Introduction

Academic quality assurance, historically a national concern, has been evolving rapidly over the last several decades in reaction to the forces of globalization. The first response was the development in many countries of new national models for assuring academic quality in the context of adoption of mass systems of higher education (Brennan and Shah 2000; Dill and Beerkens 2010), which itself was a national reaction to the economic impacts of increased global economic competition. More recent responses include the development of regional and increasingly international organizations and regimes for academic quality assurance as a consequence of the globalization of the higher education industry itself (King 2009; Santiago et al. 2008a). This development of international institutions of academic quality assurance appears to be consistent with the ‘rational design’ theory of institutions (Koremenos, Lipson and Snidal 2001). This would predict that as transnational exchanges involving students, faculty, services and university-produced knowledge exchanges grow international institutions will emerge to help reduce the associated transaction costs of these exchanges, including bodies for making and enforcing necessary agreements.

Practices for assuring quality are relevant to all the traditional academic activities of universities, including the quality of services such as academic consultancy and knowledge transfer, the quality of basic research and of teaching and student learning. While there have been significant new national policies designed to assure the quality of research (Dill and van Vught 2010), the primary attention of academic quality assurance efforts at the national, regional and now global level has been on confirming and improving academic standards (Dill and Beerkens 2010), which is the focus of this chapter. By academic standards is meant the specific level of knowledge, skills and abilities that students achieve as a consequence of their engagement in a particular academic program and as such this definition of academic standards reflects the growing

worldwide concern with assuring and improving the quality of student learning (Santiago et al. 2008a).

The immediately following sections explore first the forces of globalization that provide incentives for the development of international organizations and regimes for the assurance of academic standards. In succeeding sections the emerging global institutional framework for assuring academic quality is outlined and the strengths and weaknesses of these arrangements are explored. The concluding section will examine the issue of the legitimacy (Buchanan and Keohane 2006) of these emerging global academic quality assurance institutions.

Academic quality assurance institutions and globalization

Global economic forces have influenced the emergence of both national and international policies governing academic quality (Dill and Beerkens 2010; Santiago et al. 2008a). However while national policies of academic quality assurance have received increasing attention the institutional framework of international quality assurance is still developing and is less well understood. The primary reasons for the adoption of new national policies on academic quality assurance over the last several decades have been the ‘massification’ or expansion of access to higher education and the associated rapidly rising expenditures in many countries, both arousing policymakers’ concerns about maintenance of academic standards and value for money in universities. If as is increasingly apparent massification and national concerns about academic standards are in turn responsive to global pressures affecting the economic viability of citizens and states, so also the more recent emergence of international agencies and regimes of academic quality assurance has been motivated primarily by global economic competition. International student mobility has risen quite dramatically over the last three decades with the number of foreign students doubling since 1995 (Santiago et al. 2008b) as students around the globe seek a competitive economic advantage through the nature and provenance of their academic degrees. The adoption of English as the language of international commerce and the rapid development of the Internet have provided further momentum for international student flows as well as for the development of a new industry in the cross-border provision of academic degrees by publicly-funded, private and newly developed for-profit universities. These increasing global transactions have fostered the recent development of international agencies and regimes designed to address the uncertainties of assessing academic quality in this new world of academic commerce. As in other international spheres of governance, such as the environment, health and finance, the hierarchical or command-and-control forms of regulation often favored by national governments have proven less politically feasible and ‘softer’ forms of governance appear more prominent (King 2009).

The OECD (2004) has outlined the national motivations for the growing internationalization of higher education. These rationales include the traditional goal of enhancing mutual understanding but also increasingly reflect economic concerns such as revenue generation for universities. In the case of developing nations internationalization is motivated also by the desire to develop human capital in a cost-effective manner by
supporting student study abroad and encouraging foreign higher education providers domestically. The economic rationale for internationalization in higher education was graphically illustrated in 1989 when the University of Reading became the first (but not the last) university in the UK to win the Queen’s Award for Export Achievement. In addition most nations desire to ensure that the quality of their academic programs is appropriately recognized so that their citizens can compete effectively for positions in the global marketplace. Developed nations also desire to attract highly skilled migrants, especially in research doctoral programs that have been shown to contribute to the technical innovation critical to maintaining national economic competitiveness (Dill and van Vught 2010). These latter economic rationales have been significantly influential in supporting the emergence of global institutions and regimes for academic quality assurance.

The competitive economic nature of this national motivation in support of global mechanisms governing academic quality however also suggests one of the underlying weaknesses of these institutions. Both nations and their universities may be well-served if the international institutions for academic quality assurance confirm the reputations respectively of a country’s academic institutions and programs. But the global public interest is best served only if these international institutions verify or help assure the actual academic standards of a country’s universities and academic programs as previously defined. This distinction between reputation and academic standards is a key factor in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the evolving global institutions and regimes for assuring academic quality.

International institutions for assuring academic quality

The international institutional framework for assuring academic quality is composed of a complex and growing web that includes:

a) intergovernmental agencies such as the European Commission (EC), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO);

b) networks of national academic quality assurance agencies such as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE);

c) institutions of civil society including voluntary and professional organizations engaged in academic quality assurance activities such as the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE) and the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET); and

d) commercial organizations such as The Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) and Financial Times that provide international rankings of universities and selected academic programs.

One high profile example of an intergovernmental institution for international academic quality assurance is the Bologna Process. While nominally a voluntary activity of the Ministries of Education of the 46 cooperating states that lies outside the formal
institutional framework of the European Union, the process has been effectively driven behind the scenes by the European Commission which first articulated publicly many of its core ideas, provides financial support for Bologna activities and most recently sponsored the independent evaluation of the process (Balzer and Rusconi 2007; Westerheijden et al. 2010). Although the Bologna Process has a number of goals, including the restructuring of academic degrees and the expansion of student mobility within the ‘European Education Space’, the recent evaluation argues that academic quality assurance ‘has proven to be the at the heart’ of the process (Westerheijden et al. 2010: 29). The key quality assurance institutions and regimes implemented as part of the Bologna Process are the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) developed by ENQA (2009), the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), which lists quality assurance agencies that substantially comply with the ESG, and the Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA, 2005) listing generic descriptors of learning outcomes and competences for the three degree cycles of higher education (that is, bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees). In addition to these more top-down mechanisms the Bologna Process has helped to institutionalize the Tuning Process as a means of improving academic quality (Westerheijden et al. 2010). The Tuning Process is designed to enhance academic quality at the subject level by developing reference points for curricula in all three cycles based upon competences and learning outcomes articulated collectively by faculty members drawn from subject fields.

Global membership organizations such as the OECD, UNESCO, the World Bank and the WTO also play an increasing role in the international framework for academic quality assurance. Over the last twenty years the OECD has changed its approach to education policy, shifting from individual in-depth country studies to a focus on rankings and ratings of member countries utilizing carefully developed measures of educational performance. This ‘comparative turn’ (Martens 2007) of the OECD has created new and influential peer pressure among the participating developed and cooperating emerging countries for reforms in education. By systematically improving its measures and data gathering of educational performance and by creating its own independent measures as with the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (the worldwide evaluation of 15-year-old schoolchildren’s scholastic performance), the OECD has markedly increased its reputation and influence for helping assure and improve educational quality. With regard to academic quality the OECD has focused on producing comparative studies of national best practices in quality assurance as well as suggested guidelines derived from related research. In response to the growing global concern with assuring academic standards the OECD (2009) has also embarked on the International Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project to assess learning outcomes on an international scale through the creation of measures that would be valid for all cultures and languages. These new measures would then permit construction of national rankings of academic performance similar to those that have proven so influential with the PISA assessments. Similarly the World Bank (2002) has provided comparative reports drawn from the experience of the Banks’ constituent states, primarily
developing countries, which attempt to provide global standards and guidelines for national quality assurance policies.

UNESCO and the WTO have also played the role of global standardizers for academic quality assurance (King 2009). UNESCO (1993) has developed a Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education which it employs to lessen transaction costs in higher education by guiding the development of recognition conventions -- legal accords among countries designed to recognize academic qualifications among the signatories. UNESCO also promulgated in collaboration with the OECD (2005) Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education and in association with other international organizations published the Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions (IHEP 2006) as a global standard for the design of academic league tables. The World Trade Organization, through its General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATS) process, also plays a role in global academic quality assurance (Scherrer 2007). Countries participating in GATS must consent to apply similar national quality assurance mechanism and standards to all higher education providers, public and private, national and international. These international trade agreements have also stimulated cooperative efforts among professional bodies such as accounting, architecture, engineering, and law societies in different countries to develop mutually acceptable standards and criteria for licensing and certification, which may, like the Tuning Process, eventually inform the articulation of similar learning outcomes around the globe for academic degrees in these professional fields.

International networks of national quality assurance agencies such as ENQA and INQAAHE have published standards and guidelines for the conduct of external quality assurance activities, such as academic audit, accreditation and subject assessments. Based upon the experiences of member quality agencies in over 65 countries the INQAAHE (2007) has set out in Guidelines of Good Practice in Quality Assurance the best practices it believes should be adopted globally by all quality agencies. As with most professional associations these best practices are implemented though the socialization and educational activities of INQAAHE. In contrast the similar guidelines developed by ENQA form the basis of the ESG adopted by the ministerial participants in the Bologna Process and therefore these guidelines are reinforced by related policies implemented by these ministers in the participating countries, and by the independent evaluations and judgments necessary to be listed in the EQR established as part of the Bologna Process.

In addition to these international networks composed of national quality assurance agencies there are other voluntary, non-governmental organizations of civil society that play an influential role in the global institutional framework for academic quality assurance. These include specialized voluntary accreditation agencies which attempt to assure minimum academic standards in particular subject fields or programs worldwide by applying a common external quality assurance approach, such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB) and the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), both based in the USA, as well as the European Quality Improvement System (EQIS) accrediting process of the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD). The university rankings of the
Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE) and the Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) also have made important contributions to the public provision of information on academic quality by systematically designing cross-national rankings of first-level academic subjects in the case of the CHE and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) in the case of the SJTU. The CHE initiated its rankings of bachelor-level programs in Germany, then extended them to other German-speaking countries, and is now developing a listing of ‘excellence’ subjects at the first-degree level across Europe. The SJTU has had a significant impact on the debates of national policymakers about quality in higher education by developing a global ranking of universities based primarily upon their research activity.

Finally the commercial organizations of the market, such as newspaper and magazine publishers who produce university league tables, have become an increasingly visible and influential part of the institutional framework affecting academic quality in many countries (Dill and Soo 2005). With the recent development of international academic league tables such as the Global MBA Rankings of the Financial Times and The World University Rankings by the Times Higher Education (THE, previously THES), commercial organizations have now also become an important component of the emerging global framework governing academic quality.

Strengths and weaknesses of the global institutional framework

Given the emerging global framework for assuring academic quality described above what are the strengths and weaknesses of these institutional arrangements? In assessing this framework several obvious limitations of global governance must be acknowledged (Keohane 1998). The fact that there is literally no overarching global government alters the relative effectiveness of the legal, financial and informational policy instruments traditionally favored by national governments (Van Vught 1994). Because international governance requires the concurrence of nation states and as such represents negotiated agreements among volunteer participants, the legal policy instruments of command-and-control, obligation and prohibition by which national governments have traditionally asserted their formal authority and regulated higher education, are less feasible in global governance. Similarly the ‘power of treasure’, the financial instruments of direct support, grants, contracts and subsidies national governments utilize to steer higher education, is not practicable at the international level. Instead, as noted above, the global governance of higher education quality relies heavily on informational policy instruments or ‘soft law’ (King 2009), such as guidelines, codes of best practice, recommended standards and rankings. These international mechanisms depend less on the legal sanctions and financial power employed by national governments and more on the influence of socialization, peer pressure and reputation that is characteristic of voluntary organizations. In this complex global framework for governing academic quality international rankings of universities play a significant role. However, similar to the weaknesses of international bond-rating agencies discovered during the financial crisis of the first decade of the twenty-first century, these rankings
appear to distort market forces rather than help them operate more efficiently in the public interest.

The experience to date of the Bologna Process suggests that efforts to define globally learning outcomes of academic programs, through common national qualifications frameworks and through the collective efforts of academic staff at the subject level through mechanisms such as the Tuning Process or the activities of professional associations stimulated by the GATS Agreement, will make a modest but important contribution to assuring international academic standards (Westerheijden et al. 2010). While some policymakers have hoped and some academic staff have feared that these types of efforts could become an effective regulatory device for assuring the fitness of purpose of academic degrees, the impacts of these instruments appear more limited. The evidence from the Bologna Process reinforces the insights from equivalent national mechanisms, which have had a limited influence on assuring academic standards (McInnis 2010; Williams 2010). The increasing specialization of academic knowledge and the rapid development of new interdisciplinary fields of study in the university sector tend to compromise attempts to prescribe academic content. The impact of the qualifications frameworks adopted in a number of countries as well as the collegially-defined Subject Benchmarks program implemented in the UK have proved more broad and general, and more formative and developmental, than regulatory. The more significant benefit of qualifications frameworks and subject standards appears to be changing national policy debates about academic standards from a focus on course content to one of student learning outcomes, while collectively developed subject-level standards similarly have helped alter the traditional orientation of academic staff and proven particularly useful in some universities in the planning of new courses of study.

The effectiveness of the standards, guidelines and best practices for governing academic quality developed by global networks of academic quality professionals such as ENQA and INQAAHE and/or in association with intergovernmental efforts such as the Bologna Process or international organizations such as UNESCO is more debatable. One obvious problem with self-regulatory approaches, again clearly illustrated by the experience with bond-rating agencies in the recent financial crisis, is that professional academic quality assurance agencies possess their own interests and therefore may attempt to ‘capture’ (Laffont, and Tirole 1991) or shape the regulatory process to ensure agency survival and prosperity rather than maximize the public interest in assuring academic standards. For example, although a stated main goal of the Bologna Process is ‘promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies’ (Westerheijden 2010: 29), the ENQA Report to the Bologna Ministerial Anniversary Conference of March 2010 stresses the diversity among political systems, national higher education arrangements and cultures. Consequently ENQA states ‘this makes a single monolithic approach to quality, standards and quality assurance in higher education inappropriate’ (ENQA 2010: 1). As ENQA then makes plain its primary concern is legitimizing fellow professional agencies: ‘There is little point in adopting a “hard line” position in respect of compliance with the ESG if, by doing so trustworthy and credible agencies are prevented in gaining Full membership of ENQA….’ (ENQA 2010: 1). This concern with diversity so influenced the ESG that
as the independent Bologna evaluation observed, ‘there are no [ESG] criteria that directly affect actual education’, (that is, academic standards) (Westerheijden et al. 2010: 32).

As the Bologna evaluators further noted all participating national quality assurance agencies are now required to undergo an international evaluation of their conformance with the ESG. Of the 44 agencies reviewed by ENQA as of 2009 by teams composed primarily of fellow quality assurance professionals, all were judged positively. In contrast the parallel process for approving national agencies for a listing on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), which evaluates agencies that operate in Europe and have proven their credibility and reliability against the ESG, rejected one ENQA-approved agency and saw three other approved agencies withdraw their applications. The Bologna evaluators observed that on the basis of the same ESG and similar review processes, different bodies reach different conclusions and this variation does not enhance the public’s faith in the regulatory process. The evaluators concluded that the ESG reviews by ENQA vary so much in their methods and processes (see also Stensaker et al. 2009) that they do not help build international trust, therefore greater attention needs to be given in the future to achieving the Bologna goal of compatible quality assurance practices (Westerheijden et al. 2010).

An earlier evaluation of a mutual recognition experiment conducted among Nordic quality assurance agencies also suggested that evaluations primarily by quality assurance professionals may limit the incentives for the development of methodologies that more effectively assure academic standards (Dill 2002). Although the recognition evaluations carried out by the quality assurance professionals revealed some variations among the respective agencies in the rigor and scientific approach of their quality assurance processes, these differences were given little weight in the recognition process and mutual acceptance of agencies appeared to trump concerns with the validity of the respective quality assurance methodologies. As a consequence all the participating agencies were recognized and the process appeared to provide little motivation for the adoption of the more demanding processes of the stronger agency.

Similarly in a series of informative papers on the best practice guidelines and quality assurance agency evaluations developed by international networks and organizations, Blackmur (2007a, b; 2008 a, b) raises a number of important challenges regarding the effectiveness of self-regulation. At both the national and global level the common answer to the question ‘who guards the guardians’ of academic quality assurance (Blackmur 2008b) has been to require public evaluation of national agencies. But these evaluations, like those in the Bologna Process, are most often designed and carried out by the agencies themselves in cooperation with associations of agency professionals and/or selected representatives of those regulated. Blackmur (2008b) argues that this type of evaluation lacks independence, fails to employ a suitably relevant and robust method of validation and generally ignores the critical issue of value for money. As suggested above this type of collegial review may provide insufficient incentives for the development of the ‘science’ of external quality assurance, which as noted in independent studies of national academic audits, subject assessments and accreditation processes, appears to exhibit substantial variations in objectivity and rigor (Dill and Beerkens 2010).
The guidelines of good practice published by international organizations and international professional networks may suffer from similar weaknesses (Blackmur 2007a, b). For example, the Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions (IHEP 2006) were developed by UNESCO in cooperation with an expert group that included commercial providers of ranking information such as the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) (now THE) and US News and World Report (USNWR). Reflecting their interests, the standards avoid addressing a number of important methodological factors in the design of more valid and reliable university rankings. These methodological points have been clearly identified by not-for-profit and scholarly organizations that produce academic rankings such as CHE in Europe and the National Academy of Sciences in the United States, as well as in research on league tables and student choice (Beerkens and Dill 2010; Dill 2009; Federkeil 2009; Dill and Soo 2005; Marginson 2009). This collective literature emphasizes that student choice is best informed by information on subject fields and academic programs, not by the commercially popular university institutional rankings that offer little positive -- if not negative (see below) -- benefit to the public interest in assuring academic standards. Further, there is a need to present ratings information as ranges rather than rankings, because the differences between the ranks in most league tables are not statistically significant, and to avoid the use of reputational surveys as a basis for rankings because it is clear that such raters have little valid knowledge of educational programs (Federkeil 2009; Ostriker and Kuh 2003). But such design considerations are not directly addressed in the Berlin Principles because ‘(W)hat could have been a restrictive set of guidelines was headed off by the ranking organisations, which argued that unrealistic principles would be ignored’ (Jobbins 2006). Thus the development of global guidelines and standards such as the Berlin Principles provides a further example of the means by which self-regulatory processes may be captured by those supposedly regulated (Laffont and Tirole 1991).

An increasingly significant institution for the governance of academic quality is national university rankings or league tables, which were initially developed by commercial publications as a means of informing student choice. At the global level, influential world rankings of universities and some subject fields such as MBA programs have now been developed by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES), now (THE), and the Financial Times. The justification for the publication of most university quality rankings is the economic argument that better informed students will be able to make more effective educational choices, that competition for these better informed students will in turn lead universities to improve academic quality and these overall efforts will increase the efficiency of the higher education system (Teixeira et al. 2004). But as Gormley and Weimer (1999) suggest, information provision is likely to influence academic standards only if quality rankings utilize measures linked with societally-valued educational outcomes, students use this information in their choice of subjects and institutions respond to student choices by improving relevant academic programs.

The collected research on national university rankings suggests instead that commercially-produced university rankings not only fail to produce the expected
efficiency benefits but likely so distort the forces of the competitive market that they encourage inefficiency (Dill and Beerkens 2010). The challenge and cost of developing valid indicators of educational outcomes are significant and commercial publications have little motivation to make such investments. Instead they enjoy substantial sales and influence among opinion leaders, high achieving students and even university personnel by focusing on the production of league tables utilizing reputational surveys, input measures such as student test scores and financial resources, and indicators of research quality, all of which have questionable validity as predictors of effective student learning (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). The students most influenced by national university rankings are those of high ambition, achievement and social class (Dill and Soo 2005), many of whom are most interested in obtaining the private benefits of higher education and therefore may be satisfied with reputational ratings rather than valid measures of societally-valued educational outcomes. While there is evidence that some universities have been motivated by the existing national academic quality rankings to improve their internal data gathering (Locke et al. 2008), since the commercial league tables are not based on any testable theory or model of university educational performance it is not clear this investment in information leads to institutional actions that actually improve the educational quality of academic programs.

The more common response by universities is to try to improve their reputation as reflected in their relative position in the rankings, by ‘gaming’ the system, ‘cream skimming’ high-achieving student applicants, increasing expensive investments in activities associated with research reputation, as well as developing more sophisticated institutional marketing (Dill and Soo 2005). The pernicious effect of this competitive pursuit of reputation, which affects all universities not just research-intensive institutions, is an increasingly costly zero-sum game which diverts resources as well as administrative and faculty attention away from the collective actions within universities necessary to actually improve student learning outcomes (Kuh and Pascarella 2004). These negative impacts of national commercial league tables have motivated the creation of a number of more valid rankings by not-for-profit groups such as the CHE in Europe and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the USA as well as by the US government, which supports the respected research doctoral rankings of the National Academy of Sciences (Dill and Beerkens 2010). It is hoped that these more valid academic rankings will better aid responsible student choice and motivate real improvements in the academic standards of universities.

The early research on the impacts of the global university rankings reaches similar conclusions as studies at the national level (King 2009; Locke et al. 2008; Marginson 2009), except that the world rankings are even more influential than national rankings on the academic choices of foreign students. The global rankings also likely influence the decisions of foreign governments supporting students who study abroad as well as the recruiting activities of international employers. Among the two major world rankings, The THES/ THE adopts the student choice rationale for its justification, suggesting that the rapidly growing global mobility of students and increasing international competition among universities requires a trustworthy, vigorous and transparent guide to the world’s universities. By contrast the researchers producing the Academic Ranking of World
Universities (ARWU) at the Shanghai Jiao Tong University wished to produce an indicator of the relative standing and progress of the Chinese university system. Although pursuing different purposes the approach of these two world league tables is quite comparable: both place the heaviest emphasis on research prestige as measured by quality of faculty, amount of university resources and publication citations. The THES/THE also includes a reputational survey, the significant limitations of which have been previously noted. For these reasons there are comparable concerns at the global level that these world university rankings may undermine the assurance of academic quality. In an effort to correct the distortive effects of the current system of global university rankings the European Commission (2009) has funded a Consortium for Higher Education and Research Performance Assessment (CHERPA) to develop a world ranking system to overcome the noted limitations of the Shanghai Jiao Tong and the THES/THE schemes.

A continuing challenge to the effective regulation of academic quality at both the national and global level is the problem of developing valid and reliable measure of educational outcomes that can both help inform student choice, and perhaps more importantly, guide academic efforts within universities to assure and improve academic standards (Dill and Beerkens 2010). At the national level surveys of the student experience have been developed in Australia, the UK and the USA as a means of academic quality assurance and are now spreading to other countries. The Australian Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) (Harris, and James 2010) and the similar UK National Student Survey, both of which are supported by the national government, provide graduates’ perceptions of teaching quality and skills learned as well as their satisfaction with their academic program. The US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Ewell 2010) asks currently enrolled students to report on experiences in their educational program known to be associated with effective learning. While generic instruments, 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. Both the Australian and UK governments also support destination surveys which provide information on the labor market outcomes of recent graduates including the nature of graduates’ employment, their average salaries and their further education. At the global level a recent comparative analysis of national quality assurance experiences by the OECD (Santiago et al. 2008a) suggests that an appropriate global standard would be public provision of data on student retention, student progression and graduate destination outcomes by subject field for all institutions of higher education.

In addition to these indicators both Australia (Graduate Skills Assessment- GSA) and the USA (Collegiate Learning Assessment – CLA) are experimenting with value-added measures of generic skills for first-level students. Great interest has been expressed also in the announced OECD (2009) attempt to create global measures of academic learning outcomes through its Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project. This project would assess learning outcomes on an international scale by creating valid measures for all cultures and languages. The AHELO feasibility study now underway is attempting to measure generic skills using an adaptation of the CLA instrument developed in the USA, discipline specific competencies in the sample fields of
Engineering and Economics, as well as indicators of the educational context. When implemented, the AHELO project would represent a voluntary form of regulation but as with the OECD PISA project, it likely would exert significant influence on the global governance of academic quality because of the direct involvement of national governments, the stature of the nations participating in the OECD, and the proven power of peer pressure among the OECD nations.

In summing up the role of information in the governance of educational quality at the national and global level, it is clear that valid and reliable information for assuring academic standards will be underprovided by the market and that the more valid academic quality information designed by not-for-profit organizations cannot be effectively produced or utilized without the intervention of government to secure necessary university cooperation. In this sense, valid and reliable information to help assure and improve academic standards at the national or global level is best understood as a pure public good which will be undersupplied and underused unless supported, subsidized, or provided by governments.

The complex web of institutions and regimes that compose the framework conditions for the global governance of academic quality has a number of strengths and weaknesses. This review suggests that while several international mechanisms and innovative efforts offer promise, the interests of states in obtaining recognition of their academic credentials, of academic quality professionals in legitimizing their agencies, of commercial rankings providers in continuing their profitable activities, and of academics in securing the reputations of their programs and universities, may limit the effectiveness of global efforts to assure and improve academic standards. What additional steps might therefore be taken to better achieve the public interest in the global governance of academic quality?

The legitimacy of the global governance of academic quality

The weaknesses and limitations of the emerging international framework for academic quality assurance outlined above raise questions about the legitimacy of these institutions and regimes. As in other areas of global governance such as trade, finance, and the environment, the ability of institutions to function effectively depends on whether they have the support of citizens, affected organizations, and ultimately of states (Buchanan and Keohane 2006). A presumptive condition for legitimacy therefore is whether international agreements possess the ongoing consent of democratic states. But state consent, while a necessary condition, is often insufficient. As noted, voluntary mutual recognition processes may help secure the reputations of the universities and academic degrees of participating nations but may do little to assure or improve academic standards overall. For this reason, truly legitimate global institutions must seek to satisfy more than the consent of the participating states. They must be designed to achieve some conception of the ‘global public interest’. How might this global public interest be defined in the case of academic quality assurance?
Critics of the legitimacy of global institutions have often argued that these arrangements must achieve in addition to the consent of the participants some standard of accountability and transparency (Buchanan and Keohane 2006). With regard to global academic quality assurance organizations transparency has most often been interpreted as requiring that they have public membership on their boards of control and/or that they provide publicly their guidelines, procedures and assessments. In turn, accountability has been interpreted as requiring that these agencies undergo regular external evaluations which also are published. However, the arcane nature of academic quality assurance procedures and language may create an information asymmetry problem in which published quality assurance guidelines and assessments are comprehensible only to insiders -- the self-interested professionals and academic constituencies and organizations directly affected by the processes. Outsiders such as citizen groups or even policymakers may have great difficulty assessing the real comparative benefits or relative gains from global quality assurance institutions and regimes. Similarly, as previously noted, the mandated external evaluations are most often carried out by professionals in other academic quality assurance agencies who thereby have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Consequently the standards applied in these evaluations may be too forgiving or low.

An additional suggested criterion for establishing legitimacy is the ‘epistemic-deliberative’ quality of international institutions (Buchanan and Keohane 2006). That is, does the institution or regime function in such a way as to facilitate principled, factually-informed deliberation about the terms of accountability? This emphasis on fair-minded, evidence-based deliberation is often associated with the legitimacy and respect earned by national and international legal tribunals such as the International Court of Justice, but the idea of rigorously established objective evidence informing public policy choices among alternative regulatory approaches is now being advanced under the concept of ‘evidence-based policy’ (Davies, Nutley and Smith 2000). An interesting example of this approach is the significant role the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) played in the approval by the US Congress of sweeping health policy reform in 2009. The CBO’s influence was based upon its non-partisan structure and demonstrated scientific expertise in ‘scoring’ the financial impacts of various regulatory alternatives.

Studies of the global governance of academic quality similarly emphasize that the degree of influence of various institutions is a function of their perceived political independence, their scientific knowledge and the compelling authority of their expertise (King 2009). As previously noted the recent increase in influence over global education policy of the OECD is attributed to its strategic shift from conducting qualitative evaluations of individual countries to developing quantitative-based comparative studies such as the PISA Project and comparative education indicators such as the publication Education at a Glance (Martens 2007). The OECD is becoming a more respected global governance institution because its legitimacy rests upon the objective scientific processes of its analyses and the careful deliberations of its expert researchers. Correspondingly the academic rankings with the greatest legitimacy are those developed by institutions of civil society such as the CHE in Germany or the National Research Council in the USA, which have systematically applied relevant research and scholarly methods to the design
and development of more valid and reliable league tables (Dill 2009). Policy analyses of external quality assurance processes such as academic audits, subject assessments and accreditation processes similarly suggest that the most influential on assuring and improving academic standards have been those such as the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) in the USA, the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) and the General Medical Council in the UK, which have developed rigorous evaluation methodologies that conform to social scientific standards of evidence (Dill and Beerkens 2010).

This perspective suggests some possible directions for improving the effectiveness of the emerging global governance of academic quality. Consistent with the trend toward evidence-based policy deliberation noted above, many nations have established ‘supreme audit’ agencies (INTOSAI 2006) to evaluate the efficacy of various regulatory institutions and regimes. National examples include the Government Accountability Office in the USA, the Australian National Audit Office, the German Federal Audit Office and the United Kingdom National Audit Office. While initially created to conduct financial audits of government organizations and agencies these institutions over time have also developed the capacity to carry out independent, objective, evidence-based evaluations of the effectiveness of public agencies and policies. Since all regulatory activities, including governmental and non-governmental mechanisms for governing academic quality, produce both positive and negative impacts the ability to assess objectively the social benefits and associated social costs of regulatory laws, agencies, guidelines and information is important to both the public and to the universities who will be directly affected. At the national level therefore the public interest in effective and efficient regulation of academic quality in the university sector is likely to be better served if existing guidelines, standards, as well as national agencies are publicly evaluated by established and respected national evaluation or audit agencies. The public and policymakers will thereby be provided with more truly independent, objective, evidence-based and expert assessments of the extent to which current institutions and regimes for academic quality assure or improve academic standards and academic quality professionals will gain greater insights on means of improving their methodologies and practices. Similarly transnational institutions and regimes for the governance of academic quality such as ENQA, ESG and EQR or guidelines and standards produced by global level organizations such as UNESCO and INQAAHE should be subject to external evaluations, not only by academic quality assurance professionals, but by truly independent international organizations such as the European Court of Auditors, the OECD or the World Bank which possess the expertise to better assess the social benefits and social costs of these regulatory approaches.

Conclusion

Universities are organizations dedicated to gathering, comprehending and conveying information and knowledge to students and to the larger society. They are also institutions that are particularly attentive and responsive to valid information about their own academic performance, quality and reputation. The emergence of a truly global

Background paper

PPAQ Public Policy for Academic Quality Research Program
academic industry over the last decades warrants the development of international institutions and regimes for governing academic quality. Given the known complexities of effectively measuring higher education learning outcomes and of assuring academic standards, regulatory processes that reflect the universal academic values of objectivity, rigor and a scientific approach to understanding are most likely to be deemed legitimate by society and the universities as well as to best protect academic quality.

Bibliography


James, R., Baldwin, G. and McInnis, C. (1999), Which University?: The Factors Influencing the Choices of Prospective Undergraduates, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service


King, R. (2009), Governing Universities Globally: Organizations, Regulation and Rankings, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar


Kuh, G. and Pascarella, E. (2004), ‘What does institutional selectivity tell us about educational quality?’, Change, 36(5), 52-8


OECD (2004), Internationalization and Trade in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges, Paris: OECD


