A Special Report on CHEA 2016 and CIQG 2016

Transparency under mounting pressure

CHEA
Council for Higher Education Accreditation

CIQG
CHEA International Quality Group
There has been an explosion in demand for higher education and evidence of its value. We have to find ways to be more open and honest about what students are learning and that should include an international comparative assessment of graduate outcomes, Mary Beth Marklein reports.

The explosion of demand worldwide for higher education and for evidence of its value to graduates, employers and the wider global community must be met head on by tertiary-level institutions, a top education official at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, told quality assurance professionals.

And the best way to do that is by being more open and honest about what students are learning, he said. “We will not be able to address mounting pressures on higher education if we’re not radically improving transparency,” said Dirk Van Damme, the OECD’s head of the Division of Innovation and Measuring Progress. “It’s about empowering the demand side.”

Speaking at an annual meeting in Washington late January of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, or CHEA, and its international division, the CHEA International Quality Group, or CIQG, Van Damme identified a range of trends, including greater student mobility, skyrocketing costs, increasingly sophisticated teaching technology and the needs of a fast-changing workforce, all of which are intensifying pressure on colleges and universities to demonstrate that a degree from their institution is worth the investment.

The most promising response, he said, would be an international comparative assessment of learning outcomes, with findings made available to all stakeholders, including policy-makers and employers and, especially, students and families.

An attempt by OECD to do just that has failed to win favour from universities in some of the most powerful parts of the world. It had
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been working with 17 countries to test an assessment instrument, known as the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes, or AHELO, that is similar to its 20-year-old Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA, for lower education levels.

In a joint letter to the OECD last May, the US-based American Council on Education and Universities Canada said they have “grave reservations” about using what they called a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

“For the time being we don’t have the political support to develop [AHELO],” Van Damme said on Thursday. But he also made it clear that the motivations behind the initiative remain a top priority.

In October, a senior OECD official said its education policy division was developing a new project to benchmark the performance of higher education systems.

Van Damme also noted a range of potentially promising national and regional initiatives being developed, including research projects in Germany, the UK and Italy. And commercial rankings, much-reviled among professionals within higher education, help to fill the void for many stakeholders.

“I don’t think we can just be satisfied with our criticism of rankings and not provide the information that students need,” he said. “Higher education systems do not provide society the amount of transparency that they expect. They continue to believe that the old mechanisms that have worked in the past – trust in quality, trust in institutions – will work. Well, they won’t.”

Van Damme’s appearance was part of three days of meetings devoted to quality assurance and accreditation in higher education. About 350 people representing more than 30 countries across six continents were registered for the event, and most of them arrived despite the massive snowstorm that crippled most of Washington, DC for much of the week.

International issues topped the agenda for the second half of the conference, and the first half focused on concerns specific to US higher education. Topics focused on a range of challenges, including an influx of new providers, the spread of corruption across developing and developed countries and growing dissatisfaction with longstanding practices in higher education.

In the UK, for example, international accounting firm Ernst & Young said recruiters would no longer consider degree classification, in part because an 18-month study found “no evidence” that success in higher education correlated with the success of its recent hires.

“More than ever, we have some topics that are challenging for accreditation and may even take us out of our comfort zone, our... traditional mode of operation,” CHEA President Judith Eaton said in opening remarks, noting that US higher education has captured the attention of contenders for the US presidential election in November. “The same thing we’re experiencing in the US is going on in a number of other countries.”

Eaton also introduced recent initiatives by CHEA and CIQG designed to address some of the emerging challenges and develop cross-border consensus on the objectives of quality assurance and accreditation in higher education.

Non-traditional providers

Responding to growing demand for professional education and industrial training that does not lead to an academic degree, CHEA and CIQG unveiled results of a pilot programme to develop an international, outcomes-based review of non-traditional providers.

The pilot included a comprehensive study of documents and a site visit to DeTao Masters Academy Advanced Classes, a private company in China. Established in 2012, the company offers short-term courses in subjects such as ecological architecture design, brand strategy and management and Spanish classical guitar.

At the conference, DeTao was certified as a Quality Platform Provider, a new designation that it met by meeting four standards: learning outcomes are articulated and achieved, post-secondary expectations are met, transparency is maintained, and comparability is established.

Also announced at the CIQG meeting was a new mechanism through which international organisations can signal their support of a set of principles that aim to define common goals for quality assurance in higher education, while also acknowledging critical differences based on country, culture or region.

The principles, developed by a CHEA/CIQG advisory council and published last spring, set the stage for discussions of “new tools and different tools” for ensuring quality of higher education across borders at the regional and international level, said Stanmenka Uvalic-Trumbic, CHEA’s senior adviser on international affairs and former chief of the higher education section at UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

“Things are moving very, very fast [in higher education], so quality assurance and accreditation should move just as fast,” she said.

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Agreement on a set of shared principles on how to define quality of provision is growing among stakeholders internationally, and greater cross-border collaboration on quality assurance and accreditation beckons.

Mary Beth Marklein reports

Support is increasing among stakeholders in multiple countries for a set of shared principles on how to define quality in higher education, and a plan is in place to create cross-border opportunities for cooperation in matters of quality assurance and accreditation.

At a conference late January on quality assurance in tertiary education, organisers invited attendees to sign a "memorandum of affiliation" that would create a foundation for national and regional quality assurance and accreditation bodies worldwide to work together in their efforts to internationalise higher education.

Judith Eaton, president of the US-based Council for Higher Education Accreditation and its offshoot, CHEA International Quality Group, or CIQG, emphasised that signatories would commit only to agreeing that they endorse the principles developed by
CIQG and published last summer.

The seven principles, developed with input from 19 experts in 10 countries representing six of the world’s seven continents, are CIQG’s response to the growing global interconnectedness of higher education, fuelled by student mobility, faculty exchanges and research collaboration, cross-border partnerships and the potential promise of online or web-based tools to deliver higher education to even the most remote corners of the earth.

Much of the conference was devoted to developing how the principles might guide policy-making at the national, regional and international levels, and how the diversity of stakeholders might build on common ground. Already, some conference presenters said the principles mesh with and enhance efforts to develop local goals.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN, for example, had previously identified four areas of consensus around quality issues. “We mapped the seven [from CIQG] with what we had [at ASEAN], and Bingo!” said Concepcion Pijano, executive director of the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities and member of an ASEAN task force.

“Now, we’re all on the same page.” Her hope is that the Philippines government will use the principles as benchmarks for quality assurance agencies.

The principles also can strengthen institutions that seek international recognition, said Nadia Badrawi, vice-president of the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education who has been presenting the principles at international conferences. “Every country, every culture is looking [to build] their reputation,” she said.

The principles themselves can be summed up in less than 150 words. The document represents a shared understanding of educational quality while also acknowledging the unique characteristics of any one country, geographic region or culture.

The seven principles aim to:

1) focus on the responsibility of higher education providers to assure and achieve quality,
2) make student learning the central focus,
3) define quality in terms of how it meets the needs of society, engenders public confidence and sustains public trust,
4) place governments in a supporting role,
5) encourage commitment to evidence-based accountability,
6) demand that quality assurance and accreditation bodies take the lead role in implementing processes, tools, benchmarks and measures of learning, and
7) call for flexibility, creativity and innovation.

Promoting excellence or setting standards?

The principles are intended “to inspire an ongoing quest for effectiveness and excellence”, says Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic, senior adviser on international affairs to CHEA and CIQG. That leaves open the question of whether quality assurance agencies should be promoting excellence or setting minimum standards.

Barbara Brittingham, president of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education in the US, likened the dilemma to that of reviews for restaurants. “The health inspector can keep the bugs out of the kitchen, but that doesn’t really get you a better meal,” she said. She recommended that the emphasis be on quality improvement rather than policing.

Another unresolved question is whether quality can be defined. “People look to the United States as a model – Stanford and Harvard – but is that relevant for, say, Mauritius?” said Chet Haskell, a US-based international consultant. “We’re trying to figure out how you deal with local institutions in a global context.”

At the conference, experts from different parts of the world explored each of the principles from their perspective.

Angela Yung-chi Hou, a professor at Fu Jen University in Taiwan and vice-president of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network, said the level of faculty engagement “will determine the success of implementation of the whole system” and that higher education providers must “furnish support and infrastructure to help faculty and staff understand their role in quality improvement.”

Badr Aboul-Elia, director of the Commission for Academic Accreditation in the United Arab Emirates, called attention to rising numbers of for-profit higher education institutions in developing countries, where “governments have been less able to support the escalating needs for higher education” and “no regulatory authority or rigorous standards exist”.

In a nod to the diversity of higher education systems across the globe, Eaton said he recommended that the principles are “not about setting standards,... any kind of regulation or any kind of review”. An affiliation would signal only that “you’re saying, ‘We would like to work with you. We think the principles make sense’,” she said.

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ACADEMIC FRAUD such as bribery, bogus universities and falsified research findings is hardly a new phenomenon but it seems to be escalating worldwide, prompting quality assurance professionals meeting in Washington, DC, to grapple with how, if at all, they can help combat the problem.

No consensus was reached, but a prevailing view emerged that the potential consequences, if left unchecked, are dire. Transparency International’s 2013 Global Corruption Report: Education found that, in some instances, corruption runs so deep in higher education systems that it “threatens the reputation of research products and graduates, regardless of their guilt and innocence”. And no country or institution is immune from it.

“What keeps surprising me is that every time you pick up a newspaper, you see [another example]. It’s happening everywhere,” says Goolam Mohamedbhai, former president of the International Association of Universities. “If higher education institutions are going to produce the leaders of tomorrow, then it is worrying for society.”

Speaking at the annual meeting of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation’s International Quality Group, or CHEA/CIQG, Mohamedbhai summarised a handful of recent examples that offer a glimpse of the breadth and depth of the problem.

A report published last year in International Higher Education described widespread problems in China as a “malignant tumour”, citing examples of rampant plagiarism, favouritism in hiring and promotions, and a doctoral student who completed his thesis in a week.

A 2014 paper in the International Education Studies said a dean at Moscow State University in Russia accepted a bribe in exchange for admission to a doctoral programme, and referenced a Moscow police report stating that 30-40 professors each year are caught accepting bribes for awarding good grades.

And a simple Google search using the phrase “Vyapam scam” reveals what Mohamedbhai called a “shocking scandal” in India, where about 2,500 impersonators sat for standardised admissions exams for slots in top medical colleges. More than 2,000 people have been arrested in the case, which surfaced last year, and dozens of those involved have died, under suspicion of murder or suicide.

A confluence of factors makes higher education particularly ripe for corruption, panelists said. A university degree is now a prerequisite for access to good jobs, positions of power and other exclusive benefits, and the most prestigious higher education institutions have neither the space nor desire to accommodate everybody who wants to enrol.

Just as low-paid faculty might be tempted to accept money in exchange for good grades, cash-strapped public universities might succumb to similar opportunities at the institution level. Pressure to move up in international rankings or publish in top journals offers incentives to fudge numbers or falsify research.

Preventive role
Until recently “surprising little attention” has been given to the role that quality assurance agencies might play in preventing academic corruption, said Michaela Martin, a programme director with UNESCO’s International Institute for Educational Planning.

In a policy brief for CIQG, Martin said the role of accreditation bodies is limited but they can “clearly have a strong signalling effect for higher education institutions”. In terms of governance, for example, quality assurance officials can insist that internal

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and external stakeholders, including students, participate in decision-making.

They also can “insist on the existence of integrity structures, policies and practices” and “spread existing good practices across the higher education sector”.

That is the approach taken in Croatia, where a 2008 police raid targeting faculty members and administrators in the economics and transportation departments of the University of Zagreb led to a number of convictions.

Police said professors were taking as much as US$3,000 from students for passing grades and more than US$10,000 for enrolling students. Five professors received sentences, from 14 to 30 months in prison, and all professors received sentences, from US$3,000 to US$10,000 for enrolling students. Five professors received sentences, from 14 to 30 months in prison, and all professors received sentences, from US$3,000 to US$10,000.

The response from a quality assurance perspective has been “transparency, transparency, transparency”, Jasmina Havranek, director of the Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education, or ASHE, told conference participants.

A number of universities at the time balked at disclosing data on topics such as applications and enrolments, she conceded, “but now they see that it is very useful”.

To the extent that crimes are committed, Mohamedbhai and others at the session encouraged the education community to leverage local laws. The Croatian arrests were made after a year-long police investigation, and the Vyapam case was referred to India’s Central Bureau of Investigation.

Havranek noted that agencies can perhaps be most effective in raising awareness to prevent corruption.

Working with UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – CHEA/CIQG plans this spring to explore how quality assurance groups can make a difference.

“We know corruption undermines quality, undermines institutions and undermines students,” says CHEA President Judith Eaton. “It is an issue to which quality assurance and accreditation can make a significant contribution.”

In some instances, corruption runs so deep in higher education systems that it threatens the reputation of research products and graduates, regardless of their guilt and innocence’.

Revolutionary delivery meets traditional standards

Can accreditation adapt to new forms of provision? A new type of university – where students travel to live and learn together online in seven cities across the globe – is showing that it doesn’t have to. Traditional standards and ways of gauging them still apply.

Mary Beth Marklein reports

IT MIGHT be easier to describe the Minerva Schools at Keck Graduate Institute, a recent entrant into the world of higher education, in terms of what it is not rather than what it is:

- There are no athletics teams, no libraries and, certainly, no lecture halls. There’s not even a campus, for that matter. Classrooms are rented.
- Students do most of their coursework taking via laptops, but it’s not distance learning – they often sit in the same room during class time.
- And over their four years of study, the students will travel to and live together in seven cities across the globe, starting with San Francisco.

Launched in 2012 with US$25 million in start-up capital from a Silicon Valley firm, Minerva leverages its revolutionary approach to teaching and learning in a way that turns the concepts of global higher education and online instruction on their heads.

The San Francisco-based school, which enrolled its first class of students in 2014-15, was featured at an annual meeting late January of the Washington-based Council for Higher Education Accreditation or CHEA, where conference organisers held it up as a model of higher education that has successfully responded to calls for change while still meeting the standards set by traditional quality assurance and accreditation agencies.
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Accreditation standards and practices are coming under increasing scrutiny in the United States. The US Education Department is experimenting with an initiative that could shake up the current system. Last autumn, legislation was introduced to allow for the creation of a voluntary alternative system of accreditation.

And the Higher Education Act is up for reauthorisation, opening the door to plenty of debate about whether accreditation is doing what it is supposed to be doing: protecting students and taxpayers from low-quality education.

“Government and others want accreditation to function in ways that are different from our traditional, typical, deliberative, formative, collegial mode,” CHEA President Judith Eaton told participants in opening remarks. The Minerva Schools, which earned accreditation in a relatively short amount of time, she says, “is a great counter-example [of] this notion that accreditation isn’t up to the challenge of innovation”.

Jump hurdles

Minerva was able to jump key hurdles by partnering with the Keck Graduate Institute, an existing higher education provider in Southern California that is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. That affiliation allowed it to expedite the process of accreditation, a third-party stamp of approval designed to signal to the US Education Department and students and parents that an institution meets quality assurance standards.

Founded by entrepreneur Ben Nelson, the former president of an online photo hosting and printing service called Snapfish, Minerva has assembled a high-profile team of supporters – including former US Senator Bob Kerrey, who spent 10 years as president of The New School in New York, and Larry Summers, who has served both as US Treasury Secretary and president of Harvard.

Nelson has said he would like the initiative to have a broader influence on the higher education establishment. Minerva arose out of concerns about four key challenges facing traditional higher education today: a general dissatisfaction among students, employers and other stakeholders with what students are learning, high cost, low completion rates and mounting student debt.

Minerva focuses on the first two – because, “if you take care of those, the other ones go away”, says Minerva Schools founding dean Stephen Kosslyn, a neuroscientist who at the conference described how the science of learning has informed the design of the curriculum.

Students do most of their course-taking via their laptops using interactive strategies – but, as Kosslyn told conference participants, “They’re interacting with each other, not with their computers.” Classes are capped at 19 students, and during class seminars, all of their images are projected in a row at the top of their computer screens, so that all students and the professor are face-to-face all the time.

The faculty, some of whom have left positions at universities such as Carnegie Mellon, Rice and Rutgers to join Minerva, draw from a repertoire of tools that ensure that, as Kosslyn says, “100% of students are engaged 75% of the time”.

One colour-coded feature of the software, for example, keeps track of which students have and which have not contributed to the discussion, so that faculty can make sure all voices are heard.

Another example: As two students debate a subject, the rest of the class is using a rubric to evaluate their argument and presentation. At any given moment, the professor will stop the debate and ask an observer to evaluate the debaters’ performances. Or they might be asked to weigh in electronically on a concept or question, or fill out a survey. Student responses produce metrics that allow faculty to track and assess responses and learning – and to share it with other faculty.

Cost savings

The stripped-down nature of Minerva enables it to keep annual tuition to US$10,000, less than a third of the national average published tuition fees (US$32,405) for a four-year private university in the United States in 2015-16, according to the most recent annual survey of private universities by the College Board, a non-profit that tracks financial trends in higher education.

When cost of living, books, health insurance and fees are factored in, total estimated annual cost for the first year (at Minerva’s San Francisco location) rises to about US$28,000 vs the US$44,000 estimated by the College Board for the total cost of one year (2015-16) for four-year private universities.

Living costs in subsequent years will vary because, over the course of their studies the students will move together around the globe – to major cities such as Buenos Aires, Bangalore and Seoul – seven in all. In each city, Minerva hires local staff to handle administrative matters, and the goal is also to hire faculty who live in each of the cities of residence. In general, though, faculty can work remotely – “anywhere where there’s enough bandwidth”, Kosslyn says.

Students live in residence halls while immersing themselves in local culture. In San Francisco, for example, they met with a committee on homelessness and had the opportunity to help serve meals at a shelter.

Minerva last autumn enrolled its second cohort, of just over 100 students. They join the 28 members of the school’s “founding class”, who spent a year helping to test-drive the curriculum, followed by a gap year, during which they pursued other interests. In August, both classes of students are scheduled to relocate from San Francisco to Berlin.
The CHEA International Quality Group

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