

## DO WE NEED AN INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION FOR QUALITY REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

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### INTRODUCTION

NATIONAL LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE ARE FREQUENTLY FACED WITH COMPLEX questions about the operation and quality of colleges, universities and programs in an international setting. Students, government officials and the public routinely want to answers to questions such as “How do we know that the quality of a higher education institution or program in one country is comparable to the quality in another country?” “By what means do individuals in one country have confidence in the institutions, programs and degrees offered in another country?”

As national leaders continue to be responsive to questions about higher education operation and quality internationally, there is considerable discussion and debate about what role this national leadership itself plays in establishing expectations of quality in an international environment. How can national leaders build an international community and on what basis? What are the core commitments on which to base policies, practices and values associated with quality in an international setting? Over the years, college and university presidents, rectors, and vice chancellors have come together with quality assurance and accreditation leaders to consider these issues in fora provided by, e.g., the European University Association (EUA), the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

To further this important discussion, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), in Fall 2002, developed and shared a concept paper “Do We Need an International Confederation for Quality Review of Higher Education?” with colleagues in various countries.\* The paper addresses the challenges and issues for international quality review and offers one approach—a “confederation”—to carry out this important responsibility. “International quality review” or “quality review in an international setting” refers to the policies, practices and procedures used by higher education and the quality assurance and accreditation community to scrutinize the quality of higher education institutions and programs choosing to operate internationally.

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\*CHEA is a private, nonprofit organization of degree-granting colleges and universities as well as institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations and is charged with responsibility for coordinating accreditation in the United States. In the U.S., accreditation is a nongovernmental undertaking carried out by private accrediting organizations that are responsible for quality assurance and quality improvement in higher education. For a copy of this paper, please e-mail [chea@chea.org](mailto:chea@chea.org).

CHEA's interest here twofold: to advocate a pivotal role for national leaders in the development of international quality review and to urge that this role be carried out based on the core commitments described in the concept paper. Whether, as the paper suggests, establishing an organization for this specific purpose, or influencing the operation of existing organizations, it is CHEA's hope that these commitments play a dominant role in the conduct of international quality review.

## **THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF NATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL QUALITY REVIEW**

Only the national leaders of higher education and quality assurance and accreditation have the experience and insight necessary to lead this international expansion of higher education focus and operation. While tensions exist in some countries between national higher education leadership, on the one hand, and the national quality assurance and accreditation leadership, on the other hand, the parties must come together to create an international quality review community that is robust, energetic and effective. This is essential to establishing a sound policy framework and sound practice in international quality review for the future.

The primary task of national leaders of both higher education and quality assurance is to forge basic ties and connections needed among countries to create an international culture grounded in rigorous and responsive approaches to quality. Participants in this culture may include colleges, universities, accreditation and quality assurance bodies, national organizations working together, regional organizations and international organizations. Its tools may be national and international clearinghouses, bilateral and multilateral quality assurance agreements, codes of practice, electronic databases and other communication networks.

There is little consensus to date about a pivotal role for national leaders in international quality review. Discussions have centered on several options about how to lead this important effort. These range from (1) national leaders creating appropriate networks to undertake international quality review to (2) national leaders ceding responsibility for quality to an international quality assurance or accreditation entity of some sort to (3) relying on international organizations (rather than national leaders) to frame international quality review issues and approaches (e.g., the World Trade Organization or World Bank).

These discussions have also been punctuated by significant differences of opinion about standards for international quality review. Some quality assurance leaders favor a single template of standards to which all national quality assurance organizations (and thus higher education institutions) would be subject. Others are more comfortable with an organic model in which higher education institutions and quality assurance organizations in different countries would make individual judgments about quality and affiliate with each other on this basis—a multiple standards approach to quality in an international setting.

## **CORE COMMITMENTS, NATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND A FOUNDATION FOR INTERNATIONAL QUALITY REVIEW**

Whatever the decisions about how to organize an international quality culture and how to approach to standards for quality, three core commitments stand out as essential to sound and effective conduct of quality review in an international setting. Leadership in various countries working together are called upon to demonstrate:

- Commitment that the longstanding, vital academic roles that are fundamental to higher education and quality assurance in various countries will also be fundamental to quality in an international setting;
- Commitment that the responsibility of higher education to serve the public good in a national setting is also a responsibility in an international setting; and
- Commitment that sustaining the diversity of higher education as a basic value is also essential in an international setting.

Absent national leaders making these core commitments that undergird quality review, higher education and its quality in an international setting are vulnerable to, e.g., commercial interests that seek to define quality but offer little

experience or investment in higher education or quality review. Or, higher education and quality review may be subject to undue influence from international organizations that have little involvement in the vital roles of higher education, but seek to judge its quality in an international context. However valuable their respective contributions, neither the commercial sector nor international organizations for whom neither higher education nor quality review is a core business should be in a position to define quality for higher education in an international setting.

*Commitment to Bringing the Vital Academic Roles of Higher Education to an International Setting.* Higher education and quality assurance leaders in many country embrace a shared vision and common understanding of the vital roles that higher education has played for generations to serve the individual and society. These roles are the basis from which quality review proceeds. While carried out in many different ways, higher education and quality assurance leaders in various countries would likely agree that these roles include:

- Contributing to the intellectual development of the individual;
- Sustaining, interpreting, enriching and transmitting culture;
- Developing an informed citizenry;
- Contributing to a skilled workforce;
- Generating knowledge to build a vital economy, improve the health and well-being of citizens and communities; and,
- Helping government, business, and community groups to use research to address local problems.

National higher education leaders are natural advocates for the extension of these vital academic roles into an international setting. Quality assurance leaders support these vital roles by affirming that they are carried out at an appropriate level of quality.

*Commitment to Higher Education as a Public Good in an International Setting.* Each of the vital roles of higher education described above has a significant history of contribution to the public good. In general, the “public good” responsibility of higher education refers to taking actions that are in the interests of society that (1) enhance public well being rather than focus exclusively on private interests and (2) are not carried out by other sectors of society (e.g., business, the judiciary). For higher education, “serving the public good” means addressing issues such as access and equity in educational opportunity. It means an emphasis on education for citizenship and societal wellbeing as perhaps more important than education for individual gain that may be unrelated to social improvement. This is in contrast to, for example, higher education primarily in the service of the market or commercial interests.

In a similar vein, an “international public good” can also be sustained and encouraged. National higher education and quality assurance leaders further an “international public good” when they assure that higher education and quality review in an international setting also support the vital roles of higher education as described above. This means that, for example, international instruments such as bilateral or regional arrangements among countries would, e.g., further the development of an citizenry knowledgeable and responsive to international needs and, e.g., discourage dubious providers of higher education or “diploma mills.”

Leadership also honors this commitment to the public good in an international setting when engaging in ongoing consultation and deliberation about key values in higher education and quality review that relates to the public good. This commitment means that effective international quality review will routinely include conversations among these leaders about, for example, the important role of general education and the liberal arts in various societies. It means attention to the relationship among intellectual development, the dignity of human life and the development of society.

*Commitment to the Value of Diversity of Higher Education in an International Setting.* Diversity of higher education within various countries usually refers to the range of institutional types available within the society: public and private institutions, teaching and research institutions. Diversity in an international setting refers not only to preserving and enhancing variation in institutional type, but also to preserving the various cultural and intellectual traditions associated with colleges and universities in different countries. Colleges and universities are influenced by the history

and culture in which they are located and bring these diverse practices and perspectives to the international community. Effective international quality review is built on, first and foremost, honoring and supporting these practices and perspectives.

Grounding international quality review in the existing network of national higher education and quality assurance leaders supports this diversity. It honors national differences. It requires that considerations of quality are addressed carefully, requiring analysis of those dimensions of quality that are more culturally dependent and those that are less culturally dependent in any society.

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The role of national leaders offered here positions quality review of higher education in an international setting as an enterprise that derives its legitimacy and authority from the national higher education community working with national quality assurance and accreditation organizations. The core commitments provide a vision of a diverse international culture of higher education institutions continuing to carry out their vital academic roles in relation to the individual and society in the context of serving the public good.



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