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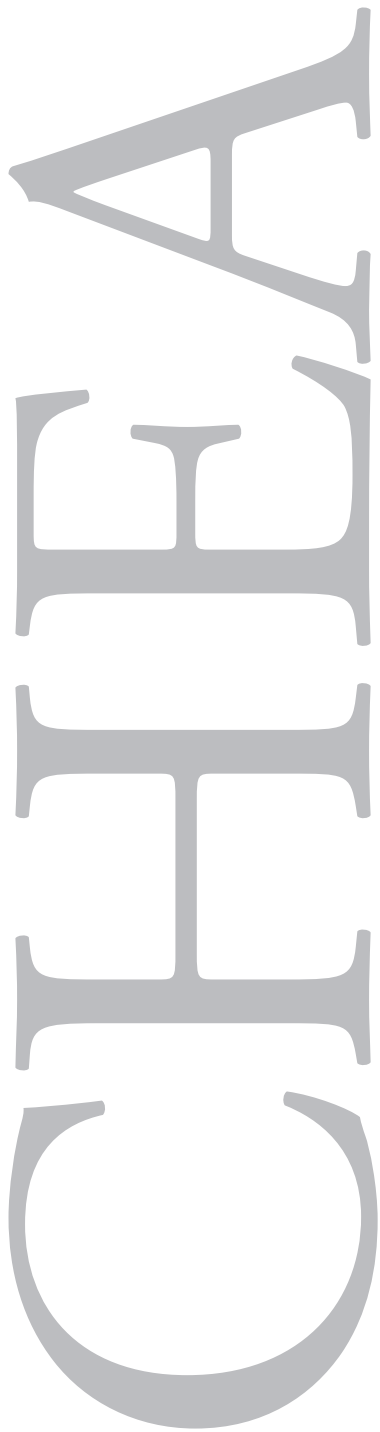
Internationalizing Quality Assurance in Higher Education

John C. Petersen



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Internationalizing Quality Assurance in Higher Education

by John C. Petersen

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Acknowledgments

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Overview

This paper examines the recent rapid growth of quality assurance practices overseas; explores forces behind the growth of the external assessment movement; considers the range of practices employed; identifies related issues; and discusses implications for American institutions and their accrediting organizations.

The recent expansion of higher education worldwide has resulted in growing concern about quality and external review. Nations where higher education was available only to society's few are finding that they must educate and train much larger proportions of their populations in order to compete in today's global, technological market. Education only for the few is no longer economically feasible or politically defensible. And as increasing numbers of people pursue higher education, they too are expressing concern about its quality and affordability.

Traditions of university autonomy aside, it is inevitable that governments that underwrite the costs of education should demand some sort of assurance that their money—public treasure—is being well spent. Within the academy itself, the trend toward higher education for larger and larger numbers of students has heightened concern about the quality of graduates. Quality thus is a concern not only of governments, but also of the general public and the academy.

Human enterprise becomes more international in character with each passing day. Communications technology has enabled business and industry to cross international borders; the same technology has eased the task of educating across international borders. Today, higher education—students, graduates, and their employers, institutions, and learning resources—crosses borders as never before. Historic assumptions about quality assurance are becoming less acceptable. Unrestrained distribution of products labeled "higher education" may pave the way for substandard and fraudulent purveyors of degrees and may lure "export" programs that are inferior to domestic institutional offerings.

For all of these reasons, it is not surprising that an international network has arisen to encourage and support the sharing of information about quality assurance policies and practices for higher education. This has contributed to an apparent convergence in practice and broad use of a model involving an external agency, self-study, independent review by outside experts, and publication of a report of findings. Overseas practices tend to be more public than those in the United States, evaluation tends to focus more on programs than institutions, and comparisons are frequently published. Students and employers also are commonly involved in evaluation efforts.

For nearly a century, the quality of American higher education has been assured by a decentralized system of voluntary accrediting agencies organized by profession or geography. In stark contrast, overseas interest in quality assurance is relatively new. Mobility of individuals and common markets motivate universities to demonstrate that they meet "international standards," with the result that external evaluation systems have become increasingly important. Many countries also have become concerned about the quality of higher education being "imported" and "exported."

Quality assurance in American higher education institutions and programs has been politely addressed by the collegial processes of institutional

and professional accreditation—external quality reviews involving voluntary self-study and peer review. Accreditation organizations are creatures of the institutional—not the governmental—community. The state and federal governments' occasional efforts to assess institutions' and programs' effectiveness are considered to be inappropriate, based on limited information and sometimes political in nature. The American accrediting system is unique in the world in that its organizations exercise broad authority without any explicit grant of power from government.

Factors Contributing to the Emergence of Quality Assurance Systems

Formal methods of institutional and programmatic review now exist in almost all nations with higher education systems. Universities operate in a competitive international environment. If transfer of credit and acceptance of degrees among institutions are to be sustained, then institutions must establish a basis for reciprocity—particularly as credit-based systems expand throughout the world.

European Community members now require some indications of comparability in higher education. Developing nations and societies with emerging higher education systems must prove that their institutions meet international standards.

Demonstrating the value of public investment. Given pressures to fund higher education as against other government agencies and services, current arrangements may not survive for long. A common practice at European universities has been to engage external examiners on a program-by-program basis. Self-accreditation, where an institution is not subject to external evaluation of any kind, has been a practice as well. It is becoming good public policy to provide for systematic periodic review to assure that institutions are meeting public policy objectives and that expenditures of public treasure are justified.

Expanding impact of the market. A visible trend in the United States—and to a growing extent elsewhere—is away from public policy control toward market control. Quality is no longer the exclusive concern of academics and accreditors; increasingly, it is defined by the consumer.

The opportunities offered by technology. Technology has made possible the competitive marketing of instruction almost anywhere, anytime, and through various means. In the United States, innovations in educational delivery, such as distance learning, television, credit for prior learning, and other nontraditional means, have been looked at askance, in part because diploma mills have been among the first to embrace them. But such delivery is increasingly common, and some members of the much challenged for-profit sector have become highly successful. Historic distinctions among public, independent nonprofit, and private for-profit institutions are breaking down.

The influence of management and business. Quality assurance and improvement have become dominant themes of management and business-oriented literature, and the suggestion is frequently made that experience in those fields should be applied to education. Enrollment and financial pressures raise questions of efficiency and accountability, and this is true not only in the United States, but in all nations with advanced or even developing higher education systems. Virtually everywhere, quality assurance movements are driven by concerns about expanding access and value for money.

International Quality Assurance

External Evaluation Systems

Europe: Some General Comments

There is a clear trend away from the old models of ministry-controlled higher education toward decentralization and institutional autonomy. Yet the price of autonomy is accountability. Frazer (1997), recognizing abundant diversity of practice, describes a four-stage evaluation model consisting of:

- a coordinating agency;
- a self-study submitted to the agency;
- an on-site peer review visit; and
- a final report.

Four-stage external evaluation systems are becoming the dominant model in some parts of Europe. More advanced systems may involve surveys of students, alumni, and employers of graduates, as well as formal follow-up procedures. The Danish Evaluation Centre, for example, formally involves students, alumni, and employers of graduates. Indeed, the national external evaluation agencies, particularly within the European Community, appear to be moving toward a similar—if not common—evaluation system.

Much of the widespread activity associated with formal external evaluation of higher education in Europe is taking place through newly-established agencies (Frazer, 1997; European Commission, 1998). Institutions and external evaluation agencies vary considerably in terms of the degree of autonomy they enjoy. They vary, too, in terms of experience, resources, and authority and thus make use of a range of evaluation processes. Denmark, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand have well-established systems. They devote significant financial and staff resources to external evaluation and have strong policies and practices in place.

Other national agencies are still in the process of establishing policy structures and evaluation criteria and determining the long-range consequences of their activities. Almost all of the international higher education community's external evaluation agencies have been established since the mid-1980s; the majority have been created within the past ten years. Several are quite new and have only limited experience and resources. Some leaders of highly-regarded institutions have questioned the application of a similar set of tools and standards to establish threshold accreditation (minimal compliance with standards) for new or marginal institutions and periodic reviews for their own institutions. The use of accreditation to both certify quality and assist in improvement requires that agencies strike a delicate balance.

Rigorous and comprehensive evaluation systems are costly. The 1998 budget of the Danish Evaluation Centre was 13 million Danish Kroner (almost U.S. $2 million) for a nation of 5 million citizens. The first round of French evaluations (ten-year cycle) was comprehensive. The second round and thereafter will involve comprehensive self-study and a selective external evaluation that will highlight major issues and how each institution has resolved (or plans to resolve) them.

Cross-institutional disciplinary evaluations also are common. They establish a baseline for credit transfer and student mobility and demonstrate compliance with international standards. For example, disciplinary assessments in the 14 Dutch universities are nationwide and comparative. In its final report, the committee compares

those faculties offering the same program. No substantial agencies in the Netherlands devote their efforts only to institutional evaluation. Many evaluate disciplines only; a slight majority combine discipline/programmatic evaluations with institutional assessments.

It is common practice for final evaluation reports to be published. In some settings (Netherlands hogescholen, for example), the accountability portion of the report is public information, while recommendations for institutional improvement are kept confidential. Some evaluation reports are widely distributed. For example, in France, the Comite National d'Evaluation publishes 1,000 copies of each institutional report, 700 of which are immediately disseminated. In the United Kingdom, the Higher Education Funding Council publishes the subject review report, the main documented outcome of the review process, on the Internet. Reports focus on judgments made according to specified criteria, as well as supporting evidence, in addition to the subject provider aims and objectives. Reports issued by the Danish Evaluation Centre are sent to the media with a press release, and copies are made available for purchase by the general public.

Denmark

The Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education (established in 1992) conducts regular and systematic program evaluations on a rotating basis, using a standard process to evaluate all programs nationwide within a given discipline. The evaluation covers not only teaching and learning activities, but also the conditions under which the programs function. Thus institutional provisions are also scrutinized.

The methodology involves (1) a planning phase in which a Centre staff member is assigned to organize the evaluation and the appointment of an external review team (steering committee) composed of Danish and Nordic academics, as well as representatives of prominent employers in the field; (2) self-evaluation, including analysis of the program's strengths and weaknesses, along with a framework for further quality improvement; (3) sampling surveys of students, graduates, and employers, which provide insight into attitudes and perceptions regarding the program's quality and effectiveness (as much as one-third of an evaluation's budget is devoted to surveying user attitudes); and (4) an on-site program review by the steering committee. The project manager drafts a final report, which is published and disseminated to the media (Thune, 1995).

United Kingdom

The purpose of "audit" in the United Kingdom is to establish the extent to which institutions are effectively discharging their responsibilities for the standards of degrees granted in their name and for the quality of education provided to students. The institution must convince auditors that the evidence relied upon for this purpose is sufficient, valid, and reliable.

An audit team relies primarily on an analytical account produced by the institution (a self-assessment document) at the start of the audit process. The document describes and comments on the means used by the institution to test whether it is discharging its responsibility for standards and quality. The account refers to an accompanying list of "evidence." The audit team can request any of the documents listed, as well as any other documents referred to during the course of the team's visit to the institution. In addition, audit teams may consider other evidence, including Funding Council teaching quality assessment reports and, if available, accreditation reports, which provide valuable external perspectives.

In recent years, a series of agency provisions for external evaluation have been utilized—most recently (1997), the Quality Assurance Agency of Higher Education (QAA). The QAA replaces the dual approach to evaluation conducted by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). At present, the HEFCE contracts with QAA to conduct assessments on its behalf.

The assessment method combines institutional self-assessment with visits by trained assessors. The evaluation considers six aspects of the learning experience and its outcome:

- curriculum design and organization;
- teaching, learning, and assessment;
- student progression and achievement;
- student support and guidance;
- learning resources; and
- quality management and enhancement.

Assessors award grades on a scale of 1 to 4 for each aspect, with 4 being the best. Comments identifying good practice and areas for improvement are published in an assessment report (available from the QAA and on HEFCE's web-site). If any aspect is graded 1, the institution is required to remedy the shortcoming as a condition of future funding.

The QAA will complete the current program of subject assessments, which is scheduled to end in 2001. The recent review of higher education chaired by Sir Ron Dearing proposed that a framework of qualifications, based on national standards, should be assessed by external examiners. Thus, the QAA is currently considering ways to achieve this. It expects to have a new system in operation by 2001.

Adaptability of European Evaluation Systems

Systems without long histories show a remarkable willingness to learn from experience and to adapt processes in order to better achieve goals of effective evaluation. A number of agencies have had external evaluations, some of which were mandated by government as a condition of their establishment.

The University Sector of the Netherlands has established a task force for considering the two-part question, "What is good in the system of External Quality Assessment, and what has to be changed?" The Dutch report submitted to the European Commission stated the following:

The External Quality Assessment as it has developed since the start in 1988, is functioning well and is accepted by all stakeholders: politicians, employers, students, inspectorate, the universities themselves. External Quality Assessment so far has had several positive effects on Dutch universities.

- Ten years of external assessments have strengthened quality awareness.
- Quality is on the agenda continuously.
- There is expanding emphasis on teaching next to research.
- Teaching plays a more important role in the career of academic staff.
- External Quality Assessment has promoted internal quality assurance mechanisms.
- For the outside world, the public reports have contributed to a better discussion on higher education, supported by facts.

However, looking at past performance, some weaknesses can be mentioned:

- The approach at this moment leads to overemphasizing of the external function of External Quality Assessment (accountability and providing information) and, by doing so, threatens the internal function of improvement.
- Because there is no distinction between a public report and a management letter, it is quite impossible to have a tailor-made assessment for a university.
- The approach at this moment leads too much to conformity and harmonization instead of promoting diversity.
- By the strict formulated framework and criteria, the idea of a one-dimensional concept of quality is rising, and therefore also a risk of ranking. However, quality is a multidimensional concept concerning the quality of input, process, and output.
- The international dimension in the assessment is still too weak. Efforts to sustain an international dimension by appointing foreign members to the committee, are not sufficient.

Looking at the strengths and weaknesses, the following basic assumptions for the renewal of the system have been adopted:

- Continuity with the current system should be assured.
- Appreciation of quality and diversity should be promoted.
- Uniformity should be prevented and diversity promoted.
- Context specificity should be promoted.
- More flexibility and tailor-made assessment are wanted.
- A distinction between a public report and a management letter is desirable.
- More emphasis should be placed on the international dimension.

The key words for the new protocol to be developed are: promoting diversity, more tailor-made assessments, introduction of a management letter next to the public report, and promotion of the European dimension.

New Zealand Universities

In New Zealand, the Academic Audit Unit was established in 1992 to review institutions' quality assurance and quality control procedures, including a sampling process to see if they are working. A "quality audit" may be carried out by an internal or external body, but the body must operate independently of an institution's procedures and of those individuals responsible for them. The quality audit system betokens greater trust in the institution than when external bodies are required to conduct the assessment.

The International Organization for Standards (ISO) definition of quality audit, which was adopted for the university system, as a systematic and independent determination of whether:

(1) The planned arrangements (i.e., the quality control and assurance procedures for teaching, learning, and research) are suitable to achieve objectives (suitability audit).

(2) The actual quality activities conform to the planned arrangements (conformity audit).

(3) The arrangements are being implemented effectively (effectiveness audit).

Institutional objectives are used as the starting point of the audit, and the audit body does not normally comment on these. Institutional objectives are also the terminating point of an audit, so the audit body compares outcomes to objectives in order to determine effectiveness. In contrast to quality assessment, which would attempt to measure outcomes, the audit focuses on institutional processes. The auditor therefore requests evidence that the institution compares outcomes to objectives, takes action over any discrepancies between them, and ensures that these actions suffice to remedy the discrepancies.

Hong Kong Tertiary Institutions

The Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) was established in 1990 as an independent statutory body financed by fees for services. It conducts program validations and institutional reviews and provides other advisory services to agencies of the Special Administrative Region government.

Program validation is a process involving internal self-study followed by external review by HKCAA. Proposed degree programs are examined against criteria related to the programs' standards and aims. The objective of program validation is to determine whether a degree program is comparable with programs elsewhere and to assist the institution and academics concerned in developing and maintaining it. HKCAA's external reviews are conducted by expert teams of appropriately qualified people from Hong Kong and overseas.

Institutional review must be appropriate to the institution and its current stage of development. A review may serve any of several purposes: It may comment on the readiness of a non-degree granting institution to achieve degree-granting status; ascertain whether an institution is maintaining its standards; or assess an institution's readiness to take full responsibility for the standards of its programs (institutional accreditation). Once ac-

credited, an institution is deemed to have achieved self-accrediting status, with the concomitant duty to maintain systematic quality assurance activity, subject to audit.

The University Grants Committee (UGC) may conduct a *teaching and learning quality process review* of accredited institutions. (The UGC is the government agency that controls the funding of institutions receiving public support.) As with the program validation and institutional review processes, a substantial institutional self-evaluation is followed by review by an external team that issues a final report of findings and recommendations.

External review is a serious matter in Hong Kong, where higher education has expanded rapidly and at great public expense. Uncertainty preceding Hong Kong's 1997 handover gave urgency to the establishment of universities operating at levels of quality comparable to those in developed countries. HKCAA now maintains a registry of more than 1,000 academic subject matter specialists, more than two-thirds of whom work overseas.

Comparisons with U.S. Accreditation

Accrediting bodies in the United States, both institutional and specialized and professional, employ eligibility criteria, standards, policies, and practice with a long evolutionary history. Their sometimes uneasy relationship with governments, state and federal, has been characterized by accommodation by all parties. Accredited status provides a basis for trust among institutions and undergirds a system which permits transfer of academic credit and admission to graduate and professional schools. Government relies on accreditation to establish institutional eligibility for student and institutional aid of various kinds. Many employers restrict tuition reimbursement to employees attending accredited institutions. The general public regards accreditation as a sort of seal of approval. The U.S. accreditation system is unique in the world in that its agencies exercise broad authority without any explicit grant of power from government. In every other country in the world, external evaluation agencies—even those operating with high degrees of independence—derive their authority directly from government.

The following generalizations pertain to international accreditation practices, particularly as they contrast with U.S. practices.

International

- Evaluations tend to focus more on programs than institutions, although institutional provisions are considered.
- Institutional evaluations are commonly audits involving external review of institutional self-assessments of quality assurance processes.
- Reports of external evaluation results tend to be public.
- Internationalism is a common theme, both in the European Community and in nations with developing systems of higher education, and the intention is to demonstrate comparable standards.
- Evaluation teams typically include employers and non-academics.
- External evaluation agencies are self-critical and are willing both to learn from experience and to modify quality assurance structures and processes.
- Comparisons among institutions are commonly made, but rankings are resisted.
- User surveys play an increasingly important role in institutional evaluation.

Similarities to U.S. Practices

- Even where the primary focus is on accountability, improvement is an important agenda.
- Agencies tend to resist linking external evaluation to funding.
- Most accrediting agencies operate independently but in accordance with government mandates for compulsory cyclical review.
- Agencies themselves are subject to review, either governmental or self-initiated.
- Agencies require self-studies and presen-

tation of evidence. Independent outside experts serve on site visit teams.
- Evaluation reports are presented to the institution/program.

The New Internationalism

The vocabulary and even some of the practices of quality assurance have been adopted by higher education. Acronyms such as TQM (Total Quality Management), CQI (Continuous Quality Improvement), ISO 9000 (International Standards Organization quality management systems), PI (process/product improvement), and QA (quality assurance) are now ubiquitous in the literature of academic management. But the most significant contribution has been the synergy among agencies and individuals charged with responsibility for higher education in various countries.

The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) has been instrumental in the rapid development of national external evaluation systems. INQAAHE was established in 1992 in Hong Kong at the first International Conference on Quality Assurance in Higher Education. The conference was the first serious attempt to identify and connect agencies and individuals interested in quality assurance in higher education. Today, INQAAHE has approximately 100 members in more than 40 nations.

Import-Export Concerns

Initial concerns about internationalism had to do with comparability of educational experiences and the increasing mobility of students, many of whom might spend a year or two at a foreign university. More recently, universities have expanded across national boundaries to areas of Europe and Asia where large markets exist, notably for a variety of MBA programs. As in the United States, off-campus degree programs are marketed heavily, and perceptions of quality and status, accessibility, time to completion, and cost are all variables in the competitiveness equation. Hong Kong imports many foreign university degree programs, with hundreds of courses offered by "exporting" universities in Australia, Canada, China, Macao, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The Hong Kong Council compared admission requirements, time to completion, and content of degree programs and found that many "imported" programs were far less rigorous than those offered by local institutions. Some of the programs from overseas were judged to be insubstantial compared to the domestic model.

In 1996, Hong Kong adopted the Non-local Higher and Professional Education Ordinance, requiring that all non-local academic and professional courses leading to postsecondary and professional qualifications be registered (unless exempted by collaboration with one of the specified local higher education institutions). The registrar of non-local courses is the Hong Kong Director of Education. The Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation is named in the ordinance as the advisor to the registrar of non-local courses. The HKCAA's role is to advise on whether any course should be registered or exempted from registration according to the criteria stipulated in the ordinance. In order to qualify for registration in Hong Kong, the non-local institution must have approval from the recognized evaluation agency in the home country; the program in Hong Kong must be comparable to that offered at the home campus; and effective measures must be in place to ensure that the standard of the course is maintained at a comparable level. HKCAA will publish a Code of Recommended Practice for Non-local Courses in 1999.

Hong Kong is not alone in its concern about the quality and integrity of education being exported from other countries; similar concerns have been raised elsewhere. Although other examples of formal review are not known, it seems likely that import barriers may be erected in high-demand markets, particularly if exporting countries fail to take steps to assure quality and integrity.

A group of individuals active in the Center for Quality Assurance in International Education

(Center) and the Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE) in Washington, DC, has proposed creation of an international agency to certify transnational education. A certification manual has been published, and GATE has been launched with certification completed for a small number of institutions. The Center and GATE have established a significant forum for international quality assurance discussions.

The End of Boundaries

Several visionaries have written about the breakdown of traditional disciplinary boundaries, where the power of the professoriate has yielded to the customer power of learners, where bricks and mortar have been replaced by communications technology, and where the academy's knowledge-creation function has come to be shared with other organizations and individuals.

In the past decade, the number of institutions and students crossing international borders has increased significantly. Entrepreneurial institutions once considered marginal have gained credibility and may become part of a new mainstream. The internet has made possible a huge increase in potentially affordable access. The "University of the Future" seems increasingly plausible. In the words of Heterick et al.(1997),

> We envision a global learning infrastructure—a student-centric, virtual, global web of educational services—as the foundation for achieving society's learning goals. This contrasts with the bricks-and-mortar, campus-centric university of today; it even goes beyond the paradigm of the virtual university, which remains modeled on individual institutions. The global learning infrastructure will encompass a flourishing marketplace of educational services where millions of students interact with a vast array of individual and institutional suppliers. It will be delivered through multiple technologies including the Internet, broadband cable, and satellite. It is being developed in phases, but will ultimately cross all institutional, state, and national borders.

To a remarkable extent, the "University of the Future" already exists in a form unplanned, uncoordinated, and unauthorized in any systemic or governmental sense. It has existed for some time in metropolitan areas of the United States. This "non-institution" consists of the variety of public and private education and training programs, the military services, community colleges, proprietary schools, and a number of generally smaller independent institutions willing to certify and grant credit and to issue degrees based on credit accumulated from a variety of institutions and unorthodox learning experiences. With the passage of time, such practices—once considered the province of diploma mills—are entering the mainstream. The Internet, not bound by state, regional, or national borders, is the ultimate information free market. Communications technology will not be readily controlled by the formal institutions that dominate delivery and credentialing in higher education.

The formal structures that serve higher education inevitably will be challenged by such disaggregation. Accreditation in the United States applies to institutions and to units within institutions. Accreditation standards have evolved in accordance with professional consensus about resources and processes that characterize institutions deemed to be trustworthy in quality, integrity, and effectiveness. As the community of institutions and academic specialties has become more diverse, accreditation has adapted, in part because of a certain discipline imposed by stable regional, national, and state borders, which required compliance with defined standards. But the new realities of borderless communications technology and expanding information sources mean that historic assumptions about quality assurance may be strained.

Issues Raised by New Realities

Enthusiasm about technology's potential should be tempered by the memory that similar prognos-

tications accompanied the early days of television. Higher education found ways to use television, which never seriously threatened to supplant institution-based instruction. The very early days of the Internet and e-mail likewise brought suggestions that distance learning could supplant the university; yet distance learning applications—like television—are often most effectively applied within the ambit of established colleges and universities. Policy makers and legislators have proposed to develop virtual universities to meet increasing demand for postsecondary education in high-growth states.

At present, the policy debate rests on extravagant assumptions about the capacity of technology to serve the educational needs of people with average incomes, even as people of means continue to send their sons and daughters to established campus-based institutions. However, it is clear as never before that the means exist to revolutionize the delivery of higher education, and that the capacity to deliver products labeled "higher education" is no longer restricted to established institutions. The stakes for assurance of and communication about quality and trustworthiness—and for consumer protection—have increased sharply.

But if the predictions (which become more likely day by day) come true, the discipline imposed by accountability to states and regional agencies may be short-lived, raising the question of what oversight will be put in place, and by what authorities. Mingle (1977) noted:

> Education is too important to exist without controls, without licensing, or without credentials. Government's role as authorizer should hold providers accountable for educational results. Means are superfluous: it is results that count. However, defining how to measure and reward the effectiveness of education or to penalize its ineffectiveness will require debate.

This is reminiscent of other discussions about accountability in the United States. The argument begins with government's assertion of responsibility and is followed by declarations about the appropriateness of accountability exercised by the institutional community itself, followed in turn by demands for more rigor on the part of accreditors.

Nongovernmental self-regulation in the United States has survived numerous challenges. The proliferation of education without a geographic base poses a challenge that will not be addressed effectively by regional organizations acting independently. If indeed a "global learning infrastructure" is realized, the evaluation and quality assurance enterprise must find ways to operate effectively worldwide. Unconstrained dissemination of products labeled "higher education" will open the door for profiteering and deception, a door that will prove difficult to monitor.

A set of common understandings should be developed in order to prevent U.S. institutions operating across international borders from losing credibility because of the actions of a few members. Unless regional accrediting agencies enter into formal agreement, intervention by the federal government should be expected. Alternatives seem to be either a united front by the agencies or the formation of a "super agency" which would either coordinate or supplant regional accreditation for the purposes of overseas operation.

New challenges evoke concern among academics, long accustomed to deliberating over (and deferring) significant issues. Like the institutions that support them, U.S. accrediting agencies are also deliberative bodies that adopt criteria, standards, and procedures only after achieving consensus.

Generally, the sometimes uneasy relationship with government has been resolved through good-faith efforts on the part of all concerned. Creation of the Western Governors University, for example, brought a number of U.S. regional accrediting agencies together to address the new reality of a virtual institution operating in many states and accrediting regions. Challenges to principle and

practice posed by the "University of the Future" will require a much greater collective effort. A world of higher education without legal and political boundaries presents abundant opportunities for misunderstanding, as well as for profitable malpractice and fraud, unless ways can be found to assure quality on a worldwide basis.

The clear trend toward the use of common practices and standards offers to the rest of the world the kind of student mobility and credential "transportability" that already exists in the United States. The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education offers a possible platform for research and development of international policy and practice. Quality assurance agencies and their staffs would be well served by formation of a well-resourced cooperative agency that would act as a repository of information, a communication center, a source of consultation to developing systems, and a broker of research on quality assurance in higher education.

The separation of institutional and programmatic accreditation (as in the United States) is not common elsewhere in the world. The most common model overseas is programmatic evaluation, with consideration of certain institutional provisions. Standards and criteria tend to be fewer in number, and for mature institutions, the quality audit model is common. (The institutional effectiveness standards employed by American regional accreditors share some of the character of audits.) Better communication with international counterparts could prove as useful to U.S. accreditors as interregional involvement within the United States has been. A good starting point would be to adopt a common vocabulary to describe the various kinds of external evaluation (see Appendix A).

Communication systems among governments have improved, as they have in education, with the likely result that innovations implemented in one country may quickly surface as legislative proposals in another. It is in the best interest of American higher education—including its accrediting agencies—to be aware of and to embrace improvements in practice before they become legislative mandates.

The language of quality assurance sounds the same around the world. Yet similar terms do not necessarily have similar meanings.

Recommendations

Coordination of the highly decentralized community of accreditation agencies is essential to internationalizing quality assurance. Oversight conducted through the United States Department of Education's recognition process has been limited. Excepting periodic initiatives aimed at accountability and consumer protection, the U.S. government honors accreditors' independence. Accrediting organizations' common concerns have been addressed primarily through voluntary cooperation. It is time for a collective initiative to deal with issues that cannot be addressed effectively by purely informal cooperation.

- Responsibility for attention to import/export concerns in higher education must be vested in an identifiable and visible entity. Not all exporters from the United States are subject to recognized accrediting agencies. Some users overseas now engage in fruitless searches for authoritative information.

- Information about accredited institutions of higher education in the United States is not readily accessible. *Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education* (published by the American Council on Education), the most authoritative source of information on U.S. institutions, is not broadly available outside of large libraries and provides prior, not current, academic year information. More current information, accessible for both domestic and international use, is needed.

- Students, academic credit, and degrees are transportable across international borders, and there is every reason to believe that this transportability will accelerate. A convenient and authoritative source of information about overseas quality assurance agencies and the institutions served by them would be useful to students considering overseas study, as well as to American entities considering admission or employment of persons with overseas qualifications.

Higher education daily becomes more of a world enterprise. Reasonable assurance of quality and integrity is a necessity as institutions, students, academic credit, and qualifications extend beyond state, regional, and national borders.

Appendix A:
Defining Quality Assurance

"Quality"

Though this word is used in some contexts to denote superiority or excellence, such definition is impractical for the purposes of higher education evaluation. The New Zealand Universities *Audit Manual* (Woodhouse, 1995) suggests that "quality" means "exceptional." In common usage, an item of quality is one that meets expectations; hence, "fitness for purpose" is the meaning accepted by academic quality assurance agencies. Under this definition, the quality of an institution or program may be assured on the basis of clear evidence that specified objectives are being achieved.

"Accredited Status" (United States)

Accreditation means that the institution or program in question, having been evaluated through self-study and external peer review, has met or exceeded the published standards of its accrediting association and is faithfully achieving its mission and stated purposes. Central to accreditation is a set of standards of good practice developed and agreed upon by the organization's member institutions or programs. This is in contrast to other countries, where accreditation denotes formal authorization, following evaluation, to award degrees.

"Accreditation" (Europe and Asia)

In Europe and Asia, accreditation means the evaluation, assessment, or other activity to determine whether the academic standards of an institution or its programs are comparable with (internationally) recognized standards.

"Quality Assurance"

Quality assurance in higher education pertains to all planned and systematic action necessary to provide confidence that (international) standards of education, scholarship, and qualification are being maintained and enhanced.

"Quality Audit"

A quality audit tests an institution's quality assurance and control system through its self-evaluation in much the same way that a financial audit tests a company's financial systems. It denotes greater trust in an institution, with an external body confirming periodically that the institution's quality assurance processes and related results comply with its established quality assurance plan.

"Assessment"

Assessment is a diagnostic form of quality scrutiny and relates to the evaluation of teaching, learning, and disciplines on the basis of a detailed review of curricula, teaching and learning, assessment and monitoring, and quality control.

"Performance Indicators"

Performance indicators are tangible measures designed to demonstrate value received for money and public accountability. They include admission and graduation data, research records, graduate employment, cost per student, student/staff ratios, staff workloads, class sizes, and availability of learning resources and equipment.

"External Evaluation"

Frazer (1997) uses this term to avoid confusion with the specific (but different) meanings attributed to quality assessment and accreditation in various European countries. The most useful terminology is probably "quality assurance" for the entire range of institutions' and agencies' internal and external activities, with "external evaluation" describing accountability-related agency evaluations.

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