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14 February 2003

Perspective of the Research Program on Public Policy for Academic Quality (PPAQ)

Introduction

Over the last decade the structure of higher education in most countries of the world has undergone significant change brought about by social demands for expanded access, technological developments, and market forces. In this period of change the traditional concerns with access and cost have been supplemented by a new concern of policy makers with academic quality. As a consequence new public policies on academic quality and new forms of academic quality assurance have rapidly emerged in many countries and have just as swiftly migrated across continents and around the globe.

While there has also been a commensurate increase in the literature on academic quality, only a small amount of this scholarship directly addresses the design, implementation, and impacts of these new policies and practices. The rich and growing public debate about academic quality assurance within and across countries is therefore not well informed by analyses of the strengths and weaknesses of these new policy instruments. The goal of the Research Program on Public Policy for Academic Quality is to help fill this void with relevant policy analysis. The Program will conduct analyses of innovative new policies on academic quality assurance and associated practices, utilizing the knowledge of informed scholars from throughout the world, and providing the analyses in a comprehensible, easily accessible format. The analyses will be as fair-minded as possible, assessing the relative costs and benefits of the respective policies from the perspective of the overall “public interest.”

We recognize that the framework of rules and policy instruments affecting academic quality within a state or country as well as in the larger global community is evolving and will unlikely follow a single form or policy. Our intent therefore is not to discover the “one best” policy, but to provide as a public good information and analyses that can help inform and enrich the ongoing public debate about the issue of academic quality assurance.

In this brief introduction to the Research Program we will provide an overview of what we mean by “academic quality,” why government intervention in academic quality assurance may be necessary, and the nature of a “public interest” perspective for assessing academic quality policies.

What Do We Mean By “Academic Quality?”

As policy makers in most countries have discussed issues regarding the assurance of academic quality there has often been extensive debate about the meaning of the term. Many have suggested that “academic quality” is amorphous, non-measurable, or so ambiguous in meaning as to be not appropriate for public intervention. Our own view is that academic quality is a fundamental and necessary concept in higher education and one without which our predominant concern with cost and access becomes increasingly futile. For purposes of the Research Program we will define academic quality as equivalent to academic standards that is to the level of academic achievement attained by higher education graduates. This definition of academic quality as academic standards is consistent with the emerging focus in higher education on student learning outcomes -- the specific levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that students achieve as a consequence of their engagement in a particular college or university program.

Academic quality in this sense is a necessary component of any discussion of cost and access in higher education. For example, policy makers must consider whether the rapidly increasing public investment in higher education is purchasing more, less, or comparable levels of academic achievement among students. Without some knowledge of the relationship between the level of public investment in higher education and the level of academic achievement produced the public debates about higher education cost can be seriously misleading. Even if a government adopts a market orientation to higher education, which produces as in the US varying levels of academic achievement, there is an important public interest in academic standards. If the market is to function efficiently, individual consumers need to be able to fairly evaluate the relative value-added by colleges and universities of widely varying cost. Similarly, policymakers in most countries who are concerned with access to higher education must confront the often-unasked question, “access to what?” Attention to access without a commensurate concern with the level of learning outcomes of institutions of higher education may not yield the social and economic benefits expected.

This lack of connection between academic cost, access, and quality is also reflected in the substantial disparity in the volume of policy research addressing these respective policy issues in higher education. The amount of policy-related research on quality assurance regulation is small, national in orientation, but growing. While we have no illusions that the Research Program on Public Policy for Academic Quality can in itself address this mis-balance, we believe that systematic policy analyses of academic quality policies utilizing existing research and evidence, conducted by knowledgeable experts, and made available in an accessible form can make a substantial contribution to current policy debates.

As suggested above, the fundamental measure of effectiveness of any policy designed to influence academic quality is its impact on academic standards. This influence may be direct, as in the effort to assess academic standards through the development of national examinations for higher education in Brazil, or indirect as in policies designed to provide incentives for colleges and universities to use evidence of

student outcomes to improve curricula and pedagogy. But the primary focus of our policy analyses of academic quality will be the impact of new policies and practices on academic standards.

Is Government Intervention Needed?

An important first question in any area of public policy is whether government intervention is needed. Is there clear evidence that academic standards are declining and, perhaps equally important, if they are, can government action efficiently and effectively address the relevant causes of the problem? Given the complexities of assessing academic standards and given that colleges and universities in many countries including the US have traditionally given cursory attention to assessing student learning outcomes, empirical evidence on the trends in academic standards is limited and mixed. In contrast the subjective judgment of the public, employers, and policy makers on the issue of academic standards is one of significant concern and this political reality has driven the rapid development of new academic quality policies around the world. There is also, as we will review below, a growing body of evidence indicating a declining capacity of colleges and universities to monitor and assure academic standards. This evidence suggests an important focus for any efforts at intervention.

One change about which there is little debate is the rapid growth of Internet-based distance learning programs and the challenge they pose for the traditional framework of academic quality assurance in most countries. When a new service such as Internet-based distance learning enters a market it distorts the perceptions of consumers, who are not only uncertain about the quality of these degrees, but also become less certain about the quality claims of traditional colleges and universities. As a consequence this new challenge effectively undermines existing quality assurance methods based upon geographic place, resources, and inputs, as well as traditional academic policies regarding curriculum design and teaching. In this new environment the quality claims of both traditional universities and Internet-based distance programs must be based at least in part upon evidence of their relative effectiveness in achieving student learning outcomes.

The earliest concerns about academic standards in higher education were voiced in the US in the 1980s as the majority of states implemented policies on “student assessment.” These policies were designed to place greater institutional attention on the improvement of student learning, allowing each institution to develop its own statements of student outcomes and its own means of gathering evidence of their achievement. However, this effort by the states to improve student learning appears to have had a limited impact on faculty members’ efforts to assure or improve academic standards. Recent research provides little evidence of a sustained commitment by institutions or academic programs to using student assessment information to improve student learning. Administrators often shielded faculty members from the burdens of complying with the student assessment policies; as a result many faculty members remain opposed to or unaware of this new public concern with academic standards.

In contrast, early efforts at state intervention to assure academic standards in Europe and the UK often adopted an academic audit or subject assessment approach, which involved external reviews of the processes institutions and academic programs employed to assure the quality of curricula and teaching. These interventions have

generally had greater influence on faculty members' attention to academic standards, particularly in the university sector.

As other countries explore new means of assuring academic quality there is increasing interest in US-style institutional and professional accreditation. However, within the US accreditation has come under substantial criticism over the last decade from policymakers who perceive it as ineffective in assuring academic quality. Concerns have been expressed that traditional accreditation is too formulaic and not sufficiently attentive to current public concerns about assuring student learning outcomes. Institutional accreditation is thought to be too comprehensive in its scope, bypassing the undergraduate core and consequently not systematically reviewing the academic experience for most students. Well-established universities, whose academic standards are clearly above the threshold level addressed by accreditation, often criticize the process as overly costly, absorbing too much administrative and faculty time, while providing little added value. Because of these criticisms numerous experiments are underway in both institutional and professional accreditation agencies to make the process focus more on the improvement of academic standards. Ironically, both the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and the new Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) are experimenting with applications of the academic audit process first developed in the UK. In Europe a number of states are also experimenting with innovative approaches to accreditation designed with a focus on academic standards.

While these examples do not provide clear evidence of a decline in academic standards, they do suggest that the traditional external processes for academic quality assurance may have significant limitations especially in the new, more competitive, and demanding environment of higher education.

There is also emerging evidence that the traditional internal processes by which faculties monitor and maintain the quality of teaching and student learning may be deteriorating. One indicator of this change has been the distinct "research drift" in many systems of higher education. This is reflected in an increase in the proportion of time faculty members report to be engaged in research and scholarship, which in the US has increased in all categories of colleges and universities. This observed research drift, and its potential negative impact on teaching and learning was one of the frequently voiced rationales by US policymakers for the development of state policies on student assessment. In the UK and Hong Kong Research Assessment Exercises have been implemented to evaluate the academic quality of faculty members' research in part to try to control this "drift" in the system.

This research drift suggests that the framework of norms and incentives influencing academic work is changing in many countries. Studies of academic work at the department level in the US reveal an increasingly individualistic academic culture. Not only do faculty members do much of their teaching alone, but also because disciplinary sub-fields are defined quite narrowly, many academics find it almost impossible to discuss their teaching with other faculty members. Collective debate about the content of the curriculum, about pedagogic methods, and about means of assuring and improving the academic standards of programs has become increasingly rare. In many disciplines, faculty members expressed the belief that the field's diversity prevented achieving a consensus on what students should be taught. This lack of agreement is exacerbated by the growth of interdisciplinary programs, because faculty members can no longer rely on disciplinary norms to define academic standards. Finally, comprehensive or subject examinations and other traditional measures of student learning outcomes are becoming less common. This creates the

“Catch 22” of academic improvement in contemporary higher education. In this context, there are few incentives for program faculty to act collectively to improve student learning outcomes, because individual faculty members have no evidence to suggest that time invested in greater cooperation would produce increased learning benefits for students. Instead there is every incentive to focus exclusively on one’s individual teaching and research, not on the collective efforts that are most likely to assure and improve academic standards.

This deterioration of the traditional collegial mechanisms for assuring academic standards within US colleges and universities is likely to have broader implications. As other nations move to mass systems of higher education similar to the US, providing access to a much more varied group of students than in the past, they are also adopting an “American” form of instruction. This involves greater attention to general education at the first-degree level, implementation of modular forms of instruction, and adoption of continuous forms of assessment in lieu of subject exams. One consequence of this change is that the traditional mechanisms for assuring academic standards in other countries such as the External Examiner system may become less effective.

Is government intervention on academic quality needed? First, as suggested above the new demands on systems of higher education will require increasing attention to improving student learning outcomes. But research suggests that faculty members in many countries are re-allocating time previously invested in teaching to research, are communicating and collaborating less in the design and implementation of curricula that will maximize student learning, and are failing to measure and monitor the value-added by academic programs. The existing external and internal framework of academic accountability that assured academic standards in the past does not appear adequate for the new challenges of competitive, mass higher education.

This analysis suggests the need for some type of government intervention for assuring academic standards in higher education. Exactly what form such intervention should take and how extensive it should be is an issue that is deserving of increased policy research and public debate.

A “Public Interest” Perspective

Professor Ulrich Teichler once whimsically observed that the main difference between research on higher education policy and on “mad cow” disease is that when the mad cow researchers present their findings the mad cows are not in the room! Academics may not be “mad” in this sense, but with regard the topic of public policies on academic quality they are often easily incensed. Professors’ criticisms of academic quality policies are of significant importance to policymakers, especially given the complexities of implementing such policy instruments in the necessarily decentralized world of academic work and given society’s understandably strong commitment to academic freedom. But by the same token, academics, who carry out the vast majority of research on academic quality, have a clear self-interest in the design of any such policies. Therefore, there is a real need for the development of a body of research on academic quality policies that is as objective as possible.

The research program will try to address this need by producing policy analyses that are written from a “public interest” perspective. That is, while all researchers necessarily have value biases, we can aspire to producing analyses that are as balanced as possible. This will be pursued first by adopting a common format for

all of the analyses of policies and practices carried out as part of the research program. Second, the analyses will attempt to assess both the intended and unintended impacts of new policies – the relative costs and benefits of these policies to all stakeholders, not just to the members of the academic community. Third, selected researchers with knowledge of the relevant policy and related literature will carry out the analyses. Finally, each of the policy analyses will be subjected to a peer review to assess the reasonableness and fair-mindedness of the written analysis.

Conclusion

Policy research and debate on academic quality assurance must focus on academic standards, the learning outcomes achieved by students. The current worldwide concern with academic quality assurance appears warranted, but each nation is actively debating the ideal form for such policies. In this context there is a need for relevant, informed, and fair-minded policy analyses of new instruments of academic quality assurance to help inform public debate. These policy instruments should be designed, we suggest, to address limitations in the existing framework for assuring academic standards, including the internal web of academic accountability within colleges and universities.