

Quality Assurance and Equity – A CIQG Discussion at the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022)

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Introduction: Quality Assurance and the DEI Agenda

Across the world, higher education is recognized as being beneficial to individuals, communities, nations, and global society (DMI, 2018). It contributes to the prosperity of nations, determines competitiveness of economies, and drives innovation for the benefit of all. Arguably, the successful evolution of the global higher education system is primarily due to concerted efforts to ensure that higher education institutions (HEIs) maintain a certain level of quality that guarantees students' success beyond graduation from HEIs. Furthermore, the continuous and successful preparation of graduates from HEIs is manifested in the impact that those graduates make on the communities that they serve, and ultimately, on the world.

The Agency for Science and Higher Education describes 'Quality Assurance' (QA) as,

“An all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions, or programmes.” (Agency for Science and Higher Education, n.d.)

For this reason, quality assurance agencies partner with HEIs and their constituents *continuously*, for the ultimate betterment of a global society – a society that is diverse, intricate, and inter-dependent.

There are those who would relegate the necessity for discussion of DEI matters to the United States of America specifically, and to North America more generally. Majmudar and Kymal (2020) argue that,

“Unfortunately, structural inequality and bias are global phenomena.”

With this realization, the academy has begun to embrace the intrinsic value of DEI, and its essential role in, serving an increasingly diverse population. This recognition has led to numerous DEI initiatives purposed to (1) educate larger numbers of diverse people,

(2) provide them with equitable access to education, and (3) include their talents in the educational enterprise. The challenge is that many proponents for the more traditional construct of the academy often question the feasibility of maintaining *quality* with the growing inclusion of traditionally underrepresented, and underserved peoples. In contrast, proponents of DEI recognize and advocate for an enhanced understanding of “quality”, one that provides space for the development of talent in the traditionally excluded.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a non-profit, non-governmental, “... national advocate and institutional voice for academic quality through accreditation ...,” (CHEA, 2022), has declared its support for environments that appreciate and value diversity of “... its institutions of higher education, accreditors, board and staff, and all who are served by these group.” Moreover, CHEA states,

“CHEA’s commitment to diversity, equity and inclusiveness guides its mission and its support for equitable treatment for institutions of higher education, families and students

CHEA’s commitment to higher education, families, students, and other communities is grounded in the assurance of academic quality. We believe that the rich values of diversity, equity and inclusion are inextricably linked to quality assurance in higher education. Additionally, CHEA affirms that diversity, equity, and inclusion contribute to student success; and, that student success contributes to a better, healthier, and more enlightened, progressive society.” (CHEA, 2022)

Concomitantly, CHEA’s international arm, the CHEA International Quality Group (CIQG), functions with the same appreciation for DEI. Nevertheless, members of the CIQG recognize that not all quality assurance agencies across the globe may believe or operate with the same mindset.

The WHEC Presentation

The panelists explained that survey questions were developed by an ad hoc research team made of active members of the CIQG Advisory Council. These questions were reviewed by the entire Council for validity of purpose and clarity of formulation. The survey was administered electronically from January 3 through February 22, 2022, with the assistance of CIQG Advisory Council members from diverse geographical regions outside of the United States (e.g., Europe, Africa, Middle East, Asia), who reached out

to their networks to stimulate interest in the survey. Survey responses were captured by an automated survey tool, TypeForm™.

Using the working definition of “equity” as:

“The application of fairness in policies and practices associated with inclusion from under-represented student populations and their academic success,”

the survey asked four main questions:

1. Equity in Quality Assurance: Is equity an essential aspect of your organization’s current policies, standards, and or practices?
2. Equity Focus Groups: Identify which groups of under-represented students are primary considerations when addressing equity decisions by your quality assurance organization.
3. Rationale for taking equity into consideration: Did your quality assurance organization incorporate equity into your criteria and processes because of a national mandate?
4. Delivery Modalities: Are the equity policies, standards and practices applied to various types of instructional modalities (for example, on-campus /online /hybrid / microcredentials)?

In total, 55 QA agencies from 36 countries across the world responded to the survey (Table 1). South Asia was the only region that was not represented among the respondents.

Table 1 – Number of Countries by Broad Regions

Region	Countries
East Asia	2
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	5
Latin America	3
Middle East & North Africa	9
North America	2

Sub-Saharan Africa	4
Western Europe	11

The inclusion of DEI criteria was reported in 31 of the surveyed nations, confirming the positive evolution among QA agencies (Table 2).

Table 2 – Number of QA Agencies Using DEI Criteria

Region	Agencies with DEI
East Asia	2 of 2
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	4 of 5
Latin America	3 of 3
Middle East & North Africa	8 of 9
Sub-Saharan Africa	4 of 4
Western Europe	10 of 11

While many respondents did not provide detailed answers to all four questions raised, the survey provided useful information. In terms of equity target groups, students with disabilities were the most frequently referenced group, in practically all regions. The target group recognized as “Low income and Rural students” was referenced with the second highest frequency, especially in Africa, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Latin America, and Western Europe. Female students were mentioned in three regions, namely Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and Western Europe. Finally, a small group of respondents mentioned members of ethnic minorities and refugees.

Based on the responses received, it was not possible to determine any clear pattern that explained why a growing number of QA agencies have started to introduce DEI dimensions in their standards and criteria. Nevertheless, in a few African cases, it appeared that the QA agency followed a national mandate introduced as part of higher education policy or legislation. In Europe, national QA agencies have been following the European QA guidelines set up by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education ([ENQA](#)), as well as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals ([SDG](#)) agenda. The survey also indicated that, when they exist, DEI criteria apply to all delivery modalities (face-to-face, online, hybrid, microcredentials).

A few other interesting facts came out of the survey responses. Several agencies reported that they look at the proportion of females in university leadership positions as part of their QA role. Other agencies also consider “added-value” as a way of measuring the learning experience of students from equity target groups.

Generally, the survey results suggest that the focus of QA agencies is still on undergraduate education, and that hardly any consideration is given to the role of higher education institutions’ support of lifelong learning. There was no indication either that QA agencies look at the impact of curriculum content and pedagogical approaches on equity and inclusion.

Interestingly, several countries assume that because discrimination is prohibited by law, there is no need to consider DEI criteria in quality assurance. Also, a few QA agencies understood “equity” as referring to the application of similar standards to all higher education institutions, or not discriminating against any person when selecting reviewers (especially in terms of gender balance).

Audience Response to the CHEA / CIQG Session

The WHEC audience of about 50 participants responded very positively to the presentation and made useful comments with respect to the survey results. While a few of them shared examples of recent efforts to take the DEI agenda into consideration in their respective countries, the focus on the conversation was on the most effective ways of mainstreaming this new dimension into the quality assurance culture. A few participants reflected on the data limitations that many countries face in collecting data to document existing disparities. Unlike cases such as Australia, the United Kingdom or the United States where there is a long tradition of documenting inequalities in higher education, in many countries the data are just not available or there may be legal constraints and philosophical considerations undermining the availability of relevant information.

Conclusion: DEI, an Unfinished Agenda for QA

The diversity of responses to the survey show that DEI is not yet a sufficiently high priority in the higher education policy agenda of many countries. At the same time, the conversation during the session showed that there seems to be a growing consensus about the legitimate mandate that quality assurance agencies have in integrating DEI considerations in their evaluation and quality enhancement activities. It is however clear

that the degree of recognition and acceptance of this new mandate varies considerably across countries and cultural settings.

Based on the results of the survey, it is desirable that Quality Assurance organizations active on the international scene, such as INQAAHE, work proactively with other relevant stakeholders (including higher education providers) to formulate a clear definition of what DEI should mean for QA externally and internally. This would include the need to define “target equity groups” that are relevant to specific country contexts. It is also important that policy makers at the national level involve QA agencies more systematically in helping to think about the role that those agencies can play in promoting and supporting DEI policies.

Another implication of the findings of the survey is that QA agencies could focus more systematically on how the curriculum and pedagogy can be more inclusive and welcoming for students from traditionally under-represented groups. More research is also needed to determine how DEI is delivered, and how related policies impact student and graduate success.

A final interesting question arising from this conversation about the evolving mandate of quality assurance agencies is whether accreditation should become a driver of change, or whether it changes in response to the transformation of higher education institutions themselves. In any event, organizations like CHEA and platforms like CIQG are well placed to lead the debate and guide quality assurance agencies throughout the world as they seek to develop adequate methodologies to consider DEI elements for a more comprehensive evaluation and accreditation exercise.

Citations

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