

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES QUALITY AGENCY

An Overview of World Issues in Quality Assurance for Higher Education

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Context

This paper is an edited version of a document originally prepared for consideration by the AUQA Board. It offers a tour of some of the issues, entities and structures relating to quality assurance (QA) in higher education (HE). It is not exhaustive in its scope or in the actions it outlines.

1. The Growth in Quality Assurance Systems

The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) was formed in Hong Kong in 1991 by 18 quality assurance agencies. Now, after 14 years, it has about 150 member organisations, around 100 of which are quality agencies. There are also now several regional networks, and many agencies are members of their regional network but not the global one. When one realises that in most cases there will be only one or possibly two agencies per country, it becomes evident that over the last 14 years very many countries have established quality assurance agencies for higher education.

Reasons for this rapid growth in quality assurance agencies include:

- increased numbers of students, leading to a change in the nature of tertiary education and a feeling that it is necessary to check explicitly that institutional QA procedures are keeping pace with the change
- increased numbers of students, so more money being spent on HE, leading to an increased desire to ensure that the money is being well spent
- increased public funding for HE, leading to governments wanting to hold higher education institutions (HEIs) explicitly accountable for the spending of their funds
- increased government attention to national needs for graduates, leading to governments wanting to hold HEIs explicitly accountable for the nature of the graduates they produce
- increasing demand for HE, leading to increasing numbers of private providers, some of dubious provenance, leading to a demand for stringent external checks

- in some countries, decreasing micro-management by governments of HEIs in return for the introduction of an external QA process
- globalisation, leading to transnational mobility of students and educational export, which in turn leads to a need to have a national QA process that is visible to other countries (for educational export, this is akin to export quality processes in other industries).

2. Regional Developments

Some of the regional networks that have been established are:

- Nordic Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (1992)
- Central America (CSUCA, 1997)
- South America (under Mercosur, 1998)
- USA (C-RAC (network of regional accreditors); ASPA (network of specialised accreditors): USA is big enough to qualify as a region — see below
- European Association of Quality Assurance (ENQA, 2000)
- Central and Eastern European Countries (2000)
- Caribbean countries (CANQATE, 2002)
- Latin America and Spain (RIACES, 2003)
- Asia Pacifica Quality Network (APQN, 2003)
- Africa (AQANet, 2004)
- European Consortium for Accreditation Agencies (ECA, 2003).

The reason for the growth in regional QA agency groupings varies. In all cases there is a desire to share good practice between QA agencies and such groupings contribute to the international visibility mentioned above. In at least two cases (Europe and South America) cross-border trade is also a major factor. When INQAAHE was founded, its core aim was information sharing and the achievement of a number of operational goals. With the growth of regional networks concentrating on practical matters, INQAAHE's focus is turning more towards policy development, relations with other world agencies (such as UNESCO, OECD, World Bank), and the evaluation of quality agencies.

3. Bologna Declaration (1999) and Consequences

The Bologna Declaration was signed in 1999 by 32 European Ministers of Education. The principal aim of the Declaration is to establish a European Area of Higher Education (EAHE) by 2010. The main objectives of the EAHE are to increase transparency and recognition of education in order to facilitate mobility across borders. Quality Assurance has been high on the Bologna agenda as a means to improve quality of higher education and to promote transparency.

The Ministers of Education have taken stock of progress every second year. In 2003 they met in Berlin and agreed that by 2005 all national quality assurance systems should include a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures as well as evaluations of programs or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and publication of results. The Ministers also asked ENQA in cooperation with the universities (EUA), other institutions (EURASHE) and students (ESIB) to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies. This resulted in the development of a proposal for European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within HEIs, European standards and guidelines for external QA agencies, and the proposal for a peer review system for QA agencies. These proposals were endorsed in 2005 by the European Ministers at their biennial meeting in Bergen, Norway.

‘The Bologna process has inspired HE reforms across Europe and has led to quicker results than expected ... and shows no signs of slowing down.’ (Reichert & Tauch, 2005) Where the Trends III (Reichert & Tauch, 2003) report revealed that staff and students, by and large, had a low level of awareness and much work needed to be done to fill this knowledge gap, the Trends IV report shows that the ‘general acceptance of the need for reforms seems to be widespread in universities’ (Reichert & Tauch 2005, p4).

According to EUA:

Until recently, there were two dominant policy levels: the national and the institutional, with the national being the most (sic) dominant. The nation states defined the university, ... provided funds and employed large percentages of graduates.

Since the late 1980s ... however, we are witnessing the emergence of new policy levels (regional, eg Europe) and shifts in the importance of the various levels such as the increased stress on university autonomy and accountability.

At the national level, there is an increase in the number of HE institutions, increased involvement of external stakeholders, eg through changes in governance structures, and State withdrawal, through reduced or stagnating funding levels and change in its role from a directive to an increasingly steering function. The steering is done through the external QA procedures and a shift in focus from control of inputs to monitoring previously agreed outputs and outcomes.

To conceptualise the interaction of the different policy levels, it is helpful to distinguish the role of each as follows:

- Institutional level: strengthening the institution to cope with the different challenges it faces.
- National level: still playing a major role and expressed in the great diversity in Europe and around the world, which needs to be accepted.
- European level: convergence of structures is a goal.
- International level: a natural environment for HE, especially in research. Globalisation is leading to rapid developments that require a new policy framework.

(EUA, 2005, pp32, 33)

The 'quality movement' in Europe started, as it were, from the wrong end, with the rush of establishing external quality procedures rather than building them internally. ... It is hoped that with time the optimal balance between accountability and autonomy will be based on HE institutions' central responsibility for internal quality while external accountability would review how this responsibility is carried out. In other words, successful and widespread implementation of such action plans as developed by each institution in this project will ensure that future accountability procedures could take the form of an institutional audit that would evaluate the robustness and the embedding of internal quality monitoring processes.

(ibid, p37)

This scenario has been strengthened by the development of the European Standards and Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance within Higher Education Institutions. However, the wish to introduce common degree structures in the form of Bachelor, Master and PhD degrees, thereby increasing transparency and facilitating mobility, pushes the development towards the establishment of accreditation procedures to check compliance with the commonly agreed structures.

4. USA

The higher education accreditation system in the United States is the oldest QA system in the world. It is divided into three types of accreditation: institutional accreditation, which is the responsibility of six regional accrediting agencies; specialised/professional accreditation, which is the responsibility of a number of specialised/professional accreditation bodies that accredit programs within specific discipline areas such as nursing, business and engineering; and national accreditation, which typically covers

courses and institutions within a narrow field of education, such as religious education, and also embraces for-profit organisations. Federal funds are available only to students enrolled at an institution accredited by an agency approved by the US federal government.

For various reasons, accreditation was increasingly the target of criticism in the 1990s. As a result, many of the regional accreditors have significantly revised their procedures to make them more flexible and hence more helpful to the different institutions, and to make them more oriented towards quality improvement rather than merely threshold standards. Professional accreditors are taking a more outcomes-oriented approach. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) was established in 1996 as an association of institutions, with a remit to conduct research in accreditation and persuade the government of its value. It set up a recognition system for accrediting agencies and has undertaken development work on the quality of distance education.

A number of the accreditation agencies, both specialised and institutional, are becoming increasingly active abroad and are accrediting institutions, programs or departments overseas.

Why does the USA seem uninterested in European developments?

The 'early' implementers of QA in Europe (ie early in the rapid growth of the last 20 years, notably the Netherlands) looked to US accreditation for inspiration, so the USA agencies could reasonably assume that European QA is derivative and does not have anything to offer them. This assumption may be reinforced by the fact that at least half the regional associations in the USA have revised their approach to accreditation in the last 10 years, so they can assume that they have continued to keep ahead of Europe.

Furthermore, in some ways, that are not immediately obvious to a cursory inspection, the US agencies are ahead (or have been until very recently). The US accreditors, and national bodies such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, were working towards consistency in degree nomenclature from early in the 20th Century. Europe's current push towards qualifications frameworks can be seen as just catching up. Similarly, another purpose of US accreditation from the beginning was to enhance student mobility, so again ECTS and Bologna are latecomers in US terms (Crow, 2002).

The US Higher Education Act of 1965 must be 're-authorised' every five years. On these occasions, the federal government takes the opportunity to impose on the HE sector requirements relating to its current concerns. Five years ago, it was the relatively benign procedures for enhancing distance education, but five years before that the government attempted to impose requirements on the accrediting agencies intended to reduce the

default rate on student loans. The current re-authorisation has thrown the QA community into turmoil since the federal government is demanding increased levels of accountability from institutions and QA bodies in higher education.

5. International Organisations

A number of international organisations, including UNESCO, OECD and the World Bank are also active in the field of quality assurance. Their activities tend to focus on capacity building for nations and national economies. Recognising the need for education to achieve social and economic development, but acknowledging the inadequate educational capacity in many countries, these bodies stress cross-border education. The achievement of these aims is supported through financial support to projects, conferences and the development of Guidelines. More recently, these bodies have begun to address the need for the education that is provided to be of high quality. Hence there is renewed attention to quality improvement in general, and OECD and UNESCO have recently published joint Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education.

6. Globalisation

As mentioned above, globalization, defined as the increasing flow of technology, finance, trade, knowledge, people, values, and ideas across borders (Knight & de Wit 1997), is one of the causes of the increased attention to quality assurance. If Australia educated only Australians to work only in Australia, it could have whatever idiosyncratic or complex or simple quality system we wished. However, the existence of an internationally respected national quality agency (or agencies), with some sort of authority over national institutions, has become the easiest way of a nation indicating its credibility in a world of mobile students and mobile graduates. Countries like Australia that have a high level of 'educational export' are expected in consequence to have an identifiable 'export control body'. Australia has a number of export control bodies for different services and products, and AUQA is the internationally identifiable national agency fulfilling this role for higher education. As Europe increasingly builds student mobility on the alignment of national QA agencies, it is essential that Australia's agency maintain its links into and reputation within this system.

As always, the actual quality of education is a function of the institutions, not the QA agency. However, a national agency can give international credibility to the system as a whole in a manner that would be difficult for some of the smaller or newer institutions to achieve for themselves.

7. Transnational Education

The UNESCO definition of transnational education (TNE) is: ‘All types of higher education study programs, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. Such programs may belong to the education system of a State different from the State in which it operates, or may operate independently of any national education system.’ (UNESCO 2001 p3). A recent Australian Government discussion paper omits ‘pure’ distance education, ie where there is no face-to-face component (DEST 2005).

‘Cross-border education’ may be used synonymously with TNE, or could include (in Australia’s case) foreign students studying in Australia. For Australian HE, transnational students comprise about one third of all foreign (‘international’) students.

Extensive and structured TNE is a relatively recent phenomenon, and QA principles and procedures are still catching up. The Global Alliance for Transnational Education elaborated some Principles in 1995; UNESCO and the Council of Europe adopted a ‘Code of Good Practice’ in 2001 (UNESCO 2001); and UNESCO and OECD have now produced ‘Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education’ (UNESCO 2005).

Currently, the major ‘exporters’ of HE through transnational education are the UK, Australia and the USA, so it is the actions of these three countries that are of most significance in the practical application of the various principles. In the UK (which had 190,000 transnational higher education students in 2003), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) from time to time convenes a panel to visit a group of overseas operations in one country or region. Australia had 55,000 transnational higher education students in 2003, and AUQA audits address the transnational operations of the university sector institution by institution. There is a great need to improve our attention to the quality of the other Australian TNE (DEST 2005). The USA agencies are reported to carry out visits to any operation that is established more than 40 miles from the institution’s main campus (Crow 2005). AUQA and QAA are seeking a meeting with members of the US regional accreditation community, to learn about and from each others’ systems.

8. On-line Education

Approaches to maintaining and auditing quality in this area are still developing. Distance education using the transmission of hard-copy materials has been in existence for decades, and the quality systems are well understood. We need to note that, despite this,

some countries and individuals still have a negative view of distance education because of the lack of in-person interaction with other students, staff and a campus culture.

As the last 10 years have seen the rapid growth of easy on-line distant access, QA methods need to take account of the new technology. An early attempt to address the issues is to be found in Butterfield et al. (1999), whose provisional conclusion was that the same questions need to be asked (perhaps re-phrased) but different answers need to be accepted. A subsidiary conclusion was that the re-phrasing sometimes leads to the recognition of gaps in the 'traditional' quality system.

Campbell (2005) agrees that e-learning does not need separate treatment provided there is a focus on students' experience of learning and e-modes are treated as part of flexible and distributed modes of learning, taking note of particular e-features of delivery, support and assessment.

This view is also supported by Marginson (2002), who goes on to point out that there is a 'distinction between predominantly distance-based degrees and face-to-face degrees. Prestigious universities that brand their distance and online degrees (and franchised degrees) as equivalent to face-to-face degrees ... harm both their reputation and the character of higher education. Distance degrees can and should be high quality degrees: the point is that they are different. ...Programs with substantially different purposes require different kinds of quality assurance.'

The UK's QAA has had guidelines for the QA of 'collaborative provision' (which is the nature of most transnational operations) and separate ones for distance learning. This was somewhat confusing, as the UK's TNE operations were often described as 'distance learning' just because they are at a distance from the UK, whereas the teaching was often mostly face-to-face (Campbell 2005). In 2004, the QAA introduced a new set of guidelines relating to 'Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)' (QAA 2004). Characteristic of collaborative provision is a focus on ends rather than means, and a focus on the awarding institution's ability to assure itself of the academic standards and quality of provision, whatever the process. Flexible and distributed learning is delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through means which do not require the student to attend particular classes or events at particular times and particular locations. It embraces e-modes and mixed modes of learning and focuses on ends rather than means, but recognises that distance is less significant than learning. It signals a move from process-based approach to an outcomes-based approach, and concentrates on the student's expectations of delivery, learner support and assessment (Campbell 2005).

On-line facilities do offer more scope for bogus institutions: there is a range of types of qualifications available via the internet, from the straight 'buy your testamur', through 'write an essay and detail you life experiences', and credible courses but at an inappropriately low level, to institutions that are genuinely avant garde and which may be accepted as accreditable after some passage of time. The only feasible approaches here appear to be watchfulness to detect the fake institutions, assiduousness in pursuing them when found, and foolproof guarantees of the validity of credible qualifications.

9. General Agreement on Trade in Services

The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) has a slightly different definition of the modes of trade in services, namely:

1. cross-border supply (such as distance education)
2. consumption abroad (such as students traveling abroad to study)
3. commercial presence (such as foreign branch campuses, or foreigners partnering with local providers)
4. presence of natural persons (such as lecturers traveling temporarily abroad to teach).

GATS also embodies three principles:

1. market access, under which each member treats other members' suppliers at least as favourably as set out in the Schedule
2. national treatment, in relation to competition within a members' country
3. most favoured nation, prohibiting discrimination between members.

The agenda behind these principles is directed towards a progressive liberalisation of trade regulations (McBurnie 2002). However, the actual effects are yet to emerge and are still being debated as the meaning of various phrases are tested out. 'Very little is known about the consequences of including trade in education services in the GATS such as on the quality, access and equity of higher education, on domestic authority to regulate higher education systems, and on public subsidies for higher education' (AUCC et al. 2001 p3).

This uncertainty still exists, and it is prudent to proceed cautiously and limit commitments under GATS (Allport 2002), so the effects can be progressively monitored. Implications for QA are a need to progressively 'strengthen quality assurance and accreditation systems' so that we are certain that they 'specifically cover international operations' (ibid). Australia has paid careful attention to this through the Protocols and AUQA's charter. Attention continues with the review and probably strengthening and clarification of the Protocols, and enhanced attention to the quality of our TNE.

10. 'For Profit' Education Providers

The emergence of for-profit education providers has engendered a good deal of concern and confusion, as if there were something innately inappropriate about making a profit from providing education. Yet, we readily accept that most service-providers operate for a profit, and that in the educational field itself there are many profit-seeking companies providing short courses. Consistent with this slightly inconsistent attitude, discussion of for-profits rarely dwells on that profit-seeking characteristic but on matters such as organisation, full- and part-time staff, practitioner teachers, student characteristics, target markets, and speed of operation — none of which are essentially confined to a for-profit mode. 'We ...have had particular difficulty in distinguishing between non-profit and for-profit private provision'. (Middlehurst & Woodfield 2004)

Less often discussed by the — usually critical — not-for-profit sector is the high level of attention paid by the for-profits to getting and acting on student feedback and ensuring an employment orientation of their courses. 'Private and for-profit providers are perceived as potentially more flexible, entrepreneurial, employment-related and innovative than the more 'structurally rigid' public sector (by governments and students alike)' (ibid).

It is noteworthy that when a public not-for-profit institution operates overseas, it is usually regarded as private, and is usually there for a profit. Most Australian (not-for-profit) universities offer overseas courses that are precisely for-profit. 'One can readily find instances where the market model and the public model appear to have blended, or crossed over each other, or swapped features. ... Another example is the international franchising of degrees, with teaching provided partly or wholly by foreign providers, mostly operating on a for-profit basis.' (Marginson 2002)

In relation to on-line education, Marginson observed that 'programs with substantially different purposes require different kinds of quality assurance'; also that 'systems should distinguish between commercial programs and noncommercial ones'; and 'if the teaching is partly provided by another agent, with different legal, educational and cultural character, how can the franchised degree be the same degree?' (ibid).

For-profit institutions can be accredited using the same standards as for not-for-profit ones, just as the University of Phoenix is accredited by the North Central Association in the US. The delay in its first accreditation related precisely to working through the standards and seeing what different answers were acceptable. For example, were requirements like percentage of tenured staff or number of books in the library essential or proxies for something else?

Similarly, for-profit institutions can be audited using the same approach as for not-for-profit ones. In fact, the major concern of for-profits required to undergo audit is that the QA agency will impose requirements that will be so expensive as to put them out of business — but not-for-profit institutions are equally concerned about the cost of external QA.

11. Structure of Collaborations

Most definitions of transnational education list many possible forms of collaboration between organisations: franchising, twinning, branch campuses, double badging, articulation, recognition, subsidiaries, validating, exchanges, study abroad and so on. Sometimes the institutions themselves are not entirely clear on the structures, and it can certainly cause difficulties for the external quality agency.

AUQA has been told by more than one Australian university (U) that it accredits courses of a partner (P). When AUQA has pointed out that the National Protocols prohibit universities from accrediting other institutions, the story changes to ‘U has agreed to grant graduates of P’s diploma two years standing in a degree at U’. The purpose of this example is not to criticise U for being devious, but to point out that the same action may be legal if described in one way but not if differently described. A more problematic consequence of such an arrangement that is sometimes noticed is that, if students have registered for P’s diploma for the express intention of continuing into U’s degree, they are sometimes unsure of whether they are enrolled with P or U, and unsure whether their diploma will be from P or U. Thus, confusion can emerge in a relatively simple arrangement such as this, and there are many more complex interactions between universities, partners, companies, and franchisees.

The standard internal QA approach has been for the exporting institution to dictate what the importing institution should do (with the best of motives, for example in Australia’s case to ensure compliance with the comparability requirements of the National Protocols). The standard external QA approach has been to hold accountable the institution in whose name the eventual qualification is awarded. Technically, this works, but even the minimal examples above show that the quality agency may not be looking at the processes and people really responsible for the student experience. A better approach to internal QA might be a more equal relationship between the partners, and a better approach to external QA might be a joint activity of the two (or more) agencies responsible for the respective partners.

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