process of doctoral studies is thus focused on the study process and excludes the evaluation of the final thesis. The evaluation of the PhD thesis has remained in the powers of the Polish Central Commission for Academic Degrees and Titles.

Besides the criterion mentioned above, devoted strictly to the assessment of doctoral studies, the Polish Accreditation Committee has adopted seven other general criteria for the institutional assessment. Each one consists of several detailed criteria, which also refer to various aspects of doctoral studies conducted by the assessed institution. These criteria are:[3]

1. The unit has a development strategy in place.
   1.2. The unit has developed a concept of education covering first-cycle, second-cycle, third-cycle (doctoral) and non-degree postgraduate programmes, which is consistent with its strategic aims and objectives;
   1.4. Internal and external stakeholders are involved in the process of determining the range and;
   1.5. contents of programmes and courses offered and building a higher education quality culture.

2. The unit applies an effective internal quality assurance system.
   2.1. The structure for decision-making in quality management is transparent and ensures the involvement of staff, students, doctoral students, learners following non-degree postgraduate programmes and external stakeholders in important decisions concerning the quality of education;
   2.2. Internal quality assurance procedures are comprehensive, prevent pathologies and ensure that the unit may verify and assess the effectiveness of all factors which have impact on the quality of education.

4. The unit has sufficient staff, material and financial resources to achieve the stated strategic aims and objectives and expected learning outcomes.

5. The unit conducts scientific research.
   The unit conducts scientific research in the areas, domains and disciplines of science related to the programmes offered, and it uses findings from its research and the latest scientific achievements in a given area in the teaching process. The unit provides conditions for doctoral students to conduct independent scientific research and enables them to participate in the research being conducted.

6. The unit participates in in-country and international exchange of students, doctoral students, research and teaching staff and cooperates with national and international academic institutions, other institutions and enterprises. Students, doctoral students and staff members shall participate in the international programmes.
   6.1. The unit shall undertake actions for the internationalisation of the education process, including the development of the intended learning outcome and the realisation of the study programme;
   6.2. The unit shall cooperate with domestic and international academic institutions;
   6.3. The unit shall cooperate with external stakeholders in the process of achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

7. The unit provides adequate research, learning and financial support for students and doctoral students in the process of attaining learning outcomes.
   7.1. The unit has put in place a system for research, learning and financial support which also takes into consideration the needs of disabled persons;

3 The list includes only selected criteria relevant for the assessment of doctoral studies. The full list of the criteria for the institutional assessment includes eight general criteria and 23 detailed criteria

7.3. The unit supports the activities of, and cooperates with, student and doctoral student self-government bodies and organisations. The governing bodies of the unit undertake activities at their own initiative in order to ensure wide participation of students, doctoral students and their representatives in the work carried out by the governing bodies and statutory and ad hoc committees, in particular, those whose activities are centred on the teaching/learning process and matters concerning students and doctoral students.

The criteria for the assessment of doctoral studies are based on the European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions.[4] Most of the ESG could have been easily adopted for the assessment of doctoral studies. Nevertheless the full assessment of doctoral studies required a broader spectrum of analysis, i.e. research issues to be included.

Assessment procedure

The doctoral studies evaluation process has been integrated into the institutional assessment procedure as its natural supplement. Inclusion of the doctoral studies evaluation in the institutional assessment broadened its spectrum. It allows assessment aspects and criteria to be included which otherwise would have been hard to use. The assessment and realisation of doctoral programmes aims to determine the potential for achievement of the intended learning outcomes relevant to the related research area:

- preparation for research and development activities by provision of the advanced knowledge regarding the newest scientific achievements within the research area
- skills related to scientific research methods and methodology
- social skills related with the research activities and social role of the researcher or artist.

Moreover, assessment includes:

- the correct selection of optional modules for the achievement of the intended learning outcomes, including achievement by the doctoral students of skills in modern teaching methods and techniques
- provision of opportunities for inclusion of doctoral students on research teams, including international teams, participation in research related to the subject of doctoral studies in other institutions, including institutions abroad
- the effectiveness of actions taken by the unit in order to enable/facilitate the preparation of scientific publications by doctoral students
- consistency of qualifications of the academic teaching staff with the programme aims and intended learning and research outcomes
- ECTS system — correct determination of workload required to achieve the intended learning outcomes and usage of the opportunities created by this system in the individualisation of the education process within doctoral studies through the national and international exchange programmes
- accountability and transparency of the system of assessment regarding the achievement of the programme objectives and intended learning outcomes.

Because of the extension of institutional evaluation, the Polish Accreditation Committee has included doctoral student experts in the assessment procedure. Recruitment and training processes of the doctoral student experts are carried out in cooperation with the National Representation of PhD Candidates of Poland, a national organisation officially representing doctoral students. The doctoral student experts are involved in every institutional assessment procedure to the unit that offers doctoral programmes as equal panel members. They prepare their interim report, which is included in the final assessment report.

4 Part 1 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)

Added value

Although the Polish Accreditation Committee has so far conducted approximately 40 institutional assessment procedures including the doctoral studies evaluation there are already several visible added value effects. Such a combination broadens the spectrum of evaluation factors which can directly or indirectly affect the quality of education.

First of all, identification and assessment of the relations between the units' research and educational activities is much easier and broader. Institutional assessment thus becomes more complex, allowing for the observation of an institution in a broader perspective. This makes it easier to diagnose any problems arising from imbalances between those two spheres of activity.

Another important issue is the extended evaluation of the institution's infrastructure. It must correspond to specific requirements of the doctoral studies, in particular the scientific development of the doctoral students.

The institutional assessment also includes, among others, relations between the institution and external stakeholders, including employers. The aspect is assessed by the professional expert. Therefore it is also possible to evaluate doctoral studies from a non-academic perspective.

The last but not least added value of the institutional assessment model introduced by the Polish Accreditation Committee is putting more pressure on the internal quality assurance systems and their efficiency and adequacy for the specificity of doctoral studies.

Difficulties in the evaluation of doctoral programmes

The introduction of the new, extended model assessment of traditional higher education institutions is of course not without problems. The main obstacle in the evaluation of doctoral programmes is the fact that various models of doctoral education have formed over the years. This is mainly due to the fact that doctoral programmes have, for the past several years, been the subject of very few regulations, reforms or modifications. Thus in various higher education institutions doctoral studies evolved very differently. The key difference is the perception of the role of doctoral education and doctoral students in the institution.

The easiest doctoral programmes to evaluate are those that have been recently established: they are in line with the Bologna Process; their organisation and functioning is the most similar to first- and second-degree programmes. For these doctoral programmes, a doctoral student is usually treated as a "privileged student" rather than a person closely related to the higher education institution. In this case, the programme of study is generally similar for all, with minor individualisation possibilities according to the scientific interests of the doctoral student.

On the other hand, there are a significant number of doctoral programmes which have been running for many years. In this group of programmes, there are differences in the approach to third cycle education. There usually prevails a doctoral student model, which is more akin to the university staff, than to the student. In extreme cases, classes for doctoral studies are carried out under individual consultations with different research staff members, and the programme of study is very highly individualised.

Both models have their advantages and disadvantages, as well as confronting the PKA with different challenges in their evaluation. The first model strongly highlights the aspect of education much more than science. The second one places more emphasis on the research progress of a doctoral student. The educational part of the programme is understood more as a complement to the research activities of the doctoral students. In extreme cases, the first model can lead to a strong commercialisation of doctoral studies. In the second case, the achievement of competencies other than scientific by the doctoral student is sometimes neglected.

Conclusions

The extended model of the institutional assessment including the doctoral programme evaluation brings a lot of opportunities for enhancement of the assessment procedure. It enables the expert panel and the accreditation agency to broaden the spectrum of assessment. It is especially important for the higher education institutions that offer doctoral programmes since it emphasises scientific activities even more than in the traditional institutional assessment procedure.

However, a close connection between the evaluation of doctoral programmes and institutional assessment also limits the possibilities of the internationalisation of the assessment process.

References:

1. Act of 18 March 2011 amending the Act 27 July 2005 Law on Higher Education
2. Resolution of 29 September 2011 of the Minister of Science and Higher Education on the conditions of the programme and institutional assessment
3. Annex to the Statute of the Polish Accreditation Committee, 2011 (www.pka.edu.pl)

Chapter 03

Making a difference across borders

International accreditation — Effects of national and cultural differences

By Aras Viligaila Vėbra[1] and Harald Scheuthle[2]

International accreditation

While the Bologna Process stands for the European Higher Education Area, the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) are its equivalent for quality assurance. The objective is a common methodological base for quality assurance in Europe (ESG) and to allow quality assurance agencies to operate throughout Europe (EQAR). Thus, in terms of external quality assurance, higher education institutions (HEI) and quality assurance agencies operate in an environment with similar basic structures. Whereas the methodological base is already widely accepted, the European market for quality assurance is only developing. Most countries still have a national quality assurance system that is implemented by one or several national agencies. Even if foreign agencies are admitted in principle, external quality assurance remains predominantly national.

Taking advantage of the common European framework, international accreditation can give a HEI external, European feedback on the situation of the institution with recommendations backed by a more extensive external experience than a regular national procedure. Additionally, a foreign agency may approach an institution in a more independent way as it is not involved in any national discussions.

Although higher education systems in Europe share many similarities due to the Bologna Process, on second glance their differences become apparent. These differences often come up in terminology: one term means different things in different countries. This leads to discrepancies in the expectations of the actors involved in international accreditation. These differences refer, on the one hand, to differences in the types of institutions and education systems and, on the other hand, to differences in the external quality assurance systems.

The majority of higher education institutions in Europe are usually called university or university of applied sciences. Nevertheless, these names refer to a wide range of institutions with different profiles. However, foreign experts and agencies expect an institution with the same name to be quite similar to institutions in their own country, especially as potential differences are not always apparent at first sight. Similarly, institutions expect foreign experts and agencies to be familiar with their type of institution as they are not necessarily aware of differences with similar institutions in other countries.

The same applies to the accreditation system, which often uses very similar criteria and procedures. Differences, however, lie in the interpretation of criteria and the concrete execution of procedures which are known within a national system. But this knowledge is difficult to access from abroad. Therefore, the actors involved in international accreditation will have different expectations on how an external procedure will be carried out.

Case study

We present a case study of ten programme accreditations at Vilnius University of Applied Engineering Sciences (VTDK) in Lithuania carried out by the German quality assurance agency evalag. While the HEI and the agency both operate within the Bologna Process, the case study points out the different expectations of the actors which are rooted in different national cultures of the higher education and quality assurance system. By describing how the HEI and the agency resolved these issues the paper discusses the advantages and difficulties of international accreditations and how to overcome them. The paper presents the case from the perspectives of VTDK and evalag and draws conclusions for the organisation of international external quality assurance procedures.

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Decision-making process for international accreditation

The decision to pursue an international accreditation was not an easy one for VTDK: first, no other non-university institution of higher education has done so in Lithuania; second, if any universities have done so, they have done it without much help from the Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (CQAHE), which was sometimes unprepared to advise VDTK or provide necessary documents in English.

Why did VTDK do it, then? There were several factors. The most simple was financial: because an EU-funded project would compensate the cost of the international accreditation, there was a general feeling of "we'd be foolish not to do it," said Deputy Rector for Academic Affairs, Anna Limanovskaja. Employing the local accreditation authority as usual would have been an opportunity missed. Without the project the international accreditation would not have been feasible, and another such project may not be available for many years.

Was quality the priority? The Lithuanian CQAHE provides high quality accreditation services, but are they the best in the world? Indeed, they ensure their quality by including foreign experts in their teams.

Finally there was a cultural element to our choice. Aleknavičienė remembers a feeling of travelling though a "grey zone". She believes that "risk-taking is characteristic of Lithuanians; westerners may not be willing to include so many "unknowns" in the process, but we'll go for gold when we get the chance even if it's a more winding road."

Procurement negotiations

A public procurement for an evaluation was completely new to VTDK — and very time-consuming — because in the past the only national agency had always filled that role. Only two dozen accreditation agencies in Europe fit the project specifications. Half were unresponsive. Half of those that responded only conduct evaluations locally. A few of those that do international accreditations only do certain fields of education, and therefore could not evaluate all ten study programmes. Four accreditation agencies were left, but two of them could not get the evaluation done in the given timeframe. This is shocking because the Lithuanian CQAHE evaluates programmes within eight weeks; one German agency could not evaluate the programmes in less than one year.

Higher education systems in Lithuania and Germany

Although both the Lithuanian and the German higher education system have universities and universities of applied sciences as their main types of institution, the differences in the type of institutions became apparent during the accreditation process. VTDK is a university of applied sciences in Lithuania (kolegija) which supposedly corresponds to a university of applied sciences in Germany (Fachhochschule). Thus, the German experts expected to find an institution which is similar to a German Fachhochschule. The Lithuanian kolegija provides higher professional training and educates professional specialists whereas the German Fachhochschule provides a practice-oriented, science-based education and also carries out applied research. Therefore, the academic level of the degrees of the two types of institutions differs, which is reflected in the higher participation rates of tertiary education in Lithuania — about 45% of 25-29 year olds, versus 30% in Germany[3] — and the fact that the professional Bachelor degree in Lithuania requires graduates to complete one to one and a half years of bridge courses to continue a Master degree at a Lithuanian university. The sector of the universities of applied sciences is also differently affiliated on the European level. Whereas in Lithuania they are represented by EURASHE and the European Network for Universities of Applied Sciences (UASnet), in Germany they are represented by EUA.

Furthermore, the professional Bachelor degree does not exist in Germany and German HEIs are in general opposed to it. Although the vocational sector in Lithuania is separate from higher education just as it is in Germany, universities in both countries generally fear a professional Bachelor would allow providers of vocational degrees to enter the higher education market in large part due merely to the wording of the degree. Therefore, some members of evalag's accreditation commission felt uneasy accrediting a professional Bachelor degree in Lithuania while at the same time opposing it in Germany.

3 Eurydice: Key Data on Education in Europe 2012

Also the expectation regarding the field of studies and the content of the programmes was different. Most of the study programmes accredited were in the engineering field and labelled as engineering degrees. The term "engineering", however, is understood differently in Lithuania and in Germany. The term in Lithuania is also used for activities of a technical specialist; in Germany, it comprises knowledge of technical designing and planning. This knowledge is not a focus of the programmes of the kolegijas but only at universities in Lithuania. Thus, the German experts expected different content in the programmes and were surprised not to find it.

Accreditation systems in Lithuania and Germany

The accreditation criteria for study programmes in Lithuania are very similar in substance to German criteria. In Lithuania, the six criteria cover the learning outcomes, curriculum design, teaching staff, facilities and learning resources, study process and students' performance assessment and finally programme management. The eleven criteria in Germany also cover these aspects. The main differences are of rather formal nature and apply to the definition of degrees or the concept and implementation of modularised study programmes as well as certain subject-specific contents of programmes. As the Lithuanian criteria are well structured and clearly explained by sub-criteria, they are easier to work with than the German.

What is particularly difficult — at least in the case of Lithuania and Germany — is that criteria and procedural rules are often split into many documents and different versions with rules, interpretations of rules, annotations, and exceptions published by different regulating bodies which may refer to each other. Often, these documents are structured according to a very different logic in the different countries. Additionally, these documents may only be available in the national language.

The accreditation project included an evaluation of the ten study programmes according to Lithuanian accreditation criteria and procedures and in addition — upon successful evaluation — the award of an international quality label. The Lithuanian evaluation required an assessment of the programme with external experts but no site visit as the programmes were "yet-to-be implemented", i.e. new programmes.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that not a single person at VTDK expected site visits. Because it is not a mandatory visit costs were not covered by the project (meaning no reimbursement to the agency). This is one point where cultural differences came into play: first, it would be rather unusual for a Lithuanian enterprise to incur such significant expenses voluntarily; and second, 80% of the administration at VTDK grew up living under the USSR, so their understanding of a "visit" is an "inspection", and not one seeking mutual benefit. In fact, the CQAHE has a special unofficial term for site visits: they call them "friendly visits". After years of going from one HEI to another, they know what to expect and try to alleviate the anxiety. This anxiety was heightened because evalag insisted on visiting VTDK when it was not mandatory. Furthermore, nobody at VTDK was sure what could be inspected besides the documents. Regardless of who carries out the accreditation, the procedures and standards are identical, but this is only true on paper: if the people are different, the process is different, and the preparation must be different accordingly.

For the evalag quality label, a site visit was, however, necessary. It is also the only step in the accreditation procedure that allows a direct exchange between institution, experts, and agency. This is especially important in international procedures as it allows the experts to better understand the institution and the study programme and helps clear up potential misunderstandings that may arise regarding the assessment of the self documentation. Therefore, it was important for evalag to include a site visit in the accreditation procedure in order to allow experts to get acquainted with the foreign higher education system and to discuss differing expectations.

VTDK felt a greater responsibility preparing for this site visit. Buivydienė remembers feeling that "it won't just be Lithuanians taking a look at us this time, and they won't just be comparing us to other Lithuanians." Everybody knows more or less how VTDK compares to its counterparts within Lithuania, but looking in from abroad may mean raising the bar.

But "the greatest benefit," says Limanovskaja, "was to hear the opinions of the experts on how to improve and develop our programmes, take them in different directions, and make them more attractive internationally. The experience was priceless."

Overcoming cultural and structural differences

Good communication between the actors involved in an international accreditation proved to be most important for bridging cultural and understanding structural differences. In the direct exchange between experts, agency and HEI an understanding is much easier to reach than a preliminary written preparation could offer.

Therefore, in the beginning of an international accreditation, it is essential for a higher education institution that hires a foreign agency to point out specifically what is important in terms of interpreting the criteria and carrying out the procedures to avoid misunderstandings. It could be useful to thoroughly discuss the criteria, their usual interpretation within the national system and the execution of an external procedure from the point of view of the institution and the agency before a procedure starts. This way, both partners are able to detect and discuss differences in their expectations and find possible solutions for them.

A site visit is an extremely important tool as it gives the experts the opportunity to have a direct exchange with the members of the HEI. The site visit provides a platform which makes differences apparent that may have gone unnoticed before as it allows both partners to exchange and discuss directly. In the current accreditation of VTDK, the site visit proved to be vital for the expert teams to clearly understand the differences in the higher education systems and the nature of VTDK in comparison to their expectations in Germany which allowed them to assess the study programmes appropriately.

To better understand the cultural, national and institutional differences in an international accreditation, evalag tries to integrate at least one expert into the team with regional knowledge. This helps the team to better and more easily grasp the system under review. In the case of the accreditation at VTDK the site visits were scheduled in a sequence that allowed evalag to build on the experience of the first visit and inform the following teams accordingly. The open atmosphere during the site visits in Vilnius also helped a great deal to understand VTDK.

Accreditation experiences and results

VTDK "considers the international accreditation a very positive experience", agrees Aleknavičienė. And although the visits were priceless, Limanovskaja goes on to regret the short duration of the accreditation period, even though the periods are identical in Lithuania. "Three years is too little. Half of the students are part-time students, so we won't even have a single full set of graduates yet. How can we be evaluated again when we haven't even gone through one cycle?"

The VTDK staff can only speculate on how things may have gone differently with a local accreditation. It would be reasonable to say, or hope, that the two programmes that received the most criticism may have been better received, explains Aleknavičienė: "Personally, I think the CQAHE would have given us more credit; the labs were just updated with a million-litas project, which was a huge investment for any Lithuanian institution."

The conclusions made by evalag have been evaluated and many will be put into action. It is not possible to say exactly which, because the then yet-to-be-implemented[4] programmes have only just begun. Since 1 September students' progress has been closely monitored, and if shortfalls coincide with problems the experts predicted, they will be corrected. So far the students have no complaints, but most of the recommendations from evalag regarded the second year of studies. It is still very early to tell the extent to which the recommendations will be implemented.

Generally, VTDK plans to implement the recommendations as much as possible under the law and realistic circumstances: study programme requirements are decided by Lithuanian legislation, e.g. the number of general subject hours cannot be reduced to focus more on field subjects or professional subjects or vice versa; additionally, certain recommended laboratory equipment may simply be unaffordable. Inquiries into railway network expansion have come to the conclusion that nothing can dismantle the railway monopoly present at this time.

In order to find out how VTDK perceived the accreditation procedure, after the end of the accreditation evalag launched an online survey to all participants of the four site visits to get feedback on the procedure and its

4 In Lithuania, "yet-to-be-implemented" study programmes have been developed and will be offered pending accreditation; therefore, at the time of the evaluation by evalag, these programmes didn't exist anywhere except on paper.

results. In general, the site visit participants were quite satisfied with the accreditation process, scoring 4.3 out of 5. The concrete recommendations of the expert teams average 3.7: more critical but still positive.

This view is also reflected in the respondents' comments. Here they appreciated the positive and professional atmosphere of the visits. The respondents further appreciated the external view of the experts and did see chances in the procedure of external evaluation and the possibility to improve the programme in this way. Some of the comments reflected the hope that the external procedure will signal to the management what changes are needed and lead to their implementation. The cultural topic, however, was also an important issue of the comments. Many respondents referred to the lack of understanding of the Lithuanian situation by the expert group. These comments referred to the unawareness of the local, economic, and social situation in Lithuania, which makes it difficult to compare it to a higher education system in a country like Germany.

Conclusion

The experiences of VTDK and evalag in this international accreditation project clearly show the benefits and the challenges of international and intercultural quality assurance. The international experts can give new perspectives to an institution and relate the performance to an international context. On the other hand, cultural differences and differences in the higher education system and the economic situation remain a challenge and a source of misunderstanding that can most easily be avoided by open-minded experts and institutional staff which use the site visit as an opportunity to exchange their views and come to a common understanding of their different situations. In order to ease such a process, it is of great help to have people with regional knowledge or experience on the expert team.

The accreditation by evalag was somewhat unexpected to both administrative and academic staff at VTDK: some areas considered strong turned out not to be, and others where some criticism was expected did not receive it. An evaluation by complete outsiders turned out to be an impetus for a detached and rigorous self-evaluation.

Despite all differences encountered, for all sides, VTDK, experts, and evalag, this accreditation remains a great experience to learn from each other and to open one's mind to new approaches and solutions.

International cooperation in discipline-specific quality assurance: NCPA-AEC joint accreditation of Russian higher education programmes

By Zhanna Kuzminykh[1] and Linda Messas[2]

In this paper, a European and subject-specific approach to quality assurance is presented: three higher music education programmes were accredited in February 2012 in the framework of a joint procedure between the National Centre of Public Accreditation (NCPA), a Russian public accreditation agency and the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC), a European membership association promoting subject-specific quality assurance in music. The joint accreditation of the study programmes delivered by the Russian Gnesins Academy of Music and the Victor Popov Academy of Choral Art was the first international joint initiative undertaken by NCPA and the first experience of cooperation with a Russian accreditation agency for AEC. Like any "first-born", this project required considerable effort and attention from its "parents".

The paper presents both organisations and describes the implementation of their cooperation before addressing the outcomes of the joint accreditation procedure, firstly from an institutional perspective, and secondly from the perspectives of both cooperating organisations.

Parties involved and context

AEC is a European cultural and educational network bringing together 280 higher music education institutions from 55 countries. AEC started to address quality assurance and accreditation in music in 2006 with various projects aiming at the development of a European and music-specific approach to quality assurance and accreditation. In 2010 it produced a comprehensive framework document entitled Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Music Education with characteristics, reference points, criteria, procedures, and established a register of peer-reviewers for external quality assurance and accreditation procedures in higher music education. In 2008, AEC began offering Quality Enhancement Processes for Higher Music Institutions and Programmes. Since 2010, AEC has developed bilateral collaborations with various national quality assurance and accreditation agencies in Switzerland, Romania, Lithuania and Germany, adding a European-level, subject-specific dimension to national quality assurance and accreditation procedures. A Quality Enhancement Committee, chaired by a member of the AEC's Governing Body, was established in 2011 to monitor and further develop the use of the AEC Framework Document in quality enhancement procedures.

NCPA is an autonomous non-profit organisation with the mission to establish and promote quality culture in higher education through evaluation and accreditation of study programmes in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG-ENQA). Benefiting from its senior management's abundant experience in institutional accreditation at the national level, NCPA is engaged in a wide range of activities including programme evaluation and accreditation, information provision on higher education quality issues, training of external reviewers and cooperation with national and international quality assurance bodies. NCPA operates in close interaction with the Russian Guild of Experts in the Sphere of Higher Education. NCPA is a full member of INQAAHE, CEENQA and APQN, and an affiliate of ENQA.

Two major kinds of accreditation in higher education are currently provided in Russia: state accreditation and public accreditation.

State accreditation is conducted by state accreditation authorities in order to determine the extent to which the performance of higher education institutions (HEIs) fulfils the requirements of national education legislation,

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2 General Manager, Association Européenne des Conservatoires (AEC)

including the state educational standards. When a HEI — either public or private — achieves state accreditation status, it is granted, among other privileges, the right to award certificates of education (diplomas) to its graduates.

At present, public accreditation of study programmes, which can be provided by organisations established by non-governmental or professional associations, is being actively developed in Russia. Public accreditation procedures are voluntary for HEIs and include external reviews by experts representing sectoral employers' associations and the academic and student communities of the relevant study fields. Successful completion of public accreditation procedures is considered evidence that the quality of education in particular specialities and study fields is adequate and deserves recognition by the professional community and by society. Public accreditation does not confer upon HEIs the rights and privileges granted by state accreditation, but it does take into account a higher level of expectations that public organisations and employers have towards study programmes. This contributes to the reputation of accredited programmes and their attractiveness for prospective students, as well as their relevance to employers. There are currently four public accreditation agencies that conduct actual quality assurance activities alongside one state accreditation agency in Russia.

Feasibility and implementation of the joint NCPA-AEC accreditation procedure

In October 2011, the Russian Gnesins Academy of Music and the Victor Popov Academy of Choral Art submitted their applications for the accreditation of some of their programmes to NCPA: Choir Conducting in both academies and Vocal Art in the Popov Academy. The agency carried out an in-depth analysis of the European and global experience in accrediting higher music education programmes and institutions. This led to the conclusion that preparing and implementing these procedures would require a special approach owing to the peculiarities of professional music education, to the specificity of the European approach to quality assessment and to the Russian national context. NCPA felt the need to carry out these procedures in close cooperation with a European-level organisation active in the sphere of higher music education and thus approached the AEC.

AEC accepted NCPA's invitation, which it regarded as a perfect opportunity to gain insight into the Russian accreditation system and to experience cooperation with a Russian accreditation agency. The first contacts between both organisations made it clear that they shared a strong willingness to promote quality enhancement and to assist institutions in their development, as well as a desire to learn from one another and exchange good practice.

Feasibility stage

NCPA thoroughly studied AEC's previous experience of collaborative review processes, as well as AEC's key documentation on internal and external quality assurance procedures (criteria and procedures for external reviews in higher music education; guidelines for review preparation). The collaboration with AEC was also discussed with the Russian Association of Music Education Institutions, which requested that the procedure be as close to that of the AEC as possible. As a result of the comparative analysis of AEC criteria and NCPA standards, NCPA developed an integrated set of standards and criteria to be used for the accreditation of the higher music education programmes subject to evaluation. This document was submitted to AEC and approved.

In AEC's previous experiences of joint procedures, the national agency's standards had been used as the basis of the joint assessment framework. Where these standards were duplicating aspects covered by AEC standards, the wording in the national standards was used. In addition, some AEC criteria, considered as missing in the national standards, were then added. In the present case, the set of merged standards produced by NCPA was fully based on the AEC criteria, which was a first for AEC. As AEC criteria are formulated as questions rather than standards, NCPA's approach created a need to reformulate those criteria into "indicators for the fulfilment of standards" in order to ensure that peer-reviewers would have the necessary tools to assess whether the programmes would comply/substantially comply/not comply with these questions (as requested by NCPA's usual procedure). AEC produced these indicators, which were submitted to NCPA and approved.

Once the document of reference for the accreditation procedure was agreed upon, an exchange of information started on a weekly basis between both organisations through a designated contact person. In order to ensure successful cooperation, both organisations first shared information about their own working methods and procedures; then every single aspect of the joint procedure was discussed — from the number of peer-reviewers to be involved in the Review Panel to the structure of the final reports. When all details were agreed upon in theory, the implementation phase could begin.

Implementation stage

It was jointly decided to appoint four panel members representing European Higher Music Education and two representing the Russian system (including a student). AEC proposed the nomination of an expert in vocal studies from the Royal Flemish Conservatoire, Antwerp, in choral conducting (also representing the profession) from the Royal Conservatoire, The Hague, and in quality assurance, accreditation and Bologna Process implementation in the field of music from the Karol Lipiński Academy of Music, Wrocław. NCPA proposed the nomination of the Review Panel Chair from the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, Vilnius, a student expert from the Schnittke Moscow State Institute of Music and an expert in choral conducting and composing from the Nizhny Novgorod State Conservatory, Russia.

As far as languages were concerned, the following was agreed: AEC would nominate two Russian-speaking peer-reviewers out of three; all panel members would be able to speak English so that the Panel could communicate easily; the self-evaluation reports (excluding appendices) would be available in English; meetings with the representatives from the institution could take place in Russian according to the institutional participants' ability to speak English and a simultaneous interpreter would be present. Finally, it was agreed that the peer-reviewers' reports would be written in Russian and translated into English.

The site visit schedule was prepared by NCPA and approved by AEC, and the set of documents to be distributed to the experts was jointly prepared. The site visit and the report writing were fully coordinated by NCPA while the follow-up was shared by both organisations.

Outcomes of the joint NCPA-AEC accreditation procedure

The joint procedure made a difference for the institutions

Upon completion of the review processes, the Rectors of the Gnesins Academy of Music and of the Popov Academy of Choral Arts were interviewed and asked to reflect on the benefits and challenges associated with the NCPA-AEC accreditation procedure.

The NCPA-AEC joint procedure was considered by the reviewed academies as beneficial for the following reasons:

- emphasis put on assistance to the institutions and on quality enhancement: the institutions described the SWOT-analysis as an extremely useful instrument for identifying their strengths and weaknesses. The combination of their own perception of the achieved level of implementation of the study programmes under review and the external perspectives of the Review Panel members, especially professional musicians and music educators from European countries, gave a powerful impetus for ongoing enhancement of their musical and educational activities. The Review Panel provided recommendations for further quality enhancement, academic and professional mobility development, improvement of the structure and content of the study programmes and the expansion of students' involvement in educational quality monitoring;
- combination of national and international peer-reviewers: given that graduates of both academies often pursue careers in Europe, the institutions were happy to receive feedback from European experts on ways to adapt their educational process in order to improve the preparation of young musicians for international careers. At the same time, they were reassured by the presence of Russian experts, aware of the national context-specific challenges;

- expertise and attitude of the peer-reviewers: the peer-reviewers were all experts in the field of music with different backgrounds and relevant specialisations, highly qualified and genuinely interested in the programmes under review. They shared their experience, gave helpful recommendations, and were tactful, friendly, and open. The external review was considered by the academies as an opportunity for their teaching staff and students to have an open dialogue with the peer-reviewers;
- areas looked at by the peer-reviewers: the NCPA-AEC peer-reviewers were interested in the educational process and learning outcomes; student involvement in the educational process; the relationship between the students and the institution; students' satisfaction and opportunities to influence the educational process.

The following points were considered challenging by the academies:

- preparation of the self-evaluation report: the institutions found it difficult to carry out a thorough analysis of all aspects of their activities according to the NCPA-AEC standards and criteria. However, despite being challenging, this preparation phase was also found to be highly useful and interesting;
- translation of the material into English: institutions had to translate the self-evaluation documents into English and prepare summaries and annotations to study plans and work programmes. This was an extra workload and created added time pressure;
- quality assurance terminology and jargon: notions such as mission, vision and quality assessment were not commonly used in the institutions and they later expressed some difficulty in understanding precisely what this terminology intended to cover;
- realistic description of the institution: the institutional representatives needed some time to overcome their fear of the external review and realise the necessity and advantages of providing the peer-reviewers with an overview of the institution's situation that was as clear, honest and close to reality as possible.

The joint procedure made a difference for NCPA

NCPA got additional motivation for continuous improvement of its methods and procedures, including revision of the documentation regulating the processes of accreditation and external review. In addition to developing the standards and criteria for the accreditation of programmes of higher music education, NCPA revised a few aspects of its basic accreditation standards. NCPA gained highly relevant practical experience from the active involvement of the Russian academic community in the revision of its regulatory documentation on accreditation, which can be considered as enhancement of the stakeholders' role in the processes of quality assurance of higher education at the national level.

Due to collaboration with AEC, NCPA got a new impetus to increase its flexibility in selecting and training peer-reviewers as well as in the evaluation of peer-reviewers' work. In accordance with the NCPA Regulations on accreditation of higher educational programmes, external reviews are now to include at least one or two foreign peer-reviewers to work alongside Russian peer-reviewers. The international panel members should be nominated by recognised international quality assurance organisations. The aim of such an approach in composing the panel is to ensure the objectivity of the procedures and to introduce a "European dimension".

The NCPA-AEC joint accreditation project contributed to the visibility of the reviewed programmes, both in Russia and Europe, and to the promotion of NCPA as an agency focused on enhancement of the delivery of higher education.

Integration of the "European dimension" of quality assurance into the evaluation procedures and processes carried out by NCPA was another important outcome of the joint initiative. Since Russia is somewhat behind the leading European countries in implementing the Bologna reforms, aspects such as the implementation and use of ECTS, the European Diploma Supplement, learning outcomes, student-centred approaches, internationalisation strategies, academic mobility, etc. were rather challenging, both for HEIs (to demonstrate and document) and for the quality assurance agencies (to assess). In the course of the joint project, the

international peer-reviewers' understanding of the challenges relating to the integration of Russian programmes into the European Higher Education Area was highly appreciated. The Russian agency learned the following from AEC and the peer-reviewers it nominated: a willingness to provide support and to share the experience gained while overcoming obstacles (including mental and psychological barriers), and the predominance of a recommendation-based approach over an instruction-based one.

The joint procedure made a difference for AEC

This first joint procedure with a Russian accreditation agency was considered a success; it enabled AEC to improve its understanding and awareness of the situation in relation to the implementation of the Bologna Declaration principles in Russia, but also provided the association with an opportunity to concretely assist some of its own member institutions.

Language issues were mostly overcome, as most of the Review Panel members could understand and speak Russian. The non-speaking Russian peer-reviewer however, found it difficult to deal with simultaneous interpretation and felt that his understanding of the discussions was in some cases limited.

The cooperation with NCPA has been excellent as contacts were maintained weekly if not daily and both organisations kept each other constantly informed about progress made on each side. Advice from the other organisation was always welcome and a full level of trust was achieved.

In comparison to previous joint procedures undertaken in the past years, AEC could also appreciate NCPA's flexibility, as the agency was willing to adapt its own procedures to AEC's way of working (e.g. appointing a secretary from the agency staff in charge of writing the first draft of the peer-reviewers' report).

As mentioned above, AEC had to reformulate its criteria into "indicators for the fulfilment of standards" in order to facilitate the assessment process for peer-reviewers. As such an assessment (compliance/partial compliance/non-compliance) does not normally take place within *AEC Quality Enhancement Processes* (which, instead, culminate in a report stating the institution's/programme's strong points as well as suggestions for improvement), developing such indicators was new for AEC. As discussions within AEC have begun to turn towards whether the AEC Framework might be used in a formal capacity as part of the compulsory official accreditation procedures that are increasingly faced by higher music institutions in Europe, the need to formulate such indicators for the joint procedure with NCPA also provided the organisation with an opportunity to further develop its system and to test it in a formal context.

Conclusion

This European subject-specific approach to quality assurance has proved successful. The most important factors for a successful cooperation between AEC and NCPA were: shared focus on assistance to institutions and quality enhancement; full trust between both organisations; extensive exchange of good practice; and strong willingness to learn from each other. The key elements which made NCPA-AEC procedure work were: the high level of cooperation of both organisations coordinating the procedure; the competence of the experts in their discipline, in European developments in higher education and higher music education, as well as their positive attitude towards the institutions, reflecting their sole focus on quality enhancement.

Several areas still need further improvement, such as the preparation of the institutions to engage with the joint procedure (in terms of the self-evaluation process, quality assurance terminology, involvement of staff members and students in the process, etc.), the preparation offered to peer-reviewers, the quality of simultaneous interpretation, and follow-up procedures once institutions receive the final report. Even allowing for this scope for further improvement, the authors believe that this model has already achieved a level of success which means it could easily be exported to other countries and to other disciplines.

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