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Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Practices and Issues¹

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The term quality assurance in higher education is increasingly used to denote the practices whereby academic standards, i.e., the level of academic achievement attained by higher education graduates, are maintained and improved. This definition of academic quality as equivalent to academic standards is consistent with the emerging focus in higher education policies on student learning outcomes -- the specific levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that students achieve as a consequence of their engagement in a particular education program (Brennan and Shah, 2000).

A useful distinction is drawn between internal and external academic quality assurance. Internal quality assurance refers to those policies and practices whereby academic institutions themselves monitor and improve the quality of their education provision, while external quality assurance refers to supra-institutional policies and practices whereby the quality of higher education institutions and programs are assured. Individual universities have always possessed policies and practices designed to assure the quality of education, but academic institutions have also always operated within a national policy framework designed by the state to assure academic standards.

This entry reviews the new forms of external quality assurance that have accompanied recent reforms in national policies and the issues they raise for higher education.

The Emergence of New Quality Assurance Practices

At the close of the twentieth century the national policy frameworks for higher education institutions underwent substantial reforms. In the emerging global economy

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advanced human capital has become a crucial factor in economic development and a central component of a nation's competitive advantage. Consequently, many countries are shifting from elite to mass systems of higher education (Trow, 2005).

The combined impacts of globalization and massification have radically altered the traditional relationship between the state and institutions of higher education and motivated policymakers to seek new means for assuring academic quality in higher education (World Bank, 2002). First, the global demand for skilled human capital encouraged changes in the degree frameworks of many countries as policymakers sought international recognition of the credentials granted by their country's higher education institutions. These new degree frameworks also encouraged a rapid proliferation of new academic programs in many countries, thereby testing established national practices for assuring academic standards. Second, the rapid growth of higher education systems has provided incentives for the development of private institutions, including cross-border franchise and virtual universities, which have posed novel challenges to national systems of external quality assurance, particularly those based upon central control of public institutions. Third, the competitive forces unleashed by globalization and massification have required institutions of higher education to become more responsive to rapidly changing labor markets and to student program interests. Consequently institutions in many countries have sought increased flexibility and autonomy from traditional state quality assurance regulations so that they can react more swiftly to changing social demands by establishing new academic programs, reconfiguring existing programs, and eliminating outdated programs. Finally, the rapidly expanding social demand for higher education has been caused in large part by students' desire to achieve the increasing private benefits available to individuals with higher degrees. The empirical reality of the growing private benefits of academic degrees has altered the traditional debate about higher education finance, encouraging many countries to require students and their families to pay a larger share of higher education costs. Consequently the new practices of external quality assurance also seek to respond to public concerns that institutions provide educational value for money.

This dramatically altered environment of institutions of higher education helped reveal the inadequacy of both the traditional internal and external practices for assuring academic standards (Brennan and Shah, 2000). Therefore in their search for a national framework that will encourage innovation in academic programs while maintaining and improving academic standards, policymakers are experimenting with many innovative forms of academic quality assurance.

The first government experiments with new quality assurance practices occurred predictably in the US, an early exponent of mass higher education. Concerned with evidence of declining academic standards in public education the majority of US states adopted in the early 1980s regulations requiring that publicly supported universities develop explicit plans for assessing student teaching (Dill et al, 1996). Subsequently new national quality assurance policies were also introduced in France (1984), the United Kingdom (1985) and the Netherlands (1985) (van Vught and Westerheijden, 1993). The French government was primarily interested in reducing its dysfunctional quality assurance bureaucracy, the government in Great Britain sought to achieve a better linkage

of higher education with the labor market, while the Netherlands adopted a new QA framework in association with an innovative approach to steering universities. The developments in these pioneering countries were then diffused to other countries in Europe, Asia, and eventually around the globe.

The traditional national frameworks for external quality assurance varied from country to country, but had generally followed three modal forms: the European model of central control of quality assurance by state educational ministries, the US model of decentralized quality assurance combining limited state control with market competition, and the British model in which the state essentially ceded responsibility for quality assurance to self-accrediting universities (Dill, 1992). In the UK, up until the actions by the Thatcher government in 1981, the assurance of academic quality in the publicly supported university sector was delegated to the academic profession itself, which monitored and assured the standard of university degrees through collective mechanisms such as the external examiner system. In contrast, ministries of education on the continent were much more active in setting standards for universities. They established and monitored regulations on university admissions, academic appointments, program curricula, and end-point examinations. In the US, as higher education rapidly expanded following World War II, the federal Congress explicitly adopted a market-based approach to academic quality assurance as a supplement to the existing tradition of state licensing and voluntary institutional as well as program accreditation. During the 1972 re-authorization of the Higher Education Act members of Congress argued that providing federal financial assistance directly to students rather than to institutions was the most efficient and effective means to both equalize opportunities in higher education and harness market forces for enhancing academic quality.

Table I outlines representative external quality assurance practices organized by the locus of authority over academic quality assurance. Professional or self-regulation clearly assumes producer sovereignty in which academics themselves are principally responsible for defining and enforcing the rules and norms assuring the quality of academic provision. As noted this places greatest emphasis on traditional voluntary practices carried out by professional bodies including accreditation of academic programs and institutions by professional associations as well as collective professional practices such as external examining. State or direct regulation of academic quality assumes the sovereignty of the state in defining and enforcing academic standards. The new quality assurance instruments emphasized by the state include the definition of academic degree frameworks, policies introducing new assessment practices such as academic audits and/or subject assessments designed to maintain and improve internal quality assurance practices, state conducted accreditation of programs and/or institutions, performance funding and contracts, and finally regulations influencing the public provision of academic information such as state-mandated exams or surveys. For the market to work effectively as a means of assuring academic standards, it is necessary for students and their families to achieve effective consumer sovereignty through informed choice of academic programs. QA practices associated with this perspective include commercially produced rankings and student guides designed to provide academic quality information to students.

Table 1 External assurance of academic quality

Locus of Authority	Professional (Self) Regulation	State (Direct) Regulation	Market Regulation
Practices	Professional accreditation and licensure Voluntary institutional accreditation External examining	National qualifications frameworks Subject assessments State-conducted accreditation Academic audits Performance-based funding or contracting National examinations or surveys	Commercial information provision, e.g., institutional or program performance data, assessments, and rankings

Several key points can be derived from these simple distinctions. First, a number of quality assurance practices such as accreditation or academic audit are essentially generic processes that can be conducted voluntarily under the auspices of academic professional organizations such as the American Board of Engineering and Training (ABET) and the European University Association (EUA), or can be a requirement of national policy carried out by agencies established by or affiliated with the state. Similarly quality rankings can be produced by the academic profession as in the world university league table published by the Shanghai University, by the state as in the UK Subject Assessments, or by the private sector as in the commercially-produced rankings of the *London Times* or the *US News and World Report*. Second, while it is often argued that professional self-regulation or market forces represent serious alternatives to state regulation of academic standards, the reality is that professional or market-based quality assurance practices are usually highly dependent upon the state for their effective functioning. If professional self-regulation or market forces are to successfully protect the public interest in the assurance of academic standards, they must be reinforced by law or formally recognized and/or subsidized by the state. For example, the current influence of voluntary accreditation in the US derives almost entirely from the fact that the national government utilizes institutional accreditation to determine college and university eligibility for federal student aid. Similarly more valid commercial rankings such as those of the *Guardian* in the UK or the *Good University Guide* in Australia are highly dependent upon government subsidized or produced data on universities. In short,

effective professional self-regulation and/or market regulation are best understood as alternative state instruments for assuring academic quality. The challenge confronting all nations is to design a policy framework that effectively and efficiently utilizes the forces of the state, the academic profession, and the market to assure academic standards.

An Assessment of External Quality Assurance Practices

The sections that follow, review the primary new practices of external academic quality assurance and the issues they raise for higher education.

National Qualifications Frameworks

In response to the changing environment of higher education a number of countries such as Australia and Ireland have adopted new national qualifications frameworks (Young, 2003). The cross-national Bologna framework of bachelors, masters, and research doctoral degrees, the “Dublin Descriptors,” and the UK Graduate Standards Program can also be understood in these terms. The initial rationale for these frameworks was to provide international recognition for academic degrees to aid in attracting foreign students as well as to help in placing program graduates in the global market. However, by providing broad descriptors of learning outcomes specific to each level of academic degrees, academic qualification frameworks also provide some potential reference points for external quality assurance practices (McInnis, 2005).

A more refined example of degree frameworks is the UK Subject Benchmarks program (Williams, 2005). The massification of higher education has also produced many new professional or more vocational university programs for which clear agreement on academic content and student learning outcomes is often lacking. In response to a growing concern about the comparability of academic standards across academic programs, the UK systematically created Subject Benchmark Committees to publicly define appropriate academic content and threshold standards at the level of each subject field. Over a five year period the UK committees developed subject benchmarks for programs enrolling the vast majority of first level students.

Some policy makers clearly hoped and some academic staff clearly feared that national qualifications frameworks and subject benchmarks would become a regulatory device for assuring the fitness of purpose of academic degrees. While the new frameworks do play a role in external quality assurance, the fact that the higher education component of these frameworks and benchmarks is usually defined by academic staff means that the frameworks’ impact on academic standards is limited and usually indirect. In the UK the impact of subject benchmarking proved more formative and developmental than regulatory (Williams, 2005): helping to define and legitimize new academic subjects, generating discussion about appropriate academic standards at the subject and university level, as well as helping to strengthen internal university processes for new course approvals and academic quality assurance. Similarly, the most significant contribution that qualifications frameworks make to an overall national quality assurance

system is to help encourage a focus on student learning outcomes rather than course content in national debates about academic standards.

Quality Assessments

One of the most significant changes in national quality assurance frameworks at the end of the 20th century was the emergence of the evaluative state (Neave, 1988). Many national governments initiated and/or subsidized the creation of new agencies and practices designed to assess quality in existing higher education programs and institutions. The new assessment practices included academic audits, subject assessments, and new forms of academic accreditation.

During the 1980s the majority of the US states adopted assessment regulations designed to encourage public institutions to place greater attention on the improvement of student learning. But these regulations delegated implementation responsibility to institutions, the institutional responses were not externally assessed, and the regulations had little measurable impact on academic quality (Peterson et al, 1999). Similarly, traditional institutional accreditation in the US was criticized for being too comprehensive in its scope, too focused on input criteria rather than policymakers' concerns about academic standards, and insufficiently transparent in that accreditation reviews are not required to be made public (Dill et al, 1996). Existing voluntary program accreditations did not assess the education programs in which the majority of students were enrolled, accrediting primarily professional fields. Under mounting pressure from policymakers concerned about declining academic standards, all of the institutional accreditation agencies adopted student assessment as one of their standards for review and several accreditation agencies introduced new accreditation review processes. But after several decades of experimentation a US Department of Education report (2006) concluded that US-style voluntary institutional and program accreditation were still inadequate mechanisms for assuring the quality of student learning.

Outside the US new forms of quality assessment including subject assessments, academic audits, and innovative approaches to accreditation were mandated by many countries for all publicly supported institutions of higher education. Each of these practices adopted a similar sequence of activities -- an institutional self-study, an external peer review, and a public report of findings -- but the focus of each practice differed. Subject assessments, as implemented in countries such as the UK, the Netherlands, and Denmark, involved systematic evaluations of the quality of delivered performance of study programs with emphasis on curriculum, teaching, and program relevance to graduates and the economy. In contrast, academic audit as implemented in countries such as Australia, the UK, and Hong Kong, focused on the processes that institutions use to assure themselves that their chosen standards are being achieved, what in Sweden is usefully termed education quality work. Accreditation, as implemented in Europe is similar to US accreditation in its assessment of a program's capacity for quality and its binary judgments about the attainment of threshold academic standards. But the European practices differed in their focus on study programs rather than institutions, in

their comprehensive coverage, and in their attention as well to the effectiveness of program quality assurance activities.

All three of these new external assessment practices had the effect of encouraging dialogue and collaboration among academic staff regarding the improvement of student learning and assurance of academic standards within academic institutions (Kehm, 2006; Massy, 2005; Stensaker, 2004). This is not a negligible impact given the increasing incentives in all of higher education for academic staff to invest time and effort in research. However, if overly focused on external control rather than institutional responsibility for improvement, these assessments can encourage a culture of compliance in which institutions invest time and effort on developing policy documents and erecting quality infrastructures to satisfy external assessors rather than on active efforts to assure and improve academic standards. External subject assessments and program accreditation are also very costly to mount and sustain over time. Because their focus is exclusively on the subject level, these assessments also provide limited incentives for the overall institution to develop an effective internal quality assurance process. Audits by contrast are much less costly, applicable to all types of institutions, and provide some of the same incentives for communication and collaboration on the improvement of teaching and learning. But the potential positive impacts of academic audits may be limited if poorly designed, for example, by too comprehensive an assessment that includes other than core educational processes, or by focusing too much on quality assurance documentation rather than on empirical evidence regarding the validity and reliability of internal processes for assuring academic standards.

The evolution of external examining in the UK, a professional external quality assurance practice, illustrates a number of the issues involved with quality assessments (Lewis, 2005). Of the many external quality assurance practices external examining, as conducted in the UK and some Scandinavian countries, most clearly assesses academic standards. External examiners traditionally assessed the actual performance of students on subject examinations used to award honors degrees in UK universities. External examining emerged in early 19th century England as a professional practice and was explicitly encouraged in subsequent university charters. However, the practice was not regulated nor codified until, under pressure from the government to assure academic standards, the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals published the first Code of Practice in 1986. Subsequent research revealed that only a minority of universities were following these professional standards, challenging academic assertions on the effectiveness of the practice (Warren Piper, 2004). Government regulations were then introduced requiring summaries of university external examining reports to be made public and the governmentally supported UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) incorporated specific precepts on external examining into their academic audits of each university, thereby encouraging greater equivalency of practice across institutions. However, the widespread adoption of modular instruction and continuous assessment in much of UK higher education over the last decades has lessened the ability of external examiners to actually compare academic standards within a subject field. Instead external examiners now perform the function of assessing the validity and reliability of the overall assessment regime in a particular subject.

Information

A third means of external quality assurance is information provision. The development of performance indicators to help assure academic standards has become an important external quality assurance practice in many countries (Cave et al, 1997). Initially performance indicators were designed by policymakers to inform government funding, often in association with new higher education financial instruments such as performance-based funding or university performance contracts. As higher education has become more competitive nationally and internationally indicators of academic quality have increasingly been published by government, academic, nonprofit, and commercial entities to better inform student choice of an educational program. Many policymakers also believe that informed student choice is an influential means of external quality assurance. While government subsidies of higher education in every country are predicated on the belief that the educational value added by higher education programs produce beneficial outcomes for society, these social benefits are difficult to gauge directly, therefore external quality assurance utilizes proxy measures of academic quality. These include: more immediate outcome measures such as graduate placement, salaries, and satisfaction with education program; output measures such as student test scores, completion rates, and marks; and various process measures such as student engagement.

Outcome measures such as graduate placement and salaries are informative and generally valid quality information for potential students and could also be valuable general indicators of effectiveness for academic programs if used by institutions. Readily available output measures such as student marks or graduation rates may be unreliable indicators of academic quality because they can be increased by lowering academic standards. For this reason performance-based funding or contracts, which are usually based upon available input, process, and output measures, have proven to be an inadequate instrument for assuring academic standards (Jongbloed and Vossensteyn, 2001) and need to be supplemented by government mandates on quality information provision and external quality assessments. While common graduate exams exist in certain professional fields such as medicine or teaching and have been utilized in association with external assessments by professional accrediting agencies in the UK and the US to improve academic standards, common exams do not exist in all subjects. Brazil attempted the most ambitious experiment in mandated common subject exams (Schwartzman, 2004), developing nationally designed and administered exams in all major subject fields for graduates of both public and private universities. The exams provided influential performance information, but could not effectively assess the actual value-added by an academic program. Under strong political pressure from the universities the exams were modified to a voluntary survey of a sample of graduates, thereby diminishing the validity and reliability of the performance information provided. Both Australia (Graduate Skills Assessment- GSA) and the US (Collegiate Learning Assessment – CLA) are experimenting with less costly and more easily administered tests of generic skills for first level students. While these tests could provide a general indicator of the educational value added by institutions, the generic content of such

exams might encourage the lowering of academic standards and in any event is unlikely to help inform academic staff in means of improving academic standards in specific educational programs.

Because of the limitations of traditional output measures and common exams or tests, common surveys of student experience were developed in Australia and the US as a means of academic quality assurance and are spreading to other countries. The Australian Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) surveys graduates' perceptions of teaching quality, skills learned, and their satisfaction with their education in their academic program (Harris and James, 2006). The US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) asks currently enrolled students to report on experiences in their educational program known to be associated with effective learning (Ewell, 2005). While generic instruments, both these surveys are based upon systematic research on effective teaching and student learning and therefore offer more valid and informative indicators of academic quality for potential students as well as academic staff.

Overall, the validity of public information on academic quality has become a controversial issue in higher education. Quality rankings by commercial publications often rely upon information gleaned from reputational surveys, input measures such as student test scores or financial resources, and indicators of research quality all of which have questionable validity as predictors of effective student learning (Dill and Soo, 2005). These rankings have become highly influential on academic behavior, often encouraging institutions and programs to invest time, resources, and effort in improving their rated reputations rather than in the challenging education quality work necessary to actually improve academic standards (Brewer et al, 2002). More valid and useful academic quality information and rankings have been produced by not for profit entities such as the Center for Higher Education Development (CHE) in Germany, as well as the NSSE and National Research Council's (NRC) assessment of research doctoral programs in the US. A critical determinant of the legitimacy of academic quality information is government policy, which may subsidize the development and provision of more valid quality information as in the case of the NRC doctoral surveys in the US and the Australian Graduate Survey, and/or mandate publicly supported universities to participate in more valid surveys and rankings as in the case of the NSSE and CHE rankings.

Publicly available information on academic quality plays an important role in assuring academic standards, but ironically its import may be greater for internal than external quality assurance. International research on student choice suggests that quality rankings and ratings influence the educational decisions of a relatively small segment of the student population, primarily those of high ambition and achievement (Dill and Soo, 2005). The education choices of most students are influenced by a wide variety of educational, social, and personal factors, which suggests that the individual decisions of even well informed potential students are unlikely to be a strong influence on the assurance of academic standards within academic institutions. The more significant role of quality information is therefore likely to be its development and use by academic staff as part of institutional efforts to assure and improve academic standards.

Summary

The growing importance of human capital to the economic and social development of contemporary societies mandated the massification of higher education and subsequently motivated a search for new methods of assuring and improving academic standards. All countries therefore are seeking an effective national framework for academic quality assurance that will likely include an appropriate classification of academic degrees, the provision of valid and reliable information on academic quality, and some efficient means of external assessment designed to assure that institutions of higher education have in place effective internal quality assurance processes. Degree frameworks and subject benchmarks can contribute to external quality assurance by helping to redirect public and academic debate about academic quality from curricula issues to socially beneficial learning outcomes. In addition, some type of state mandated external assessment of internal quality assurance practices seems warranted, since traditional professional practices appear inadequate in the new environment of higher education. Centralized control of academic quality by state education ministries is impractical in mass systems. Professional practices such as voluntary academic accreditation in the US and external examining in the UK have noted limitations and academic audits of internal quality assurance in a number of countries have clearly revealed that these institutional practices can be improved. Comprehensive program accreditation practices, such as those being experimented with in Europe, can help assure the attainment of threshold academic standards following the adoption of a new degree framework. However, over time, the high cost and limited focus of regular program accreditations as well as subject assessments appears difficult to justify and sustain. National quality assessment practices seem to be evolving out of necessity toward the adoption of some form of external academic audit of internal quality assurance processes. Developing effective academic audit processes will therefore likely be a continuing and important challenge for the field of academic quality assurance (El-Khawas, 2005). Finally, the public provision of valid and reliable information on academic quality will be a critical component of national quality assurance frameworks. While commercial publications provide an increasing amount of information to the public on academic quality, they have limited incentives to publish rankings that will actually help maintain and improve academic standards. The development and public provision of valid and reliable indicators of academic quality therefore is best understood as a pure public good, which must be subsidized by government.

See also: Accreditation; Graduate Outcomes; International Accreditation; Rankings; Student Learning.

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- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE): <http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm>
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<http://www.unc.edu/ppaq/>
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- The joint quality initiative: <http://www.jointquality.nl/>
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