

Change is the only Constant – Quality Assurance in Higher Education as a Tool for Reflective University Management

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1. The Rise of Quality Assurance

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education plays an increasingly important role in many university systems worldwide regarding the competitiveness of universities and entire national or regional university systems. The origins of what we consider today as systematic QA (e.g. accreditation processes, external evaluation, audits, etc.) can be traced back to the emergence of the new public management paradigm in the 1980s and 1990s which gave speed to the spread of periodically applied QA mechanisms in many higher education systems worldwide. Under new public management governments withdrew from a detailed university management approach, and universities were granted more autonomy and self-responsibility. At the same time they were required to legitimate their achievements and to take more accountability. In the long run this was supposed to promote more competition among the universities and to produce better outcomes and “value for money” (Hénard & Mitterle, undated).

More recent developments in the context of QA refer to regional harmonisation of study programmes and degrees which can be found in the European higher education area under the Bologna process and in the South-East Asian nations (ASEAN) respectively. Such regionalisation can be interpreted as a response to globalisation. The aim of harmonising European, Asian or other world regions’ university systems is to increase the visibility and competitiveness of “bigger units” just like the European higher education area (European Commission, 2015). In the attempt to harmonise a university system that is as diverse in terms of languages, traditions, and values as the European system is, the comparability of the individual higher education institutions’ quality is an important “currency”.

The above movements have led to the elaboration of systematic approaches to quality assurance. In the European case the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) have been released in 2005 in order to standardise the mechanisms that allow for quality statements on study programmes and to worship the diversity of different understandings of what quality actually is (ENQA 2015). In order to achieve both of these - potentially contradicting - objectives, the ESG are very generic in nature and leave room for the interpretation of what the respective standards mean to the individual university. E.g. they refer to the quality policy that a university should have in place without determining, how such policy needs to look like in detail.

Assessing the fitness of purpose of the individual universities’ approaches to “quality governance” is then assigned to the respective QA mechanisms which consist for instance of accreditations both at the level of individual study programmes or entire universities.

2. Struggles over Quality Assurance

The introduction of QA was accompanied by controversial debate. In many cases the academia resisted against systematic QA since it was suspected to undermine the intellectual and managerial autonomy of the faculty. In this context another feature of the new public management paradigm that is important, namely to strengthen the position of the central university management at the expense of the single researchers' decision-making freedom. The new central managements (Rectors, Deputy Vice Chancellors) enforced QA as a management tool which was perceived by the faculty as an attempt to gain full control over their academic freedom (which is in countries like Germany a constitutionally protected right).

The respective debate over QA then referred to the methods which were in use and which were accused to be "non-scientific" but coming from the world of industry instead and thus being a threat to the basic values of the science system and yet another step on the path to full commercialisation of higher education and science as such.

3. Recent Developments and Future Tasks of QA

This controversy has not yet been fully resolved. However, the introduction and application of QA mechanisms – like accreditation, audits, internal and external evaluations – seem to have turned into a more commonplace process in many (European) university systems.

In order to unfold its full potential as a management tool, QA would have to be positioned as a more strategic instrument which is assigned with supporting university managements in their attempt to adapt successfully to changing environments. The social changes that affect the way in which higher education is organised efficiently, are manifold. Examples are demographic change and changes in the modes of knowledge production and transfer.

Demographic change

Europe is an ageing society. The respective effects have severe impact on higher education. In regions like Eastern Germany, where in the aftermath of German reunification demographic developments were aggravated by emigration and a dramatic decrease of the birth rate (as a consequence of socially insecure conditions and rising unemployment rates) a population loss of more than 30% by the year 2050 is projected. The decrease of births in the early 1990s results in a decrease of student enrolments today, forcing the universities in the respective regions to address new target audiences like adult learners and senior students or international students, respectively (Pasternack, 2013). With the changes in the target audiences, universities encounter new demands and requirements which they have to meet (Krempkow, Pohlenz & Huber, 2014). With the reshaped understandings of what quality higher education is, the modes of delivery are changing, and with it the tasks of QA: quality assurance is supposed to anticipate respective developments, to foresee what didactical approaches are relevant to the "new" student body and the like. Mechanisms that are restricted to

execute set quality standards (e.g. in accreditation processes) will be no longer sufficient in order to sustain the universities' competitiveness.

New Features of the Knowledge Society

Knowledge production is said to be shifting more and more away from disciplinary discourses to transdisciplinary approaches to problem solving that involves stakeholders from outside the academia (e.g. employers, societal actors, etc.). Under the label "from mode 1 to mode 2 of knowledge production" (Laughton, 2011) society is more involved in research processes and the public discourse on relevant social problems (climate change, financial crises, etc.). Citizen science is another example for the respective movement. Lay persons are assigned with data recording in research projects that require manpower beyond the capacity of universities. Many examples in the natural sciences exist.

The more lay persons are involved in formal research processes, the more they claim a say in what relevant knowledge and knowledge transfer is. In the long run this will have an impact on the ways we organise higher education, too: the changing public perception of science will be reshaping the modes and contents of higher education. Again, QA could play an important role for university management, in the sense that it serves as a tool to cultivate the science-public interaction and helps to incorporate social change into the organisation of higher education.

4. Conclusion

The above reflections on QA built on sociological thought, particularly on the seminal work of Talcott Parsons who established a model of conditions under which social systems maintain their stability (Parsons, 1951). Most importantly, social systems need to be able to adapt to changing environments. Other aspects of the model refer to their ability to set out achievable goals; to secure social cohesion and an effective division of labour; to integrate as many as possible members of the social system; and to maintain the social system's basic values (compliance with formal and informal rules, worshipping the cultural uniqueness of a social system, etc.).

Resistance against QA can be explained against this theoretical background: the early years' over-emphasis of QA procedures that originate from social sub-systems other than the science-system (e.g. from the industry and the private sector in general) has led to a lack of acceptance of the respective procedures in the academia. Pure legitimation or control functions assigned to QA (steering by objectives, key performance indicators, rankings) contradict the academic values of self-responsibility, evidence-based practice, "the quest for truth", etc. In order to establish beneficial QA procedures that are actually contributing to quality enhancement in higher education, it is necessary to appropriately recognise and reflect the specific features of the science system in the elaboration of respective mechanisms and instruments.

5. References

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