

Chapter 4

Assessment as a tool for different kinds of action: from quality management to compliance and control

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Introduction

It is well known that quality assessment can have multiple and sometimes contradictory objectives, the most usual ones being quality improvement and accountability. Quality improvement addresses what van Vught [1] calls the intrinsic dimension of higher education quality, which is mainly a concern of institutions, while the government pays special attention to accountability, which addresses the extrinsic dimensions of higher education quality, i.e. the qualities found in the services provided to society by HEIs (higher education institutions).

More recently, the increasing role played by markets in higher education and the obvious need for information to allow consumers to make rational choices have created a new role for quality assessment, as provider to parents and students of information about the quality of educational provision.

To use the market as a regulation mechanism for higher education, governments were forced to confer at least some degree of autonomy on to HEIs, allowing them to have some 'market-like' freedom as providers of higher education. The rules of the market demand that producers have decision-making freedom to compete and to adapt to the competitive environment. However, this has created difficulties for the government's steering capacity and effectiveness, as institutions have acquired some freedom to define their own strategies under conditions of market-like

competition. Quality assessment might be seen as a government tool to regain some degree of control over institutions, if necessary as a compliance mechanism.

On the other hand, the emerging New Public Management policies have directly attacked the power of the professionals, and one may argue that quality assessment has led to micromanagement techniques that were used at local level (faculty and/or department) to control the behaviour of academics in an intrusive way.

At last, the European Community is promoting the implementation of a European accreditation system that may result in a highly stratified European Higher Education Area.

In what follows, we critically examine these different uses of quality assessment (and accreditation) as tools for a diversified range of actions and the way they are related to recent developments in public policies.

A problem of ownership

When discussing quality assessment systems, a fundamental question is their ownership. There is a whole spectrum of possibilities, ranging from one extreme where the system is owned by the state or a state agency to the other where the system is owned by the institutions themselves. The consequences are obvious, and, when the owner is the state, the accountability function in general prevails over the

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improvement function; the reverse being observed when the institution is the owner.

It is interesting to notice that, when the first national quality assessment systems were implemented in Europe, there were cases where institutions were able to beat the government at its own game to gain ownership over the quality assessment system, a good example being provided by the Dutch case. By claiming that the major responsibility for quality lay with the institutions themselves, and that trust in the supportive character of the quality assessment exercise was a necessary condition for open and critical self-assessment (a fundamental tool for improvement), Dutch universities were able to convince the Ministry that they should control the quality assurance system through an 'independent' agency, the VSNU (Vereniging van Samenwerkende Universiteiten). The Portuguese universities have followed the same road, and the Evaluation of Higher Education Act (Law 38/94 of 21 November 1994) has given the ownership of the quality agency to 'representative institutions', which, in the case of public universities, was the 'Foundation of Portuguese Universities', similar to the Dutch VSNU.

Ewell [2] already recognized in 1987, apropos of the American accreditation system, that assessment had moved more and more from education improvement to institutional accountability. At present, one observes a recent tendency in Europe for a shift in the balance between the two distinctive objectives of quality assessment, quality improvement (of higher education) and accountability (of HEIs), towards the second objective, which reopens the debate on the ownership of the system.

A new emphasis on quality: quality management

Academics have always maintained that the noblest objective of quality assessment is quality improvement, a concern that was expressed in the coining of new rhetoric expressions such as quality care and quality assurance. In the U.S.A, Dill et al. [3] support the idea that institutions should keep the main responsibility for quality and suggest that the route to quality assurance must combine "a

mutually reinforcing system of institution-based quality assessments of teaching and learning and a co-ordinated regional system of external academic audits". And Martin Trow [4] contends that the role of outside supranational, governmental or quasi-governmental agencies should consist of "monitoring and encouraging the emergence of this culture in institutions of mass higher education, but not through 'evaluations' based on uniform criteria and linked to funding", and that accreditation should be transformed into "searching audits of each institution's own scheme for critical self-examination, its own internal quality control procedures".

However, the shift of the decision-making responsibility to producers of higher education resulting from increased institutional autonomy has had "substantial implications for institutional governance and management" [5]. Starting in the 1980s, and especially at the political level, several voices were raised against the traditional model of governance and management of HEIs, considered to be inefficient and outdated to face the new challenges confronting these organizations [6].

In fact, almost everywhere, higher education has been under pressure to become "more accountable and responsive, efficient and effective and, at the same time, more entrepreneurial and self-managing" [7].

Over the last two decades, we have assisted in the intrusion of the rhetoric and management practices of the private sector into higher education, which has led to important changes in the operation of HEIs. This phenomenon was interpreted using concepts such as 'managerialism' [8,9], 'new managerialism' or 'new public management' [10-13], being associated with the emergence of market or quasi-market modes of regulation.

It is within this context that the traditional criteria of social and cultural relevance of higher education are increasingly seen as obsolete and inefficient, being progressively replaced by criteria of economic rationality. HEIs are forced to demonstrate explicitly to society that they make effective and efficient use of their resources and that their activities are relevant to the economy and the labour market. "Governments have espoused managerialism, whether as ideology or as practice, to different degrees or not at all, and institutions have responded

in very different ways, largely influenced by their historical, economic and social backgrounds” [14]. Despite considerable resistance from the academic community, some private sector management practices have, to a variable extent, intruded into the higher education world. However, so far, HEIs have been able to avoid most of what Birnbaum [15] calls the ‘management fads’ that Hinchcliffe [16] lists: “We have experienced a string of fads proclaiming the same institutional success including Statistical Process Control, Long-Range Planning, Strategic Planning, Management by Objectives, Zero-Based Budgeting, O & M (Organization and Methods) Theory ‘Z’, Theory ‘K’, Job Enrichment, the energetic Management-by-Walking-About, the Management Audit, Value-Added Planning, Work-Place Reform and the various other theories through which scholars and practitioners have earned their fame, their theses, their MBAs and their consultancy fees”.

There are reasons explaining why it is not easy to transfer many of the private sector management practices to universities, which one can analyse using as an example the application to higher education of TQM (Total Quality Management), one of the most popular management tools, at least in terms of marketing efforts. For Williams [17], this application is a “product of the market ideologies of the 1980s and of the managerialism that accompanied it”.

The resistance of HEIs to TQM begins with its own terminology. Terms such as product, client, empowerment or even strategy, not to mention TQM or re-engineering, do not echo easily in HEIs. Massy [18] states, “the greatest resistance to quality process improvement comes from professors who think it’s just another business-oriented fad. The language of some TQM advocates contributes to this view... Customer, scientific method and removal of all forms of waste are sure to raise the hackles of academics”.

Birnbaum [15] considers that the most relevant barrier has also to do with the need for a compromise between TQM and what are the traditions, values and purposes of HEIs. However, he recognizes that TQM probably has been the first management tool capable of provoking a serious discussion not only about its technical merits and demerits, but also about its educational and social implications. Williams

[17], although being aware of the difficulties of implementing TQM in universities, defends that a number of TQM’s principles could be useful in higher education, such as continuous quality improvement, quality consistency, participation of academics, students and non-academic staff, satisfaction of the clients’ needs and the existence of management procedures that reinforce quality.

For David Dill [19], there are also some important lessons that HEIs can learn from TQM, the most relevant being the central place that the social capital should occupy inside organizations. He defends that the assurance of quality in academic programmes requires “weaving the collegial fabric of academic communities, the collective mechanisms by which faculty members control and improve the quality of academic programmes and research” [19].

Harvey [20], although considering that TQM is not applicable to HEIs, admits that one should “determine the worthwhile aspects of TQM and relocate them in the higher education context, stripped of alienating managerialist jargon and linked firmly to existing quality processes”.

HEIs are facing demands for increased societal relevance of teaching and research and the government’s attention to the extrinsic qualities of higher education to the detriment of its intrinsic qualities, which includes the progressive emergence of accreditation mechanisms. In this new context, it is possible that HEIs will assume a defensive attitude by adapting the more palatable, for academics, components of some private sector management fads, as Harvey [20] and Dill [19] suggest.

Quality assessment as an information tool

Over the last few decades, markets have become an increasingly important regulation tool of the public sector, as governments are trying to improve the efficiency of public services through the implementation of market-like competition mechanisms. Governments are more and more assuming that competition is the miraculous ingredient that will suddenly transform hardened bureaucrats into brave private entrepreneurs. Even the Bologna Declaration, “redefining the nature and content of academic programmes, is transforming what were

once state monopolies over academic degrees into competitive international markets" [5].

However, the efficient use of market regulation presents several problems. For the allocation of goods and services to be "optimally efficient for the larger society" [21], the market needs to be perfectly competitive, which implies a number of conditions that are difficult to fulfil. Indeed, both government and market regulation may lead to inefficient action as is well documented in the literature.

Non-market or government failures are related to the fact that sometimes the government and its agencies are incapable of perfect performance in designing and implementing public policy, because of defects of representative democracy and inefficiencies of public agencies to produce and to distribute goods and services [22,23].

Market failures are the shortcomings of markets [23] when confronted with certain goods and conditions, namely the production of goods that show large externalities⁴, as in the case of education. As the market is a means of organizing the exchange of goods and services based upon price, additional social benefits (externalities) will tend to be ignored or be too little taken into account by market mechanisms. Other sources of market failures are the tendency of a free market to build monopolies resulting in inefficient outcomes (in general, government regulation outlaws this kind of development in order to protect consumers) or the so-called "market imperfections" [23], such as prices not reflecting product scarcities and insufficient or asymmetric information.

In this chapter, we focus the attention on the need for perfect information by producers and consumers about price, quality and other relevant characteristics of the goods or services being purchased for a market to produce efficient outcomes. However, in many cases, the relevant information is not available (imperfect information) or the producer has a much more detailed knowledge than the consumer (asymmetric information).

The information problem is very acute in the case of higher education, which has three simultaneous

characteristics. First, it is an experience good, meaning that its relevant characteristics can only be effectively assessed by consumption, as it is only after a student starts attending a study programme that he/she gets a real idea of what he/she has purchased in terms of quality, professors and the general value of the educational experience. Secondly, it is a rare purchase, as, in most cases, a student enrolls in a single study programme throughout his/her professional life and cannot derive market experience from frequent purchases. Finally, opting-out costs are high, as it is, in general, rather expensive to change to a different study programme or institution [24].

The simultaneous presence of these three characteristics makes a strong case for government intervention to protect consumers, which may take different forms such as licensing, accreditation and the public disclosure of the results of quality assessment activities, all of them aimed at increasing consumer information [25], which justifies the increasing role of quality assessment for market regulation purposes.

However, Dill [22] still considers that, from the strict point of view of "rational economic choice", "students lack sufficient information about the quality of academic institutions or programs to make discriminating choices", as what they need is the measure of prospective future earnings provided by alternative academic programmes and not "peer review evaluation of teaching processes, nor subjective judgements of the quality of a curriculum".

On the other hand, even if this kind of data were available, many students (or their families) would not use it, which questions the validity of the hypothesis of rational economic choice. This is what David Dill [22] calls the problem of immature consumers and provides the ground for "the implementation of quasi-markets, rather than consumer-oriented markets, for the distribution of academic programmes". The state or a state agency, acting on behalf of the final consumers, can get a better bargain from the providers as it has a much stronger power of the purse than any individual client, a logic that is reinforced when (immature)

⁴The concept of externality is used to compare the social and private benefits of any activity, and can be defined technically as the benefit received by society beyond the individual private benefit.

clients do not make rational choices. The state is no longer a provider of higher education, but assumes a role as principal, representing the interests of the consumers by making contracts with competing institutions, which creates a quasi-market in which independent providers compete with each other in an internal market [26].

Quality assessment as a compliance tool

Neave and van Vught [27] have described the changing pattern of the relationship between HEIs and the state and society that started to emerge in Europe after the early 1970s as a shift from the model of state control to the model of state supervision. The state was supposed to refrain from detailed scrutiny of the daily life of institutions and to steer the higher education system from a distance.

Van Vught [28] refers to the cybernetic behaviour of institutions using his cat as an example: when the fireplace is lit, the cat adjusts its distance to the flames until it finds a comfortable temperature, thus behaving like a cybernetic animal. In the same manner, HEIs would adapt their behaviour and strategies until they were comfortable under the environmental conditions created by the government through distance steering. In an ideal system, the government should be able to ensure that institutions will perform in compliance with the government's goals and objectives in the pursuit of public good.

Despite the increased level of autonomy conferred on institutions, the state is still in control, and Neave and van Vught [27] recognize that "the musicians are still marching down the broad highway of detailed plan and control". Roger Dale [29] also uses a musical allegory to refer to the restrictions to autonomy under conditions of financial stringency: "So, while he who pays the piper always in the end calls the tune, he can specify more or less broadly what kind of tune he wants, but only with far greater difficulty exactly how he should be played. Under 'licensed autonomy' the teaching profession was given what amounted to a negative programme by the paymaster: 'play anything you like but Russian music and folk songs'. Under regulated autonomy the requirement is much more positive: 'play only modern German music, as far as possible just like the Germans do, and we'll be

listening to make sure you do".

More recently, at least in some countries, neo-liberal governments have come into power and a new political rhetoric has become popular. Increased privatization of higher education has been observed in a variety of forms, which include the establishment of private HEIs, the use of market mechanisms and the increased contribution of students and families to the higher education costs. Neo-liberal politicians proclaim that the state should decrease its activity as service provider, that state regulation should retreat in favour of market regulation, and that competition among institutions is a necessary ingredient to ensure that institutions become more responsive to society and more efficient in the use of public funds.

Ben Jongbloed [30] uses a traffic metaphor to make clear the differences between the traditional government system of centralized command and control (similar to traffic signals) to co-ordinate their higher education systems and the adoption of market-based policies (similar to a roundabout). In this metaphor, traffic lights condition drivers' decisions heavily, the same way that government regulation conditions the behaviour of institutions. On the other hand, a roundabout, while influencing traffic behaviour, delegates decision-making authority to the drivers: "Drivers in a roundabout are awarded greater discretion (and more immediate forms of accountability!) than when traffic is controlled centrally by signals. This co-ordination by 'mutual adjustment' supposedly increases the efficiency of the traffic flow. The challenge confronting those experimenting with market-based policies in higher education therefore is to discover the institutional framework of rules and incentives that produces welfare maximizing competition among (mainly) publicly subsidized, but autonomous, academic institutions" [5].

Despite neo-liberal claims that governments should not interfere with markets, several authors [30–32] argue that the social benefits of markets cannot be realized in the absence of regulation defining the boundaries for market transactions. However, despite this state oversight of market operation, there was hope that institutions would become freer from state interference and have more freedom to define their strategies under the new

mechanisms of market-like competition.

This raises a fundamental question of how more autonomous institutions will behave in a market-like competitive environment. Will institutions still uphold the primacy of public good or will they promote their own 'private good'? How will more managerial rectors and presidents view the traditional role of the universities?

Public universities receive at least a significant part of their budgets from the state, under the argument that they further the public good by contributing to economic development and by advancing the life prospects of citizens by increasing their 'employability' potential, to use the new European terminology. Public universities are non-profit organizations that are, by law, forced to reinvest any surplus in the organization itself, instead of providing private benefits for their members. This offers the state some guarantee that the organization will not digress from its obligation of upholding the public good. And it explains why the state, at least in most European countries, mistrusts private HEIs, and either forbids them or tries to control them more closely that it does public institutions [33].

Massy [32,34], in two very interesting papers, argues that "the way institutions currently respond to markets and seek internal efficiencies, left unchecked, is unlikely to serve the public good", a danger that is exacerbated by excessive competition or by retrenchment operations. Massy [32,34] considers that when competition is excessive, or when the state cuts public subsidies, thus curtailing the institutional capacity for discretionary spending, non-profit institutions may behave like for-profit ones, ignoring the promotion of the public good inherent to their missions. This forces the state to intervene by changing the rules of the market to ensure the fulfilment of its own political objectives.

When quasi-markets are implemented, the government agencies making the purchases in the name of consumers face the classical principal-agent dilemma: "how the principal [government] can best motivate the agent [university] to perform as the principal would prefer, taking into account the difficulties in monitoring the agent's activities" [35]. This problem is obviously exacerbated when providers have considerable autonomy.

Therefore one observes an evident contradiction in neo-liberal policies. On the one hand, it is claimed that government intervention is the mother of all sins and that institutions should be allowed to operate freely under the rules of free market competition. On the other hand, the government realizes that autonomous institutions competing in a market may behave in ways that are contrary to public policies and the public good.

This leads to the arbitrary intrusion of the government to change the rules of the game in order to force the institutions to follow strategies that in some cases are even self-defeating from a pure market perspective. Dominique Orr [36] suggests that the new relationship between the HEIs and the government is portrayed by the 'roundabout model' [37], but with an increasing number of (government) traffic lights restricting the allowed routes.

This is consistent with the idea that an effective delegation of 'public-interest decision-making' authority to institutions requires "an affirmative desire to interpret and serve the public good, the will to hold institutional self-interest at bay, and the financial strength to balance intrinsic values with market forces" [34]. However, the unchecked behaviour of institutions, especially under conditions of strong competition and financial stringency, may not correspond to the best public interest, which paves the road for government intervention.

That is why governments have been introducing an increasing number of mechanisms to ensure that institutions will behave as the government wants them to behave. Among these mechanisms, one finds an extensive array of performance indicators and measures of academic quality, be it called quality assurance or accreditation. Therefore one sees the use of quality assessment as a compliance tool.

A special case occurs with 'weak states', where intervention is, in general, more sporadic and occurs when a crisis is already well underway. In South Africa, the move to state supervision is part of the redefinition of the relationship between the government and civil society, and needs the services of the Ministry to "shift away from the traditional opposition between state and civil society to negotiated co-operation arrangements" [38]. Kraak [39] considers that, for this change to be successful, it "requires leadership by the

government, the only actor with powers of political co-ordination in society” that should become the beacon setting the direction of institutional activity on behalf of the nation.

The NCHE (National Commission on Higher Education) had a clear vision of the essential ingredients for success and suggested that, for the state to be able to play this leadership role in relation to higher education, four central capabilities were absolutely necessary: “organizational capacity (a corps of competent ‘planning’ civil servants); a long-term growth orientation (the development of a coherent socio-economic and human resource development plan); autonomy and independence from powerful private social interests; and being the honest broker in co-operative relations across public and private domains. Co-operative governance can succeed, only to the extent that the state acquires these capabilities” [38].

The conditions mentioned by the NCHE are not present in the weak state, which, being incapable of efficient steering, resorts to “a bureaucratic weak and arbitrary form of intervention based on prescriptive fiat and rigid rules and procedures” [39]. The weak state is viewed as: “weak and unable to attain the sophistication required for ‘steering’; and, as a consequence, necessitating a reversion back to a conception of the state as bureaucratic and prescriptive. This is the only perceived route in which the (weak) state can gain some control over what is perceived to be a crisis-ridden and highly dysfunctional sector” [39].

For instance, in some Eastern European countries, after the demise of communism, there was an uncontrolled development of private higher education that came to an end when the state intervened drastically and sporadically to rescue the remains of a crisis-ridden system, by implementing accreditation systems.

Quality assessment as a substitute for trust

Today, any specific discussion of higher education management needs to be set within the broader context of New Public Management and related concepts, such as new managerialism and reinventing government [40], which have dominated

public sector reform over the last two decades. As Denhardt and Denhardt [41] note, “the New Public Management has championed a vision of public managers as the entrepreneurs of a new, leaner, and increasingly privatized government, emulating not only the practices, but also the values of business”.

Under New Public Management, the public are clients of the government, and administrators should seek to deliver services that satisfy clients. In higher education, too, students are referred to as customers or clients, and, in most higher education systems, quality assurance and accountability measures have been put in place to ensure that academic provision meets client needs and expectations.

One of the consequences of the New Public Management policies appears to have been a strong attack on the professions, including the academic profession. Reed [13] states: “By imposing market competition through political dictate and administrative fiat, the ideology of ‘new managerialism’ attempted to destroy, or at least weaken, the regulatory structures that had protected unaccountable professional elites and their monopolistic labour market and work practices across the full range of public sector service provision throughout the 1980s and 1990s”.

The academy no longer enjoys great prestige on which higher education can build a successful claim to political autonomy [42]. One observes the gradual proletarianization of the academic professions; an erosion of their relative class and status advantages [43]. Academic capitalism [44] also made faculty more like all other workers, making faculty, staff and students less like university professionals and more like corporate professionals whose discoveries are considered to be work-for-hire, the property of the corporation, not the professional.

The ‘de-professionalization’ of academics has been coupled with a claim to professional status by administrative staff. Thirty years ago, administrators were “very much expected to operate in a subservient supportive role to the academic community, very much in a traditional civil servant mould” [14], and, in the meetings of the academia, they were expected to be seen, but not to be heard. Today, managers see themselves as essential contributors to the successful functioning of the contemporary university.

Institutions use more and more microman-

agement mechanisms to respond to outside pressures, promoting the new values and demands of “economy, efficiency, utility, public accountability, enterprise and various definitions of quality” [45]. Management control technologies include systems for evaluation and performance measurement of research, teaching and some administrative activities, particularly those linked to finance. The implementation of these systems occurs in basic units, which are internally made accountable for budget expenditure (eventually decentralized) and for the results of evaluations of teaching and research activities. The influence of the recommendations (or sanctions) from those evaluations is one of the most important aspects determining the selection and concentration of activities [10] in HEIs, as well as the degree of autonomy of professionals.

In the U.K., for instance, control mechanisms included an extremely detailed framework of devolved performance criteria against which operational efficiency and effectiveness at the unit level would be monitored and assessed [13]. Sets of indicators were selected for diverse public services such as health, social security and education. And Reed [13] states: “Within the context of much more intrusive and pervasive performance management, a consistent emphasis on the detailed monitoring and evaluation of ‘quality’ standards in service delivery and outcomes emerged as the overriding priority”.

The emergence of the New Public Management and the attacks on the efficiency of public services, including higher education, resulted in loss of trust in institutions and professionals. For Martin Trow [46], every institution is linked to its surroundings through some combination of accountability, market and trust. Accountability is the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, answering questions about how resources have been used, and to what effect [46]; the link of higher education to society through the market is visible when support is provided to a college or university in return for the immediate provision of goods or services; trust is visible in the provision of support, by either public or private bodies, without the requirement that the institutions either provide specific goods and services in return for that support, or account specifically and in detail for the use of those funds. The laws of autonomy or

envelope budgeting are examples of trust.

For Martin Trow [46], accountability is an alternative to trust, and efforts to strengthen it usually involve parallel efforts to weaken trust, and he adds that accountability and cynicism about human behaviour go hand in hand. The U.K. under the premiership of Margaret Thatcher is a classic example of the withdrawal of trust and increasing demands for accountability.

Quality assessment as a supranational policy tool

The new European Higher Education Area that the Bologna Process aims to implement will be a complex system of very diverse institutions, offering a wide range of quality. It can be observed that the more neo-liberal model that occasionally becomes visible in European policies tends to emphasize the importance of the efficiency of the system, as can be seen from a document by the European Commission entitled *Making the Best Use of Resources* [47], where one can read “The necessary level and type of investment and their consequent impact on efficiency depend on the development level of the country as defined by its proximity to the technology frontier (i.e. relative to the technologically most advanced countries). Countries far from the frontier should focus on primary and secondary education (imitation process), whereas countries close to the frontier should invest primarily in higher education (innovation process)”.

When simultaneously one observes other developments, such as the recent report *Institutional Profiles: Towards a Typology of Higher Education Institutions in Europe* [48] supported by the European Commission that proposes a European higher education typology (even if it states that it should be emphasized right away that the European higher education typology is not an instrument for ranking HEIs) and the interest of organizations such as UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) in rankings, one may well guess that something is coming.

It is true that massification of the European

higher education systems has created new problems. Trow [4] recognizes that “the growth and diversification of higher education, along with associated changes in pedagogy, will require that a society and its systems of higher education surrender any idea of broad common standards of academic performance between institutions, and even between subjects within a single university, ministerial assertions to the contrary notwithstanding”.

This is a criticism of the stubborn attitude of many European governments in considering that all HEIs offer similar quality, an attitude that clearly contrasts with that of the Americans who “never made (or could make) any commitment as a nation to the maintenance of common standards across our thousands of colleges and universities” [4]. These developments can be linked to the efforts of the European Commission in the area of accreditation.

In February 2001, the CRE (Conference of European Rectors) [now EUA (European University Association)] organized in Lisbon a validation seminar, “Towards Accreditation Schemes for Higher Education in Europe?”, where the main conclusions of an exploratory project on accreditation as a tool for promoting the internationalization of higher education were presented. Those conclusions were challenged by a wide majority of the participants. However, the written conclusions of the seminar conveyed to the Salamanca Convention of European HEIs just stated that “representatives of HEIs, as well as student organizations, quality assurance agencies, national higher education authorities and intergovernmental bodies discussed accreditation as a possible option for higher education in Europe, particularly as a contribution to the completion of the European Area of Higher Education” (Message from the Salamanca Convention, 29–30 March 2001; http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/010329-30SALAMANCA_CONVENTION.PDF), ignoring the controversy.

At Salamanca, accreditation was once more presented as a component of the European Area of Higher Education, but the majority of the universities present at the Convention rejected it. The international press present at Salamanca reported that accreditation was a hot topic of debate and the Report to the Ministers of Education assembled in

Prague states that no consensus on accreditation had been possible: “The question of who is responsible for setting the reference standards has proved to be a delicate and controversial one, especially if it is considered at European level. Alongside those that firmly believe in accreditation, even at European level, there are those that fear externally imposed European standards, as inadequate to their national system or reality and a restriction to the institutional capacity to innovate” [49].

However, the final conclusions of the Salamanca Convention of European HEIs conveyed to Prague state “the way into the future will be to design mechanisms at European level for the mutual acceptance of quality assurance outcomes, with ‘accreditation’ as one possible option”. On the contrary, the final Communiqué of the Higher Education ministers assembled in Prague avoids any reference to a European system of quality/accreditation.

Despite the opposition of a large number of HEIs, the idea of European accreditation has survived all difficulties, and, in 2004, the Commission has presented a proposal for the recommendation of the Council and of the European Parliament. According to the proposal, there will be multiple accreditation agencies, public and private, national and international, that need to be recognized by a central agency. HEIs should be allowed by their governments to choose any agency they prefer. This is consistent with the idea of a stratified European Area of Higher Education, as institutions would be allowed to choose an accreditation agency adequate to their quality level. One may foresee that some accreditation agencies will address excellence at an international level, while others will be more appropriate to regional or local institutions, some will accredit research universities, while others will specialize in teaching-only institutions.

Therefore one may conclude that quality assessment can also be used as a tool for the implementation of supranational policies.

Conclusions

This chapter shows that quality systems, albeit in a number of different forms (quality assurance, accred-

itation, licensing, etc.), are today an intrusive reality of every national higher education system and will remain an important regulation and steering tool for many governments.

Being initially an almost exclusive concern of the academics, quality has become progressively a matter of public concern in the 1980s and 1990s, with the two main objectives of quality assessment being quality improvement and accountability; the balance between these conflicting objectives lying more to the side of improvement where the academics still have a strong voice, and more to the side of accountability when the will of the government predominates.

We have examined the different uses of quality assessment as a tool for quite different kinds of action, ranging from the more academic concern with quality improvement to the implementation of markets and the interests of government control and supranational policy implementation. Today, there is an increasing diversity of rationales explaining why quality and the measurement of quality have assumed such an important role. Changes in the context surrounding higher education, such as massification, globalization, the presence of the market as a tool of public policy, the increasing visibility of new higher education providers (private and for-profit) and the increasing competition for money, students and positions in rankings, have had a profound influence over the universities and their governance and management systems.

The new role of the government as a purchaser of higher education and the new role of the students as customers in a higher education market have created the need for more information on the quality of educational provision, which has introduced a range of mechanisms such as performance indicators, institutional rankings and systems of quality assurance and accreditation.

The attack on traditional public services has destroyed society's trust of institutions and has increased the demands for more accountability, while new micromanagement mechanisms were put in place that have contributed to the progressive proletarianization of the academics, which have moved from a position of professionals into one of employees, the new assumed professionals being the managers, academic or not.

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