Chapter 1

The changing concepts of quality in the assessment of study programmes, teaching and learning

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Introduction

The discussion on concepts of quality of teaching and learning in higher education was given boosts, first in the 1980s by the introduction of what can broadly be called 'new public management', with its predilection for management models developed in the business world, then in the 1990s by the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, and most recently in the 2000s by the Bologna and Lisbon agendas in Europe. With each of these drivers went different instruments for quality assurance: starting from quality assessment for 'value for money', but also for quality improvement, a trend can be seen towards accreditation of study programmes and higher education institutions. While there is a relationship between the political concepts of quality and the quality assurance instruments chosen, the choice of instruments also has consequences for the concept of quality that is best served by it. In the present chapter, this mutual relationship is illustrated, and an overview of the spread of nationwide quality assurance schemes is given.

Concepts of quality and quality assurance instruments

Subject delimitation

Before really beginning, it is necessary to delineate my subject. I shall concentrate in the present chapter on quality and quality assurance of study programmes, teaching and learning. Matters around quality of research will not be addressed here themselves, although engagement in research may be part of the quality of individual staff members (in U.S. terms, these are called 'faculty', but I shall use 'staff', 'teachers' or 'academics'). In quality assurance of research, attention tends to centre on output and impact [1] or on management of research groups [2]. Also, I shall not go into institutional quality assurance, in which the focus is on developing institutional missions, capacity for change [3] or, more mundanely, on the implementation of central services [4].[2]

Concepts of quality

The question for this section has been simplified by limiting myself to the quality of the educational primary process in higher education institutions. A real simplification is not given in this way, however, as there is not an essential 'quality': words can be given any meaning, as the mediaeval scholastics already found out, and as novelist Pirsig repeated [6]: "Quality ... you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is.…But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes *poof*! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists?"

This implies that we have to look at the different

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[2]This enumeration of possible foci of institutional quality assurance expressly does not include the educational quality of the institution as a whole, because that is a non-issue: within a single higher education institution, different programmes may show different levels and types of quality, as is also recognized in the principles for good practice of ranking in higher education, the so-called Berlin Principles [5].

approaches that have been taken to conceptualize quality in higher education. In broad lines, I would like to distinguish two approaches: deductive and inductive.

Deductive approaches

In a deductive approach, the meaning of a concept is derived from more general theoretical relationships. The main problem for deductive approaches to quality is that there is no theory of quality as such. The quote given above from Pirsig's novel [6] is illustrative of what happens if one tries to deduce the meaning of 'quality' without having a pertinent theory. Where could such theories be found?

The first and main area where one would expect to find a theory on how to produce quality of higher education is pedagogy. More specifically, the question that pedagogy would have to answer from our perspective is: how to produce quality of teaching, or rather of student learning? For it is agreed among educational specialists that, as a consequence of different characteristics of students (intelligence, educational, social and cultural backgrounds, but also learning styles), any single way of teaching does not produce equal learning results for all students. However, beyond this general insight, the production function remains 'opaque' [7].

Another area of knowledge in which quality is researched extensively is economics. Although the bulk of publications on quality is from the sub-area of business studies, it may be useful to think in terms of micro-economics of quality as a balanced outcome of demand and supply, connected to the price in a market. Yet even modern and neo-institutional economics have difficulty handling quality in formal market models [8]. Still it may be interesting to pursue some arguments from the perspective of economics, as they will assist in making some points about the concept of quality.

A fundamental question with regard to the economics perspective is whether education can be treated like a market good or service at all? The answer that should be given to this question is clearly of the 'Yes, but…' type; the 'yes' applying to the element that education has the characteristics of a service, and the 'but' being that it is debatable whether education, and especially higher education, is not a public good

that should be exempted from market perspectives. The term 'public good' is ambiguous. Do we mean a collective good, or do we mean a good that has to be provided from the public purse? From an economic point of view, the answer is simple: education is *not* a *collective* good. Collective goods are defined as goods where the consumption by one individual in no way prevents others from consuming the same good (cf. any textbook on economics, e.g. [9,10]). Evidently, education does suffer from crowding effects, as, for instance, German students who have to sit in the aisles for lack of chairs can testify, and, even more, selection processes by universities make it patently clear that individuals can be excluded from consuming education.

However, education has positive externalities, i.e. other individuals benefit too if one individual attains better education (e.g. several jobs are created when one individual starts an enterprise, or many people can enjoy better-performed symphonies). Education therefore can be called a merit good. Merit goods may suffer from market failures, indicating that, for individual consumers, the investment in education provided at market prices may not be worthwhile given the limited benefits they themselves have of it, while, for society at large, the individual benefits plus the positive externalities may make a higher level of consumption of education very desirable. The merit good status, then, would be a valid argument for giving government a role in providing education. This seems to lead to the sometimes confusing result that, as public authorities are (legitimately) involved in providing the goods, they may be called public goods. Educational economists tend to agree that education has a merit-good character at least up to secondary education, in the sense that public benefits outweigh the private ones. That is to say societies have much benefit from having a well-educated labour force, while, for the individual, there is not much to gain in terms of, for example, income or job security from attending education up to the secondary level, since almost everyone does so. Educational economists equally tend to agree, conversely, that private benefits outweigh public benefits for postgraduate courses. The moot question then would be on which side of the borderline between predominantly public and predominantly private benefits is higher education? The prevailing

European point of view seems to be that higher education is a merit good. In taking this point of view, I have the impression that European policy-makers and students, who are most vociferous in this respect, are thinking of undergraduate higher education. With the increasing proportions of populations going into higher education, one of the arguments for believing that the private benefits outweigh the public ones for initial higher education becomes increasingly weak. For that argument is built on the idea of having a higher education degree being a 'position good': position goods give benefits to their holders because others do not have it (a scarcity argument). Obviously, if having an undergraduate higher education degree is becoming common, they are not scarce anymore. At this level then, it may well be true that the collective benefits of a highly skilled workforce make up the most important part of benefits. On the other hand, graduate and postgraduate degrees remain relatively scarce, so that they still function as position goods, as may be shown by the significantly higher income that holders of master and doctorate degrees often earn.[3] In summary, there is more reason to treat higher education as a marketable good for graduate and postgraduate degrees than for undergraduate degrees.

A second consideration with regard to the applicability of market mechanisms in higher education is that benefits appear only in the very long term. Whether one takes 'narrow' benefits in terms of income, or 'wide' benefits including personal growth, happiness, health, etc. (which all seem to be positively correlated with having a higher education degree), these are all benefits that appear after a number of years, sometimes a large number of years. Future benefits are discounted, economic theory holds, so that they play a smaller role in prospective students' decisions than the size of these benefits warrants. Markets function better with short-term benefits. Student satisfaction is not a good proxy for the eventual benefits (see also Chapter 3), because student satisfaction is an immediate reaction, not one based on long-term considerations.

The final consideration I want to address here is the 'transformation argument', explained in detail by Harvey and Knight [11]. One of the core aims of education is to change the student, especially mentally; they are to learn new knowledge, skills and competences. Therefore their view of the world will change in the course of their education. As Harvey and Knight [11] put it, education is not a service *for* a fixed customer, but something that is done to the students. As a consequence, students' preferences change during their education, including their preferences with regard to education itself. And that, in turn, means that standard market theories cannot be applied, because those assume fixed preferences. This argument may apply more to 'initial' higher education students (a student's first encounter with higher education) and to young students (adolescents are changing their views on life radically anyway) than to mature students pursuing second and further degrees. Accordingly, market approaches are more applicable to the latter category rather to than the former.

The conclusion of these economic considerations must be that education is a complex kind of service, which by its very nature is not easily amenable to market co-ordination, while that option is not completely precluded either. The previous arguments do not imply that it is more easily co-ordinated by planning mechanisms. Also, they do not answer the question of whether higher education should be funded (to an undecided extent, and through whatever mechanism) from the public purse; the merit good argument is one in favour of public funding.[4] It does establish, I think, that higher education must be considered in the context of the political economy of a society.

Maybe surprisingly, the term 'quality' did not appear in the above, but it was implied, especially in the consideration of the long-term character of benefits from higher education: students do not value high quality of education as much as they 'ought' to if they took future benefits fully into account. In the short run, *consumption* motives (immediate satisfaction, enjoyable lectures, easy exams, comfortable facilities,

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[3]This does not mean that for every individual the private benefits are high. Especially in the humanities, higher degrees do not always lead to higher salaries in the private sector of the economy.

[4]There are other arguments for some degree of public intervention in higher education as well, such as the desire for social equity in access.

nice town, etc.) outweigh *investment* motives (lifelong valuable competences such as analytical skills, 'learning to learn' and 'learning to earn'). Students may therefore overemphasize consumption arguments in their judgements on quality of higher education, while teaching staff put more stress on investment-associated aspects of quality. This is just one example of how different stakeholders have, understandably and legitimately, different views on what constitutes quality in higher education. Another may be that the teaching staff made careers in higher education itself, so that they tend to overemphasize the internal values of the higher education community, i.e. they stress 'academic excellence' over practical usefulness for the student in other career (and life) paths. For such reasons, I shall not try to give a once-and-for-all definition of quality: "there are (at least) as many definitions of quality in higher education as there are categories of stakeholders (such as students, teaching staff, scientific communities, government and employers), *times* the number of purposes, or dimensions, these stakeholders distinguish" [12]. Briefly though, all definitions in the literature (e.g. ISO 8402/ISO 9000 series definition) point to the link between the good or service under consideration and desires of customers as the essence of quality.

The complication in higher education may be that there are many different stakeholders rather than a single category of customers. Partly, this depends on a lack of clarity of focus or level in the discussion. If higher education is considered to be what happens between teachers and students in the classroom, laboratory, etc., then it is clear that the 'customers' are the students. If a macro perspective is taken, things are more complicated: higher education's 'business' is to deliver graduates to the economy, and then, at the highest level of abstraction, the employers (among them the public sector represented by the state) are the customers, or, taking a step back towards the micro level, the graduates are the customers, who have 'purchased' a package of knowledge and skills which they can trade for an income on the labour market.[5] Much depends therefore on the theory applied to higher education (e.g. macro- compared

with micro-economics, or economics compared with educational science) and the level of discussion. The only viable solution for political systems (in which higher education figures) to handle quality of higher education seems not to make a choice for one level or theory, and go back to the multitude of stakeholders, each with their different views on quality.

Inductive approach: what is around?

In the above section, it appears that the deductive theoretical approach was not successful (yet), but led to contingency statements: quality may be different for different stakeholders, and, we may add, at different moments: the zeitgeist of 1968 demanded quite different qualities from higher education than the 1980s/1990s career-oriented students. Let me therefore approach the issue from the other end, inductively: what do we see when we look at existing schemes around quality in higher education?

Dimensions and terms

Before looking at quality assurance schemes in detail, first a few words on terms. I shall use 'quality assurance' as the general term for these arrangements, emphasizing their function toward society. 'Quality control' and 'quality management' are used for the schemes within higher education institutions, the former stressing measurement and maintenance of current standards within the field of 'producing' education, and the latter stressing the connection of quality control with general planning and control cycles and thinking of possibilities of enhancement and change. 'Quality assessment' or 'evaluation' is used for external quality assurance schemes when focusing on the 'measurement' (quantitatively and qualitatively) of quality. 'Quality audit' is used in the jargon of higher education for an evaluation mechanism that investigates quality management arrangements within higher education institutions. 'Accreditation' differs from quality assessment and quality audit in that it leads to a brief formal statement of reaching certain quality threshold levels, giving the judged unit (programme

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[5]I realize that the economic view is highly partial: in an educational view, such as the transformation argument alluded to above, students are much more than customers purchasing a service. For my purpose here, the economic shorthand is sufficient.

or institution) an official right to exist in a higher education system. These terms are defined here for working purposes, to cut short the complicated and tedious question of translation of officially used terms. The etymology of officially used terms often says more about political pathways in which quality of higher education has been involved, than about commonalities and differences in substance.

Quality assurance schemes, then, appear in a confusing multitude of forms, with different aims, scope, foci, levels, etc. (see Table 1). To add to the confusion, the different options per dimension are not (always) mutually exclusive. The aims of a quality assurance scheme, for instance, may be to support quality improvement in higher education institutions, but also for them to be accountable to society about the effectiveness and efficiency of (tax) money spent on higher education, and to inform employers and/or future students about different qualities of different higher education institutions. A complication is the issue of what should be taken as valid statements about those aims: what the governments says, what the co-ordinator of the quality assurance scheme says, what staff say, what researchers about quality assurance schemes find as the aims in use? For different aims of analysis, different answers may be the most relevant.

Dynamics of quality assurance

A further complication in looking at quality assurance schemes inductively is that they are not stable over time; quality assurance displays changes, which can be analysed to uncover mechanisms driving dynamics. In our view, there are four main phases in the development of quality assurance schemes (Table 2). The Table depicts the phases (first column), the main problem higher education has in the dominant discourse in a given society (second column), together with the main aim of quality assurance derived from that problem (third column). The fourth and fifth columns then briefly characterize the forms of internal evaluation (or other major information base)

and external review that seem most appropriate for the situation.

The mechanisms that explain development from one phase to another are internal and external. Internally, the mechanism is learning: parties learn their roles in a quality assurance scheme, which, on the positive side, implies increasing levels of awareness and capacity to handle issues of quality. On the downside, though, it implies that parties 'learn the tricks' so that, instead of a genuine quality assurance scheme, any system tends to become a bureaucratic routine replete with window-dressing behaviour, but without any impact on the actual education process. Positive learning opens the option of a higher phase[6]; negative learning induces co-ordinating actors to change quality assurance schemes (probably without 'climbing' a phase, although a 'flight forward' could be a viable option in some cases).

The first mechanism of external dynamics is that solving one problem leads to the next one coming to the surface (hierarchy of problems; favours 'climbing' to next phase), but it is a recipe for failure to try to address problems of later phases unless the lower-level problems have been brought to closure.[7] The second external mechanism might be termed the 'social dynamics', these are the exogenously changing views and politics, which may bring other roles of higher education to the fore in society, and therefore change the quality problems in the higher education system. The rise of globalization is an example of the social dynamics (for an example of consequences for higher education, see [14]), but, even more pertinently in our present theme, is the Bologna Declaration, which is denoted in Table 2 by the bottom row of 'new challenges'.

The basic message of Table 2 is that all schemes of external quality assurance have specific strengths and weaknesses, which may be relevant in different circumstances and, I could add, thinking back to the argument of my contribution before that, in different constellations of stakeholders. Its heuristic value may be high, but the empirical value of the mechanisms explaining dynamics is limited,

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[6]This learning mechanism implies that it may be difficult to 'jump start' a quality assurance scheme: the sophistication of knowledge, attitudes and behaviour needed for the higher levels must be learned in practice.

[7]'Closure' denotes that an issue is not seen as a problem anymore, but it need not be 'solved' in any objective sense.

Table 1. Dimensions of quality assurance schemes

Aim	Improvement	Accountability	Validation	Information
Scope	Education	Research	Service to society	Management
Focus	Input	Process	Output	
Level	Macro (country)	Meso (institution)	Micro (unit)	Individual
Approach	Institutional	Disciplinary	Subjective (mainly peer review)	
Method	Objective (mainly indicators)			
Time frame	Ex ante	Ex post		
Principal (for whom?)	Government	Buffer body	Institution	Profession or other external customers
Co-ordinator	Government (-al agency)	Buffer body	Institution	
Quality assessors	External	Internal		External actor

because it seems that the social dynamics, i.e. the uncontrollable, exogenous, changes of policies and views, override them. Moreover, the consistency that we as researchers saw among the different elements within a certain phase may have been seen differently in the political reality. For instance, in the situation of the new challenges posed by the Bologna Declaration of 1999, we found that, under the circumstances of present-day higher education with its modularization (further supported by Bologna) and concomitant individualization of curricula, the study programme was, as it were, 'deconstructed' so that quality assurance schemes ought to focus on the individual learner's competences and on reporting on aggregated measures of higher education institutions success in teaching learners under these new circumstances. Instead, a wide variety of higher education authorities almost immediately focused on accreditation of programmes or institutions, which brings me to the matter of the next section.

A quick trip through two decades of quality assurance history

The question of how quality assurance schemes and especially accreditation have spread across Europe since the early 1980s was the subject of a comparative study of 20 countries, published at the beginning of the 21st Century [15]. Quality assurance schemes were first introduced in some Western European countries just before the middle of the 1980s. In Central and Eastern Europe, they were introduced from 1990 onwards. The different timings already indicate that there were different aims and goals attached to quality assurance in Western and Central/Eastern Europe. Below, I give a schematic overview of the spread of quality assurance, and then go into different (social) dynamics and the concomitant different concepts of quality.

Main quantitative results and main drivers for change

When looking at the number of countries where some form of quality assurance scheme is applied, it appears that, in the space of 20 years, this new policy instrument became well-nigh universal (see Table 3). In even less time, so did accreditation; however, as will appear below, these figures should emphatically not be taken at face value! Especially when looking at accreditation, it has to be borne in mind that the authors only looked at the question of whether there was one or more supra-institutional schemes for some part of the higher education system. Thus, for instance, the fact that there are tens of professional bodies in the U.K. with accreditation power for a certain set of study programmes made them put the U.K. in the category of 'has accreditation', even though the main quality assurance scheme, affecting all of the higher education sector, is the institutional audit driven by the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency), which is not an accreditation scheme. Similarly, Austria is in the category of 'has accredi-

Table 2. Phase model of quality assurance schemes

Phase	Problems	Role of quality assurance	Internal evaluation / information base	Nature of external review
1	Serious doubts about educational standards	Identifying substandard educational programmes	Descriptive reports; performance indicators	Summative; accreditation, checking standards, report to the state
2	Doubts about the efficiency of the higher education system and/or institutions	(i) Public accountability; (ii) creating quality awareness in institutions	Descriptive/strategic reports selling of ('self') covering: (i) performance and (ii) procedures	Ranking of institutions; identifying good practices; report(s) to the state and institutions
3	Doubts about innovation capacity and quality assurance capacity of institutions	Stimulate self-regulation capacity of institutions' public accountability	Self-evaluation reports about (i) procedures, and (ii) performance	Audit report to the institution and to the state
4	Need to stimulate sustainable quality culture in institutions	Split between (i) improvement based on self-regulation, and (ii) public accountability	Split between (i) self-evaluative reports about processes and strategies based on SWOT and benchmarking, and (ii) self-reporting about performance indicators	Split between (i) audit report to the institution, and (ii) verifying data to be incorporated in public databanks
New challenges	Decreasing transparency of higher education systems	Market regulation, i.e. informing clients (students, employers)	Performance indicators about 'products' (knowledge and skills of graduates)	Publication of comparative performance indicators; standardized testing of graduates?

*SWOT, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats. Reproduced with slight adaptations from Jeliazkova, M. and Westerheijden, D.F. (2002) Systemic adaptation to a changing environment: towards a next generation of quality assurance models. Higher Education **44**, 433–448 with kind permission from Springer Science and Business Media.*

tation', even though the schemes apply only to private higher education institutions and non-university institutions, but not to the traditional public universities. As a third example, in Sweden and Norway, there is also accreditation, but that functions mainly on a one-off basis, namely if an institution wishes to be upgraded from college to university status.

The 'pioneer countries' with regard to quality assurance schemes in Western Europe were the U.K., France and The Netherlands. In the spirit of neo-liberalism that inspired new approaches in the public sector, e.g. labelled 'New Public Management', governments in these countries sought to make higher education more accountable for the tax money spent on them (a sum that was reduced, especially in the U.K. and The Netherlands), and to refrain from detailed regulation ('dysfunctional bureaucracy') by replacing regulation with market-like mechanisms. Quality assurance can be seen, on the one hand, as a policy instrument supporting transparent markets for students and graduates by making information about quality differences public, and, on the other, as a safeguard against too blunt minimizing of quality levels in the free supply behaviour of higher education providers on (quasi-)markets. The latter would be induced by, e.g., performance-related funding where performance is in quantitative rather than qualitative terms, in particular numbers of graduates (invites lowering of standards in order to maximize graduation rates). Besides, quality assurance schemes were meant at least in some cases to stimulate quality improvement in the sense of making higher education institutions adapt more flexibly to the changing demands on graduates in the move from industry-based to service-focused economies, or to the emerging knowledge society.

In 1990, Denmark was the first follower of these pioneers, and, from then on, the 'quality movement' spread to the rest of Western Europe. An important event in spreading the different models of external evaluation was the EU (European Union)'s Pilot Project on external evaluation methodology of 1994 [17]. The basis for this pilot was the finding that, on an abstract level, a common four-step model seemed to apply to most quality assurance schemes: a national co-ordinator, self-evaluation, peer review and some type of public report on the external evaluation outcomes [18]. The pilot project consisted of evaluation exercises involving one or two programmes in two knowledge areas in all (then) EU countries and some other Western European countries. Years later, in 1998, it led to the EU's decision to establish a network of quality assessment agencies, ENQA (European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) [19]. A further 2 years later, this became operational, and, after some years, it gained a key position in the Bologna Process. Meanwhile, from two inventories made in 1998 [20,21], it can be concluded that almost all Western European countries at that moment had a government policy to assess quality in higher education. The most notable exceptions were Germany, Italy and Greece. By 2003, of these three, only Greece was left without a formal national quality assurance scheme. In Germany and Italy, the combined Sorbonne and Bologna Processes had given the final push for establishing quality assurance schemes.

Developments in Central/Eastern Europe had started later than in Western Europe, namely with the fall of communism in 1989. The first new higher education laws in the transformation era, those of the Czech Republic (at that time Czechoslovakia) and of Poland, showed different routes towards rapid institutional transformation. The Czech approach included an accreditation committee from the outset, to assess, among other things, all study programmes [22]. In Poland, transformation was not couched in terms of evaluating quality, initially [23]. Other countries in the area also followed their own routes towards renewal of higher education, but many included (semi-)independent, often academically controlled committees with a remit to accredit quality of institutions and/or programmes. In Romania, for instance, the new legal arrangements allowed for the rapid rise of multitudes of private higher education institutions as well as the creation of campuses associated with foreign higher education providers. The academic establishment reacted by introducing accreditation for new higher education institutions, focusing heavily on sufficiency of input factors, especially staff numbers and facilities [24].

Only with the Bologna Declaration did the idea of accreditation move from Central and Eastern Europe to the West [25], as a way to enhance interna-

Table 3. Year when certain proportions of countries had quality assurance or accreditation schemes operational

	Quality assurance schemes	Accreditation schemes
(Practically) no countries	1983	1989
About half of 20 countries	1992	1998
Almost all countries	2003	2003

Data taken from [16].

tional transparency (compatibility) of the until then very different national higher education systems, and to assist in transforming, where applicable, old-style single-cycle study programmes to the newly required two-cycle structure. The impact of the Bologna Declaration was far from homogeneous across countries: I like to say that, in 1999, there were in fact 29 Bologna Declarations, because this document was interpreted in every country in the light of the function that the Declaration could fulfil in the national reform agenda for higher education. Accordingly, for some countries, such as Germany, it gave the push to end a decade-long discussion on quality assurance and actually to begin to implement it[8]. In others, it led to a major revamp of the existing quality assurance scheme. For instance, in The Netherlands, the quality assessment scheme that after more than a decade was beginning to show signs of wear, was 'topped up' with a programme accreditation organization which, as had been predicted by some, drastically changed the dynamics of the interaction between evaluators and evaluated units. In still other countries, by contrast, very little changed, as there was no wish within the country for change (e.g. the U.K. and Denmark).

Later, the Bologna Process became more institutionalized, especially once the European Commission gained a permanent position in the BFUG (Bologna Follow-Up Group). From then on, the process acquired its own dynamics, exerting force towards harmonization on all countries involved, and especially on those that joined the process later.[9] Thus ENQA had been given the task by the ministers of developing common standards for quality assurance schemes, especially at the supra-institutional level although with ramifications for internal quality assurance in higher education institutions (published as [26]). Before that, the European Commission had already strategically supported informal initiatives of countries to develop common descriptors for undergraduate and graduate learning outcomes, what I called the 'Dublin Descriptors' when they were first publicly presented, in Amsterdam in 2002 [27]. Similarly, it had supported the university-based projects to develop learning outcomes for several areas of study, i.e. the Tuning projects (http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/). These informal pilot projects quickly achieved (semi-)official status as standards to be followed, not least thanks to the verbal support they were given by the European Commission.

Some changes in concepts of quality in use, and some open questions

After this brief overview, it may be useful to reflect on the changes that have taken place with regard to the concepts of quality that are used in the European higher education systems. This reflection is limited to the concepts used at the level of higher education systems as a whole, which is conditioned by the method chosen for this contribution. Had the level of consideration been the quality concepts used in (a sample of) the 4000 individual higher education institutions in Europe, things might have looked different. The contribution would then have looked at quality management systems based on EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) models, ISO-9001/9004 certification, and 'native' higher education models. However, from the literature, it appears that higher education institutions in their choice of models for their

[8]In fact, the Sorbonne Declaration (signed in an exclusive meeting of higher education ministers from France, Germany, Italy and the U.K.), in 1998, and the establishment of the nationwide accreditation system almost coincided.

[9]At each biennial ministerial follow-up meeting, new countries joined, bringing the total up to 45 by 2005.

quality management systems and even more in the indicators and areas chosen for application in those systems, are driven by external requirements. And among the external requirements, the market forces are one important factor, but the state's (and other accreditors') demands are the most outstanding factor [28,29]. Indeed, it has been hypothesized that institutional management styles (and presumably also the management instruments) parallel the governmental style of steering. Accordingly, it may be expected that the concept of quality used by the government has an important influence on the higher education institutions.

A constant, rather than a change, in the quality concepts in use over the last two decades among European governments is, obviously, that the governments and/or their agencies retained a central influence on the quality assurance schemes, notwithstanding statements about increasing autonomy for higher education institutions. The fact that governments have remained the main, if no longer the only, funding source for higher education institutions, together with the concomitant conviction that government is responsible for higher education on behalf of society, is the main factor for this constant position. It leads immediately to a second constant, namely that in the concept of quality, accountability to the government remained a main aim.

A major change has been that, whereas government approval used to be tied directly to the bureaucratic routines of establishing and funding higher education institutions in almost all European countries, there now are formal evaluation procedures tied to such decisions, i.e. there are accreditation schemes around. One can think of the upgrading of colleges to university status in Sweden or Norway, but also of the recurrent *habilitation* of study programmes in France that has become more evaluation-oriented in recent years [30].

Accreditation is meant to assure basic ('threshold') quality. I wish to make two remarks here. First, the metaphor of students as consumers has gained currency across many higher education systems; it is connected to accreditation in that both carry the sense that giving 'consumer protection' against malpractice of 'degree mills' is an important

task for governments. Secondly, governments feel more responsible for assuring a threshold level for all students, rather than identifying excellence, which, by the way, is the most popular concept of quality among academic staff [31]. In the political philosophies that characterized the welfare state's view of the role of government, but equally under the more recent neo-liberal state views, this is an understandable and condoned standpoint. Only when another state role is taken into account, namely to support its citizens in the international economic competition, does supporting excellence come to the fore. This is the agenda of the Lisbon strategy, but it does not seem to have much impact on the quality assurance schemes in European countries: quality assurance is for the basic level; excellence is pursued in other ways.

The fact, though, that quality assurance remains focused on the basic level of quality, implies that it does not in itself stimulate diversity in higher education. Although there may be different ways of reaching the quality threshold (e.g. through different didactical approaches, such as problem-based learning or distance education), still the single set of quality requirements is a homogenizing force in the higher education system. To what extent European co-operation with regard to standards (see the Dublin Descriptors and Tuning, p9) will be a homogenizing force, or conversely whether the many translations (on 'translation' rather than 'implementation', see [32]) of these European-level discourses through national policies and schemes will keep higher education systems separate, is an issue meriting further research. The influence of ENQA and its guidelines, and even more of the register of quality assessment agencies that is to become functional for all of the Bologna area, is another case in point.

The question of Europe or the individual state is an important one. As appeared above, it was the European-level Bologna process that inaugurated a new phase for the quality assurance schemes in many European countries. The impact of Bologna on countries may have been different for each country, but at least the actors in the countries have had to address the question of how to react to this impulse. On the whole, the Bologna process has been instru-mental in the rise of accreditation as the main type

of quality assurance schemes in Western Europe. As a consequence, the general approach to external scrutiny of quality in higher education institutions has become more oriented towards assuring basic quality, consumer protection, accountability, summative evaluation, etc. As indicated in Table 2, this moves us back, in a way, to phase 1, and, in doing that, it may detract from the internal dynamism that was getting a number of higher education systems close to phase 3 or even phase 4. The associated, unanswered, research question is what are the effects of changing the external evaluation scheme with a much more sophisticated internal quality management in higher education institutions. Do more sophisticated higher education institutions react differently to the changing external pressure than when both institutions and external evaluators were still at the beginning of their learning curves?

Finally, I would briefly like to raise a fundamental question. It has been contended that external quality assurance schemes are policy instruments of 'organized distrust'. In that light, the spread of quality assurance and the hardening of external quality assurance into accreditation both point to a further decrease of trust. At the same time, policy-makers and higher education managers deplore this situation and want to effect a shift in the system back to a high-trust situation, but with some form of quality assurance, as this has proven to be an advantageous instrument for them. The fundamental question here is whether it is possible at all to shift back to a high-trust situation. Who coined the one-liner: 'Innocence once lost cannot be regained'?

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