

Assuring Quality in Global Higher Education: A Review

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Abstract: This paper presents a general idea and a literature review of the main aspects related to quality assurance in global higher education. It provides an overview of accreditation as a mechanism to ensure quality in higher education, examines models of QA, and explores the concept of quality. In addition, the paper provides a review of research on the effectiveness of quality assurance practices, with a particular focus on student involvement with quality assurance. Furthermore, although quality is the significant concern for accrediting bodies, accreditation structures are decentralized and complex at both the regional and international level. Another challenge identified revolves around the concerns of faculty members and other stakeholders, such as students, about the QA process. Given that students are at the center of higher education, and invest time and money in the system, so, involving the students could improve QA processes.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Accreditation, Continuous Improvement, Higher Education, Accountability, Involving Students In Quality Assurance

I. INTRODUCTION

As the demand for quality education increases, there is a growing demand for quality assurance (QA) for international universities where there is increased mobility of students, faculty, programs, and higher education institutions in global networks. Quality assurance can be a driver for institutions to achieve excellence in higher education. However, ensuring that quality of educational programs meets local and international standards simultaneously has become a great challenge in many countries (OECD & World Bank, 2007). Hence, a need emerges for cooperation of quality assurance agencies and acceptance of quality assurance review decisions. Academic Performance Indicator is also the one of the major components of the career advance scheme for the faculty of colleges and universities in India. As a result, it is also a measure of quality of higher education.

As to address this emerging need, a common framework for a quality assurance model would provide consistent assessment of learning design, content, and pedagogy (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2008). As shown in Figure (a), a conceptual model of quality assurance (QA) in higher education comprises several areas. As such, the aim of this paper is to examine the literature surrounding quality assurance in global higher education.

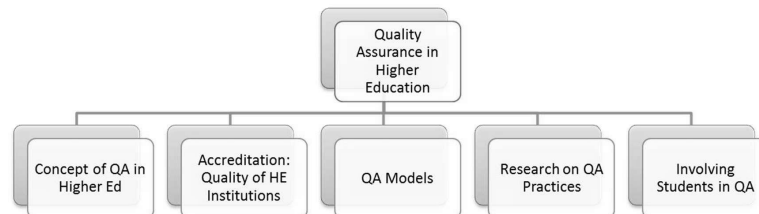


Figure a: Quality assurance in higher education conceptual model.)

The Concept of Quality Assurance in Higher Education:

Internationally the higher education has resulted in “a growing demand for accountability and transparency ,which has in turn led to a need to develop a quality culture, while addressing the challenges of globalized higher education” (Smidt, 2015, p. 626). In a practical sense, quality assurance reviews provide external, third party, independent, objective insights. Such reviews offer observations about partner institutions, products, programs, services, and processes,

and they provide recommendations for improvement. Nonetheless, “the perception of quality assurance is very multi-dimensional and contextual and a gap exists in the view between professionals in quality assurance and academic staff and students” (Smidt, 2015, p. 626). Several key dimensions of quality in higher education include excellence, value, consistency, and meeting needs and expectations; yet no one quality assurance framework can address all aspects of quality, so choices are made about what kinds of quality are assessed (Harvey, 2014; Wilger, 1997).

According to Barnett (1992), there are two conceptions of quality in higher education. The first is tacit conceptions of value and intellectual property in academia. It is the character and quality of the contributions of higher education's members that are at issue rather than any outcomes. The other conception of quality is the performance conception, in which higher education is seen as a product with inputs and outputs. In this view, the quality of higher education is measured in terms of performance as captured in performance indicators. Another conception of quality in higher education is of faculty-student interaction (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Vincent, 1987).

The literature contains many different definitions of quality assurance in higher education. In examining definitions of quality, Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, and Crawford (2015) noted two main strategies for formulating definitions in the literature.

Accreditation: Quality Assurance of Higher Education Institutions:

According to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, 2007), three factors influence the quality assurance trends in international higher education. First, quality assurance is more competitive and rigorous than ever before. Second, quality assurance is becoming recognized regionally. Third, there is a need for an international quality assurance framework with acknowledgement and reciprocity across countries. Program offerings across international boundaries require students to enroll in multiple jurisdictions as part of their degree programs. These innovative approaches to higher education demand greater awareness of the attributes and requirements of quality assurance organizations worldwide.

“Accreditation is a review of the quality of higher education institutions and programs” (CHEA, 2014, para.1). An institution or program is granted accreditation for meeting minimum standards of quality. One common accreditation theme is quality assurance assessment and continuous improvement. Accrediting agencies have developed standards and procedures to guide institutions in the process of voluntary commitment to continuous improvement, by way of application for accreditation. These standards are used by review committees as the basis for judgment and to make recommendations and decisions.

Regional accreditation is comprehensive and indicates that an institution has achieved quality standards in areas such as faculty, administration, curriculum, student services, and overall financial well-being (Eaton, 2011). Regional accreditors require compliance with quality standards and criteria. Quality is the utmost significant concern for all regional accrediting agencies in the United States. Evidence of the significant emphasis on quality is found in every U.S. regional accrediting agency's goals statement.

Models of Quality Assurance:

The applications of quality assurance processes in higher education are discussed in the literature, yet skepticism prevails on the effectiveness of any one QA model (Asif, Raouf, & Searcy, 2012). One of the reasons for this skepticism could be attributed to the fact that the types of services and the quality frameworks the agencies use vary from one QA organization to another. For example, the Baldrige Program is an affiliate of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and it is dedicated to performance excellence. Baldrige administers the Malcom Baldrige National Quality Award. Award recipients must demonstrate achievements and improvements that meet seven categories of the criteria for performance excellence. There are three versions of the criteria: (1) business/nonprofit, (2) education, (3) health care organizations.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), in collaboration with the higher education sector, developed and maintains the UK Quality Code for Higher Education to assure quality standards for higher education institutions in the United Kingdom (QAA, 2014).

Quality Matters (QM) is a leader in quality assurance for online education and has received national recognition for its peer-based approach and continuous improvement in online education and student learning. QM subscribers include

community and technical colleges, colleges and universities, K–12 schools and systems, and other academic institutions (Varonism, 2014).

Quality Matters is also a leading provider of tools and processes used to evaluate quality in course design (Quality Matters, 2014a). The Quality Matters Rubric is a widely used set of standards for the design of online and blended courses at the college level.

Research on Effectiveness of QA Practices

Higher education gleaned the concept of quality from commercial settings and private industry (Newton, 2002). Methods of quality assurance were introduced in England in the 1980s as part of the Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA). TQA provided a third party review and assessment at the institutional level and peer reviewers conducted the TQA review (Cheng, 2010). Then, TQA was replaced with subject reviews during the period of 1995–2001. Subject review was replaced by the institutional audit by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for higher education in England (Cheng, 2010).

Cheng (2010) conducted a study using theoretical sampling to select academics from seven institutions in England. The study examined how quality and audit affect the work of academics through capturing their perceptions and experiences of quality audits. The study examined eight criteria for quality assurance mechanisms. Four were internally devised and implemented (peer observation, student course evaluation, annual program review, and the approval system for new and revised programs and units). The other four mechanisms were externally developed: England's QAA institutional audit, two external examining systems, and regulatory bodies. Cheng analyzed the perceived effects of the eight mechanisms on the following features of academic work: teaching practices, curriculum development, power relations between faculty and students, and faculty workload (Cheng, 2010). The results of Cheng's study showed that quality audits remain a source of controversy. Two thirds of the respondents felt the quality audit was futile and bureaucratic because their work focuses on research and teaching. This finding, Cheng said, indicated that academics want to maintain autonomy. The academics exhibited resistance to the quality audit which produced "game-playing" attitudes to quality assurance mechanisms (Cheng, 2010, p. 269). Issues of power and control surfaced and suggest a relationship exists between the university and the QAA because of a need to have a quality assurance mechanism in place to meet the requirements of the QAA. Academics viewed the university's relationship with QAA as distant from their own work and did not feel "ownership of and responsibility for" the quality audit process (Cheng, 2010, p. 269).

The paper identified practices that quality assurance agencies are expected to implement, as well as areas where progress was needed, thus proposing a vision for the future of quality assurance reviews. The article reported the following examples of good QA practices:

- Practices regarding external QA procedures
- Practices which enhance stakeholders' involvement in QA of higher education
- Practices aiming at improving the infrastructure and resources of agencies

Success and Challenges in QA Review Practices

In the past 10 years, heightened interest has been directed toward quality assurance in international higher education (OECD & World Bank, 2007). Historically, quality assurance agencies have not focused their attention on assessing imported or exported academic programs, with some exceptions. Now, however, an increase in cross-border education has introduced a new challenge in the field of quality assurance.

One challenge of quality assurance reviews is faculty members and other stakeholders' concerns about the QA process. The researchers use a qualitative approach to examine faculty members' perceptions of completing the QA peer review. Although faculty were skeptical before participating in the QA process, the results indicate that many of the concerns and criticisms of the peer review process did not validate earlier assumptions. The study examined faculty beliefs, instead of rumors, to identify specific faculty concerns that could be directly addressed. The results, though limited due to small sample size, stated online course quality is an important goal, and, with plans for expansion, an established standard (such as the QM rubric) requires scientific inquiry for appropriate and improved application of the standard (Altman, Schwegler, & Bunkowski, 2014). This research can be used to guide changes in QA processes and to increase participation in QA reviews with the goal of improving the online course design quality with a greater number of

institutions (Altman, Schwegler, & Bunkowski, 2014, p. 109).

Concerns about the QA process reflect another challenge in itself: creating a quality culture. All stakeholders within an institution need to share a vision as to what quality is and choose a management model to improve overall quality and maintain continuous improvement (Lomas, 2003).

Certainly, another major challenge in quality assurance revolves around digital learning and the integration of technology. According to Stella and Gnanam (2004), with the increasing amount of digital educational offerings, consumers “expect the quality assurance agencies to provide more information about the quality of those educational services to make intelligent choices (p. 148). In turn, “this raises issues of quality assurance controls by the exporting and importing countries and whether quality assurance should discriminate between in-country providers and the transnational providers” (2004, p. 148).

Involving Students in QA Processes

Involving students in QA processes is an important topic and educational leaders are considering how best to include students in their QA systems. Student involvement in evaluating and enhancing the quality of their higher education institution is carried out through specific activities, such as responding to focus group interviews and questionnaires, participating in QA related working groups, and involving themselves in QA processes (Elassy, 2013, p. 166).

The quality of educational services provided by a university is a crucial aspect of strategic plans in the student-centered education context. Students’ evaluation of the academic programs is a significant assessment instrument used for stimulating quality enhancement in a university (Stukalina, 2014).

Introducing students to quality assurance processes and allowing them to participate in external evaluation panels provide good experiences for students. In the role of student representative, the student has the ability to see the situation from the learner’s perspective, which others may not be able to take into account. Furthermore, the students are stakeholders in higher education, with time and money investments in the system. As such, they have a special interest in the quality of the academic program (Alaniska et al., 2006).

Irrespective of the challenges, the benefits for involving students in QA processes can be grouped into two categories: benefit to the student and benefit to the QA process. Benefits for the student include development of communication, analytical reasoning, and leadership skills (Elassy, 2013). The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the United Kingdom reports that student participation is “an opportunity for students to develop their ability to analyse the quality of their programmes, creating a sense of ownership of these programs” (QAA, 2009, p. 2).

II. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented an overview and a brief literature review of the main aspects related to quality assurance in higher education. In reviewing the concept of quality assurance, itself, it can be said there is a need for a common framework for a quality assurance model; however, there is no agreement as to a QA definition or a QA model. Furthermore, although quality is the utmost significant concern for accrediting bodies, accreditation structures are decentralized and complex at both the regional and international level. The difficulties and skepticism in choosing one QA model or another can be seen in the various types of services and the quality frameworks the agencies use, which vary from one QA organization to another, and from one jurisdiction to another. Another challenge revolves around the concerns of faculty members and other stakeholders, such as students, about the QA process. Given that students are at the center of higher education, and invest time and money in the system, involving them could improve QA processes.

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