

## Chapter 6

# Quality assessment and indicators in higher education: needs, problems and potential

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### Introduction

From the glossary of terms related to issues of quality assurance, published by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)-CEPES (European Centre for Higher Education), it appears that 'assessment' can be defined as "a process of the systematic gathering, quantifying, and using information in view of judging the core activities of a higher education institution"; in other words, quantitative and qualitative evidence, foremost, of education activities and research outcomes.

Furthermore, the English thesaurus found in Microsoft Office indicates the following related words for the term 'assessment': appraisal, evaluation, estimation, measurement, judgement, review, consideration and opinion.

From the above explanations and descriptions, it is quite clear that 'assessment' is a multidimensional concept as well as a rather intrusive undertaking. And, if this were not tenuous enough, the object of the assessment to be dealt with is not a less complex and multi-variable concept referring to 'quality', reflecting the work carried out by a higher education system and its constituent institutions.

### The needs

It is appropriate to keep in mind that 'quality assessment' is not a new phenomenon in higher education. Actually, it can be argued that it has always been subjected to a mixture of external and internal assessment. It can be considered that, until the early 1990s, the dominant way of dealing with quality in

higher education was through *soft policy measures* which relied mostly on *voluntary accreditation* (in the American model), the *external examiner system* (in the U.K. and other Commonwealth countries) and *public authority control* over institutions and study programmes (in the case of continental Europe). An entirely different situation arose in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (and other countries under a communist regime) in which ideological factors were mixed with genuine concerns for academic standards.

Let us analyse the causes which, on the one hand, led to the departure from the previous way of dealing with quality of higher education, and, on the other hand, to a much greater demand for quantitative measurements; indicators which have become one of the main features characterizing the environment in which universities and other HEIs (higher education institutions) are now functioning.

The explanation for this new environment should be looked at within the context of the profound changes which are taking place within higher education as well as with regard to its role in modern society, with the major features illustrating the dimension of these changes being the following.

- A spectacular growth of the system of higher education combined with institutional diversity. In the late 1970s, it was considered that any society needed a certain minimum of the entering age group (those 18–23-years-old) to have access to higher education in order to grow and survive. It was estimated at the time that around 20% was a reasonable proportion, while less than 12% was seen as insufficient even for survival [1]. It is being argued that these

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numbers should now be at least double; while those societies which have led in all kinds of competitiveness tests have participation rates somewhere between 45% and more than 70%. What has emerged is an “*egalitarian-driven mass higher education*” in which students of different backgrounds, ages, academic qualifications, ethnicity, economic status, special needs, etc. participate. Description and analysis of such heterogeneous student population poses enormous statistical challenges, especially at the international level which can be easily observed when reading international statistical yearbooks. No lesser challenge is to assess the institutional diversity of higher education enterprise which also poses serious problems when we try to provide quantitative information concerning basic data such as the total number of HEIs.

- Most of the universities (the term covers also other types of HEI) are big organizations by all kind of quantitative indicators. Their role and impact in the local economic and social contexts are enormous. Most often, an HEI is the largest employer in its local environment. Higher education is a recipient of an important part of the public budget, corporate investments and private funding in a variety of forms, from tuition fees to donations. Budgets are now in the range of large corporations. The land-holdings and physical infrastructure make a number of institutions important ‘property-holders’. In addition to teaching and research facilities, universities operate a multiplicity of entities with a variety of activities: canteens, book stores, sports arenas, museums, even hotels and concert halls. Students and staff represent a large pool of potential and regular consumers of goods and services produced within the premises operated by the university. All these need to be somehow ‘assessed’ and evaluated. Only from such a point of view is the need for quantitative measurements evident.
- The university is the only place where it is possible to undertake, on a large scale, all kinds of research: basic, applied, historical and reflective academic disciplines, as well as

interdisciplinary, international and intercultural research. Consequently, the number of spin-offs in which academics and/or universities are participating is steadily increasing (with all the associated problems... but that is for another discussion). In our modern ‘knowledge-dependent economy’, it is simply unrealistic to expect that different stakeholders within and outside of higher education are going to conceal their interest and accept that academic community ‘to leave it alone’. In this regard, they might also express their own view concerning quality and its assessment.

- Higher education is partly influenced by and partly contributes to globalization and its various international as well as regional expressions, such as, for example, the Bologna Process. In this context, there is a growing need for reliable *comparative* information about systems and institutions of higher education. In this regard, the role of organizations such as UNESCO (mainly through its activities related to collection, analyses and publication of the statistical yearbooks), OECD [(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development); through elaboration, collection and publication of policy indicators, particularly those produced under its *Education at a Glance* series] and Eurydice (through the collection and analysis of information on education in the countries of the European Union) is of a renewed significance. Of no less importance are indicators which try to reflect effectiveness of certain policy measures, for example, impact of loans provided by international financing organizations or aid agencies.

### Problems and potential

The above developments in higher education have brought about many changes, including a departure from an *implicit way* of dealing with quality (perceived as a natural element of university-level learning and research and an integrated part of academics’ professional responsibilities) towards an emergence of more *perceptible mechanisms* in which higher education has to provide ‘evidence of

quality' as proof of value-for-money, effectiveness and fitness-for-purpose, etc. [2].

In addition to being of assistance in dealing with traditional aspects of 'academic performance', the agenda of quality assurance has a potential to respond to a much larger set of objectives, such as to enhance accountability, to allow more effective management and control, to stimulate improvement, to contribute to various forms of public information (including ranking), to contribute to public confidence, to assure international acceptability and to facilitate resource allocation.

Each of the above objectives requires an informational input, not always, but very often, in the form of performance indicators which should provide reliable information taking into account the specificity of higher education.

A new policy is prevailing: one linking performance with resource allocation. Consequently, HEIs, as well as academics, are required to be much more directly involved in matters linked to a 'quality assurance' agenda. In the case of Europe, this needs to be seen in the context of the Bologna Process which integrates two ambitious initiatives: to create by the year 2010 the EHEA (European Higher Education Area) and the ERA (European Research Area). It is now being accepted by all parties involved in the implementation of the Bologna Process that quality issues are at the heart of the process. To nobody's surprise, in the course of the last couple of years we have witnessed the emergence of a very different picture of the way quality assessment is being dealt with at the national and also more and more at the European level. I believe it is correct for the academic community to retain a certain degree of control by developing an internal quality culture to ensure and monitor enhancement of their activities and services in a way that is compatible with core academic values. Such initiatives as those undertaken within the Bologna Process to create a registry of *bona fide* quality assurance and accreditation agencies, REHEQA (European Register for Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies), are in line with such an approach. Such a registry might also be appropriate in order to avoid emergence of the false accreditation agencies issuing fraudulent 'accreditation certificates'.

Inadvertently, the creation of such a registry is going to result in the sharing of licensing and quality assessment 'powers' between non-governmental, governmental and international bodies and agencies. At least in a Pan-European context, it is still *terra nova*; it might therefore be valuable to have a look at already existing examples of international quality assessment and international initiatives of awarding a 'quality label' which is quite spread out with regard to engineering and business education. In the case of the first filed studies, the most well-known is that one run by FEANI (European Federation of the National Engineering Associations). In the field of business education it is the EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System) process designed and administered by the EFMD (European Foundation for Management Development). This is quite an elaborate system, based on two types of quality benchmarking, including an accreditation procedure leading to the award of an acknowledged 'EQUIS accreditation label'. An excessive use of quality standards may well become the source of a certain amusement and bemusement; when, for example, a particular business school promotes itself as being 'triple-accredited'. It also needs to be kept in mind what is the 'added value' of each such external accreditation.

The issue of quality assessment in higher education has become of such importance that even a liberal country such as the U.S.A. has not left setting the rules for the exercise entirely to the academic community. After some two centuries of non-intervention in the affairs of higher education, it has recently adopted a legal act called *The Higher Education Amendments Act of 1992*. It has expended the prerogatives of the U.S. Secretary of Education to determine which of the country's accrediting agencies or associations (which formally are not governmental agencies) are considered to be reliable to assess the quality and give accreditation of study or training programmes provided by HEIs. The exerted-by-proxy control over those agencies is carried out by the required approval of their standards and operating procedures by the Secretary of Education.

Present developments concerning quality assessment in higher education need to be seen in the context of a drive for efficiency and the emergence of

a more competitive culture in institutional behaviour in our societies. It has various manifestations, from the emergence of a 'quality assurance movement' promoting 'quality culture' to the proliferation of 'university ranking'. The specificity of higher education is no longer considered to be a 'shield of exceptionality' preventing it from external quality assessment, however controversial such initiatives may be, as is in particular the case with methodologies used in ranking and league tables.

It is in this context that *design, choice and use* of indicators needs particular attention. Well-designed and mutually acceptable indicators can contribute to a more effective policy debate and streamline the decision-making process, thus minimizing the cost of reaching a decision. On the other hand, too many indicators can result in heavy bureaucratic and administrative procedures and lead to a situation in which public or institutional administration can exert excessive control over academic competencies.

Indicators can play a *positive awareness function*. We have observed this in the context of the stocktaking exercise carried out within the Bologna Process when the five level colour-coded benchmarks were used in the Bologna scorecard exercise to determine the level of progress made by participating countries on the three priority action lines: quality assurance, implementation of a two-cycle system, and the stage of ratification and implementation of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention (the Lisbon Convention).

As pointed out above, particular caution must be exercised with regard to who is in charge of the final decisions with regard to the *choice* of indicators, benchmarks and standards. If externally established standards are applied, the university will not have a sense of ownership. The methodology of assessment exercises and the choice of indicators need to be of well-defined methodology and impeccable transparency. This would require additional work on the deontology and ethical context of quality assessment. A good example of positive developments are 16 principles of good practice, dubbed the 'Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions' which were adopted by the IREG (International Ranking Expert Group) in May 2006 [3]. It is being accepted that 'one-size-fits-all'

systems of quality assessment cannot respond to the challenges of quality enhancement in today's era of mass higher education and with a great variety of types of establishment. In a more telling way, it is not the same set of indicators to be used in quality assessment in the case of the world-class institutions as in a two-year community college.

## Conclusions

It would be too optimistic to argue that a consensus can be achieved on how to define 'quality' in higher education. The dimension, context and content of academic work have tangible and quite easily quantifiable expressions, but there is also a great deal of creative 'fuzziness' in the way higher education operates and performs. This should not be an excuse not to continue our efforts to develop a solid system of quantitative indicators which describe and report developments in higher education for the reasons which have been presented in earlier parts of this essay. There is a need for a variety of reasons including strategic planning and policy development, public control, financial allocation, institutional functioning, group and individual performance. We badly need indicators which would facilitate international comparisons [4].

There is a risk that an excessively interpreted need for a quality assurance drive could lead (in some cases this is happening already) to bureaucratic interference with universities. But it is important to keep in mind that the days of the university described, in a somewhat idealized form by Derek Bock, a former President of Harvard University, as a 'genial anarchy' which distinguishes a university from hierarchical entities such as corporations or public agencies are almost gone, maybe with the exception of some very-well-endowed private universities. At the same time, there is a risk that too -confident assertions based on blind dependence of indicators might lead to self-serving reactions from a very adaptable HEI.

Improvement of 'quality standards' must be part of a long-term policy, on the part of universities to embark on searching for 'creative solutions', and on the part of public authorities to create regulatory frameworks and financial conditions to respond to

such challenges. The university requires *stability* and *continuity*. All of these requirements add up to the reality that the modern university cannot fall behind scientific advances, technological developments, and social and cultural changes. Searching for an appropriate balance between *continuity* and *change*, as well as between *regulatory interventions* and *self-steering* is what represents the potential for a better mastering of the Q-challenge and for avoiding assessment fatigue. And it should always be kept in mind that the predominant responsibility will remain with those directly involved in higher education: teachers, researchers, students and administration staff.

Undoubtedly, diversity is the strength of Europe, but this argument is valid up to a certain point and we should avoid 'standardized European higher education' and aim for the agreed 'Europe-wide standards' which will facilitate interactions at individual, institutional and system levels. The work on development of appropriate indicators forms part of the road map taking us in this direction.

It is modestly encouraging that the academic community is not the only one which is complaining about the quality of 'performance indicators'. For example, the British police are not at all pleased that, while chief constables are required to have their forces assessed, the key performance indicators do

not address the diversity between certain criminal cases, for example, those related to arts and antiques thefts. The performance indicators do not distinguish between the police officer who has solved the case of the theft of a Picasso and the one who has solved the theft of a family portrait; all he/she has cleared up is just one case, regardless of the complexity of the investigations, resources employed, value of the object or severity of the crime. Statistically, both cases have been closed and that is all that seems to matter [5].

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