The US Council for Higher Education Accreditation International Quality Group: Ten Years Later

by

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On September 13, 2012, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) Chair, David Carter and President, Judith Eaton announced the establishing of the CHEA International Quality Group (CIQG) as an *international affiliate* of CHEA. As a continuation of a more informal International Commission, CIQG was to grow into an assembly/body of higher education experts from across the globe, committed to the promotion of quality higher education internationally. CIQG members include quality assurance agencies of post-secondary institutions that are recognized by their government (or any other official authority), higher education associations, government agencies, higher education consultants, and individuals who are vested in and committed to quality assurance in higher education. CIQG members are poised to collaborate for the purpose of addressing matters which may enhance, or compromise, quality assurance in higher education, worldwide[1].

Ten years later, we look back at the highlights of CIQG's activities over these ten years through annual meetings, international projects, research and publications including its policy briefs and electronic newsletter *Quality International*. Although it is difficult to give credit to all CIQG's activities that accompanied the unprecedented transformations of higher education in the past decade, this article will focus on five major developments: internationalization; diversification and alternative providers; academic integrity and academic corruption; digitization; and diversity, equity and inclusiveness.

Internationalization of Quality Assurance

The first decade of the millennium was marked by the internationalization of quality assurance as demonstrated by the debates and Communiqué of UNESCO's second World Conference on Higher Education (Paris, 2009). A global quality assurance model emerged to respond to the massification of higher education and to the diversification of provision.

One of the backbones of this development was the creation of higher education areas or spaces which gave a prominent role to quality assurance. A unique regional reform of higher education, spanning across almost 50 European Member States, the Bologna Process, triggered by the signature of the Bologna Declaration in 1999[2]

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[1] (https://www.chea.org)

[2] One year before the declaration in 1999, education ministers Claude Allègre (France), Jürgen Rüttgers (Germany), Luigi Berlinguer (Italy) and Baroness Blackstone (UK) signed the Sorbonne

gave a prominent place to quality assurance. This process inspired similar developments in other regions of the world.

Although a certain diversity of approaches and implementation modalities chosen by countries around the world are noted, several analysts have concluded on the emergence of a global model. Wells (2014) notes the convergence in approaches to QA. He states that QA practitioners are responding to a similar model of 'good practices' while implementation of these practices varies, in the diversified higher education landscape. And Salmi (2015) calls this a "quiet quality assurance revolution".

One of the early annual meetings of the CIQG featured a lively debate whether a single set of quality standards was needed in a rapidly changing higher education world? Would it benefit the internationalization of quality assurance in a constructive way? Benefits of a set of single standards were highlighted as an international benchmark for quality, facilitating international comparisons and portability of degrees and quality assurance of cross-border higher education. On the other hand, in order to develop such standards, a number of difficult challenges would need to be addressed: how to describe quality, how to achieve consensus in order for the standards to be trustworthy and in which way the effectiveness of the standards are to be judged. Finally, who could be entrusted to elaborate such standards? An acceptable approach would be to begin with designing a set of guiding principles for quality, rather than standards, with a focus on common expectations and a shared understanding of quality (MacGregor, 2014; CHEA/CIQG, 2014).

Stemming from this debate, based on the assumption that certain fundamental principles underpin all forms of higher education, no matter what the curricula or delivery mode, *Seven International Quality Principles* were articulated in 2015 by CHEA/CIQG as presented below.

T**he CHEA/CIQG Seven International Quality Principles**

1. *Quality and higher education providers:* Assuring and achieving quality in higher education is the primary responsibility of higher education providers and their staff.
2. *Quality and students:* The education provided to students must always be of high quality whatever the learning outcomes pursued.
3. *Quality and society:* The quality of higher education provision is judged by how well it meets the needs of society, engenders public confidence and sustains public trust.
4. *Quality and government:* Governments have a role in encouraging and supporting quality higher education.
5. *Quality and accountability:* It is the responsibility of higher education providers and quality assurance and accreditation bodies to sustain a strong commitment to accountability and provide regular evidence of quality.
6. *Quality and the role of quality assurance and accreditation bodies:* Quality assurance and accreditation bodies, working with higher education providers

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declaration in Paris in 1998, committing themselves to "harmonising the architecture of the European Higher Education system".[3] The Bologna Process has 49 participating countries.

and their leadership, staff and students, are responsible for the implementation of processes, tools, benchmarks and measures of learning outcomes that help to create a shared understanding of quality.

7. *Quality and change:* Quality higher education needs to be flexible, creative and innovative; developing and evolving to meet students' needs, to justify the needs of society and to maintain diversity.

The Seven Quality Principles were a first significant step in internationalizing the CIQG. They were translated from the English original into seven languages (Arabic, Chines, French, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish). In addition, a publication *The CIQG International Quality Principles: Toward a Shared Understanding of Quality* presented essays on each principle authored by a distinguished group of higher education and quality assurance experts (Uvalic-Trumbic, ed. 2015).

Based on the Principles, a Memorandum of Affiliation was put forward and signed by 70 organizations to date.

Finally, CHEA/CIQG established a CIQG Quality Award in 2018 to recognize outstanding performance of higher education providers in meeting the CHEA/CIQG International Quality Principles[3].

Two principles particularly resonate. First, principle 1 states that "assuring and achieving quality in higher education is the primary responsibility of higher education providers and their staff". This applies both to face-to face and online provision of higher education and is particularly relevant for the diversification of higher education providers. Second, quality assurance will have to adapt and become more flexible and creative – as stated in principle 7 - to keep abreast with the dynamic diversification of higher education provision as it opens up in multiple ways and promotes equitable access to greater number of learners.

The issuing of the Seven Quality Principles coincided with another significant document that will impact developments in higher education and quality, the 17 UN 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Unlike the 2005 Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs acknowledge higher education as an important driver of societal and economic development. SDG 4 aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong opportunities for all". The target of SDG 4.3 is to ensure by 2030 equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.

Quality assurance and alternative providers

Despite the acceptance of a global model of quality assurance and the diversity of adapting the model to regional and national realities, needs and demands, there was growing criticism over time that quality assurance processes were time-consuming for

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[3] (https://www.chea.org/announcing-ciqg-quality-award-and-other-quality-assurance-related-issues)

both the HEIs and the QA agency as well as overly costly without a clear demonstration of benefits, especially for students (Uvalic-Trumbic & Martin, 2021).

A shift of paradigm in external QA became a clearer focus on student-centered learning, based on the assumption that the student (learner) is at the heart of the teaching and learning process which is particularly significant for a greater diversity of learners, responding to the SDG 4 directions.

The assessment of learning outcomes and the closely related national qualifications frameworks as a means of quality assurance gained a central place in Europe, as a core of the Bologna process and are integrated into the 2015 European Standards and Guidelines [4]. A number of countries around the world have introduced student learning outcomes in their QA approaches and they are relevant for a range of alternative and new providers.

A great diversity of alternative, non-traditional or post-traditional providers emerged. Private higher education, online and distance learning, cross-border education, shorter courses, competency-based education and a range of increasingly accepted flexible learning pathways are some examples of this diversification. This in turn challenged traditional approaches to quality assurance.

CIQG developed a new tool as a form of external review of the quality of alternative/innovative providers of higher education that are not part of the traditional higher education systems or quality assurance frameworks. The Quality Platform was designed in 2013 as a tool to measure learning outcomes from shorter online courses such as MOOCs and other alternative providers. The Platform is designed as a response to an emerging new sector of higher education now available alongside the provision of traditional colleges and universities. The primary intent of the Quality Platform is to assure and improve quality as this sector develops and serves more and more students. It is an outcomes-based review using standards established by the Platform, a self-review by the provider, an external review and a site visit of a team of experts. The acceptance of the report by CHEA/CIQG is the basis for the award of the Quality Platform Provider Certificate.

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[4] The EHEA Bucharest Communique (2012) reinforced this approach by the Ministers' commitment:

> "To consolidate the EHEA, meaningful implementation of learning outcomes is needed. The development, understanding and practical use of learning outcomes is crucial to the success of ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance – all of which are interdependent."

The **CHEA/CIQG Quality Platform** is based on four simple standards summarized as follows:

1. Learning outcomes are articulated and achieved.
   The provider organizes its work, determines the content of offerings and sets expectations of rigor based on anticipated and actual results for students who enroll: information about gain in skills, competencies or other attributes resulting from a learning experience.

2. Learning outcomes meet postsecondary expectations
   The provider demonstrates that the articulated and achieved student learning outcomes are consistent with expectations of student learning at degree-granting colleges and universities.

3. Curricula provide opportunities for successful transfer of credit
   For the provider's offerings intended to be used for credit or credentialing at a college or university, the provider: 1) Builds opportunity for student progression beyond its offerings as part of its curriculum development; 2) Organizes offerings into a coherent learning experience that can be sustained across multiple providers of higher education.

4. Transparency is maintained and comparability is established:
   The provider develops and provides reliable, easily accessible and readily understandable information to the public, at least annually, about its performance: 1) An aggregate description of the student learning outcomes that are achieved; 2) The results of comparisons of performance among similar types of non-institutional providers; 3) An aggregate description of the uses of the offerings to students, for example, advancing toward an educational goal, employment.

The Quality Platform was pilot-tested in 2015 with the DeTao Masters Academy in Shanghai, China. DeTao is a private company with the aim of developing innovative educational programs, which go beyond conventional educational approaches and are not part of the traditional higher education system in China. In 2016, the Quality Platform was also included in the US Department of Education Educational pilot program to accelerate and evaluate innovation through partnerships between colleges and universities and non-traditional providers. It is being applied to assess the partnership between the Dallas County Community College District and StraighterLine, a U.S. company that offers online higher education courses at low cost[5].

Quality assurance and Digital Credentials

Within the shift of focus to student-centered learning, student learning outcomes and development of skills and competences, an increase in shorter courses is on the rise as they are better adapted to acquiring skills and competences needed by the labour

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[5] https://www.chea.org/chea-quality-platform-serve-quality-assurance-entity-equip-program-and-other-accreditation-related

market (Van Damme, 2018). Such courses, often provided through the internet as massive open online courses (MOOCs) have spread, sometimes lead to certificates, more widely labelled as 'microcredentials'. This global trend is also in line with the targets of SDG 4.

The lack of reliable quality assurance systems for digital credentialing is recognized on the global level as a serious threat to their credibility in addition to setting constrains on the flexibility of traditional degrees (UNESCO, 2018).

Some raise the issue whether the traditional norms of quality assurance and accreditation can be effective for shorter term learning experiences such as microcredentials (van der Hijden 2019). Others question whether quality assurance has become obsolete in the digital age (Keevey, 2019). To explore approaches and propose possible innovative ways, CHEA/CIQG convened an expert group in 2019 on quality assurance and digitization.

Digitization of credentials: Quality of Shorter Term Educational Experiences

An expert group convened by CHEA/CIQG, proposed nine quality review types that could be adapted for digital credentials for shorter term educational experiences:

- self-assessment;

- peer-review;

- benchmarking;

- external evaluation and audits;

- provider appreciation;

- employer appreciation;

- professional appreciation;

- crowd assessment and

- comparative assessment of learning outcomes.

The 2014 CHEA/CIQG Quality Platform, adapted to digital credentials in 2018, was put forward as an alternative form of quality review that could play a pivotal role.

Quality in a time of emergency: disruption during the Covid-19 pandemic

When the COVID-19 pandemic was announced at the beginning of 2020, most HEIs were faced with difficult choices. The news that Cambridge University declared it would go online for the rest of the year caused shock and dismay but soon many HEIs around the world followed this example. Some opted for blended dual-mode learning, offering on-site teaching for laboratory work, difficult to conduct online. But most HEIs were forced to abruptly go online, without much preparation or training, or combined classroom teaching with remote learning. QA procedures had to adapt to this new reality. Reviews were either postponed or became virtual.

During Spring 2020, a flurry of webinars were organised to examine challenges, novel practices and new opportunities for quality assurance in a time of disruption during a major emergency.

In addition to other organizations (EQAF, INQAAHE, UNESCO to mention just a few), CHEA/CIQG conducted a series of webinars in 2020 looking at developments in the coming academic year and its impact on quality . In addition, an international virtual session at the 2021 CHEA Annual Conference addressed the issue further, looking at how to frame international higher education and quality assurance for the future, exploring virtual quality assurance, the role of universities in the pandemic, social unrest and equity and what impact will mainstreaming remote learning have in the future.

The CHEA/CIQG discussions demonstrated that we were in a formative period. Certain standards were being developed but it became clear that long-term strategies were needed, not just damage-control adaptations before going back to business as usual. The digital divide was highlighted as a significant obstacle to inclusiveness and equitable access to learning in emergency situations. In countries like India, for instance, mobile phones provided better opportunities for learning than the internet.

To ensure better quality in remote learning, in addition to adequate technology, a key element is effective pedagogy. In African higher education systems, there is an urgent need to build human and institutional capacity to deliver quality online education. In the same continent, a lack of training was noted with both students and faculty not trained adequately in online learning and teaching, a deficiency shared by many HEIs around the world. External and internal quality assurance in the future must include institutional ICT and ODL capacity in all HEIs.[6]

The CHEA/CIQG discussions concluded that challenges faced during the 2020-2021 disruption can offer a new opportunity for QA to be more open to innovation and change. It may well develop lighter approaches which will be less process-oriented, more efficient and will increasingly use the potential of online tools.

Quality and Academic Integrity

A review of CIQG's activities over the past ten years would not be complete without mentioning its work devoted to promoting academic integrity and combatting academic corruption. Although, historically the risk of corrupt practices has not been a significant feature of either external or internal quality assurance, the increasing frequency of press reports on corrupt practices in higher education in the past decade has put the issue of academic corruption in the forefront of discussion and concern in the academic and quality assurance communities.

Promoting academic integrity and fighting academic corruption has further been exacerbated by the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and online learning. As reported by the press, researchers in the United Kingdom are warning of an alarming rise in cheating in universities since the pandemic started, essay mills and contract cheating being the most prominent scourge manifested that may affect academic integrity beyond repair.[7]

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[6] https://www.chea.org/chea-podcasts-and-webinars
[7] The Guardian, February 14, 2021

At international level, building on the previous work CHEA and UNESCO did on Degree Mills (2009), CHEA/CIQG joined forces with the International Institute for Educational Planning of UNESCO to convene an international expert group to review this threat in March 2016. Its Advisory Statement noted that: 'dishonest practices are undermining the quality and credibility of higher education around the world' (CHEA/UNESCO, 2016).

As an outcome of an international working group composed of experts from all world regions, convened in Washington, DC in March 2016, an *Advisory Statement for Effective International Practice, Combatting Corruption and Enhancing Integrity: A Contemporary Challenge for the Quality and Credibility of Higher Education* was issued in July 2016 (Daniel, 2016).

The Advisory Statement identifies the main stakeholders that can take preventive measures to combat academic corruption and offers a matrix with examples for each group.

The CHEA/CIQG/UNESCO/IIEP Advisory Statement for Effective International Practice, Combatting Corruption and Enhancing Integrity

a) Identifies the following stakeholders:

- governments;
- quality assurance agencies;
- higher education institutions;
- faculty and staff, students; m
- press/civil society;
- employers and professional bodies

b) Offers a matrix giving examples of effective preventive actions that each of the stakeholders could use to diminish academic corruption. Three among these seven stakeholders are singled out: students, as possible perpetrators but also vital allies in fighting corruption; academics as key players in preventing corruption within the institution and the press and civil society and their role in exposing and discouraging corruption.

c) Gives examples of effective practice that cover: the regulation of higher education systems; the teaching role of higher education institutions; student admissions and recruitment; student assessment; credentials and qualifications; research theses and publications; and public awareness.

Quality Assurance is central to the battle against corruption, both through Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) by developing a robust internal quality culture at institutional level and through External Quality Assurance (EQA) as a support to IQA. Unfortunately, academic corruption is rarely a focus of EQA at present. Enhancing the credibility of higher education requires concerted action by all stakeholders.

Building on the Advisory Statement, CHEA/CIQG commissioned a global study about actions and responses of accreditation and quality assurance bodies to address different forms of corruption in higher education (Glendinning et al, 2019).

The study concluded that the activities of QA bodies are quite limited around the world, with some exceptions of good practice. It is clear that this is one of the areas that quality assurance in its new developments should take into account to move forward.

Quality assurance: Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness

In 2022, CHEA issued a Statement on Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness:

"… 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."[8]

In order to identify the role of quality assurance and accreditation in assessing elements of diversity, equity and inclusiveness in external reviews, CHEA/CIQG conducted a global survey the results of which were presented at the UNESCO 3rd World Conference on Higher Education at a session moderated by CHEA President, Cynthia Jackson Hammond (Barcelona, 2022).

The results of the Survey demonstrated that there was no clear pattern to explain why QA agencies are starting to introduce DEI dimensions in their standards and criteria. In this respect, notable exceptions come from Africa and Western Europe (due to national mandate through policy and/or legislation, European Standards and Guidelines, the SDG agenda). When in place, DEI criteria apply to all delivery modalities (face-to-face, online, hybrid, microcredentials).

The diversity of responses show that DEI is not yet a high priority in the higher education policy agenda of many countries. Several countries assume that because discrimination is prohibited by law, there is no need to consider DEI criteria in quality assurance. Several 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 gender balance).

Diversity, equity and inclusiveness in QA: Suggestions

In order to move forward and promote inclusion of DEI in QA processes, CHEA/CIQG put forward the following suggestions:

- Quality Assurance (QA) organizations (e.g., INQAAHE) need to work with other relevant stakeholders (including higher education providers) to formulate a clear definition of what DEI means for QA (internally and externally). This would include the need to define "target equity groups" that are relevant to specific country contexts.
- National authorities could involve QA agencies in helping to think about the role of those agencies in promoting / supporting DEI policies.
- QA agencies need to focus more systematically on how the curriculum and pedagogy can be more inclusive and welcoming for students from traditionally under-represented groups.

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[8] Presentation at the 3rd World Conference on Higher Education

> ▪ More research is needed to determine how DEI is delivered, and how related policies impact student and graduate success.

Conclusion

This paper tried to showcase some of the most prominent activities of CIQG over the ten years of its existence (2012-2022). These activities focused on the way quality assurance and accreditation have evolved in an effort to adapt to change by addressing transformations in higher education globally. These included but were not limited to:

 a) Internationalization, through the development and promotion of the CHEA Quality Principles;

b) Diversification and alternative providers through the development and piloting of the Quality Platform;

c) Promoting academic integrity and combatting academic corruption through a Statement and a Global Survey of the role of QA bodies in this area;

d) Digitization through a report proposing approaches to digital credentialing and a policy brief;

e) Diversity, equity and inclusiveness and its greater inclusion in QA processes through a Global Survey and suggested activities for the future.

In addition, CHEA/CIQG responded to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on higher education and quality through topical webinars, podcasts and policy papers.

All activities, articles, research results, publications and annual conference presentations reviewed above are available on CHEA"s website: https://www.chea.org.

We look forward to CHEA/CIQG's leadership in the years to come.

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