

Chapter 14

Quality assessment in higher education: an overview of institutionalization, practices, problems and conflicts

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Introduction

Compared with most of the many international meetings that have been held recently in the field of quality assurance, the Pavia conference “Quality Assessment in Institutions of Higher Education in Europe: Problems, Practices and Solutions” was original in several ways: it focused on quality assessment instead of generally referring to quality assurance; it covered both teaching and learning, and research assessments, which are usually addressed separately; and, being organized by the *Academia Europaea*, it was not driven by the political or corporate interests of governments, quality assurance agencies or HEIs (higher education institutions). The European dimension was well served by the attendance: 21 European countries were represented, with on average one or two participants per country (with, naturally, many more from Italy, the host country). Among organizers, chairs and speakers, Western European countries were predominant, and some emphasis was given to the Dutch, Flemish and British cases, since, in these countries, evaluations have become large-scale standard procedures, while they are hardly adopted in other European countries. Yet, from one country to another, even when the same words are used (assessment, evaluation, review, validation, accreditation, etc.), external quality assurance schemes, as well as their level of development, are rather different, and, moreover, they all change regularly and rapidly. Thus a certain degree of ‘confusion’ is present.

In the discussions, as well as in the preceding presentations, more or less all forms of assessment were referred to: assessment of learning and research programmes, of institutions (centres, institutes, departments or universities) and of individual academics and researchers, and of assessment systems themselves, serving to highlight both the complexity and instability of the present situation.

The aim of this chapter is to reflect on and highlight some of the main aspects that emerged from contributors’ presentations and the debate they stirred during the conference, which the reader can also find throughout the various chapters of this book. I selected some issues that to us seem to be perceived as the most crucial by conference participants, in both their presentations and their debate reactions, to offer a state-of-the-art overview of quality assessment in higher education. This reflection tries also to offer some theoretical interpretation of the selected phenomena and issues, because we think that such interpretations are still implicit. As El Khawas noted [1], “despite a large volume of published work on quality assurance, the development of theory has fallen behind”; she also underscores that most analysis is policy-directed and thus has an evaluative, normative and prescriptive stance and aim, rather than an interpretative one.

Following this aim, I picked out three broad and interrelated themes concerning quality assessment development: (i) its process and degree of institutionalization; (ii) problems, tension lines and contradictions arising from the practice; and (iii) the

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conflicts generated by the varying aims, practices and interests of the actors involved. In the conclusion, I provide a balance and some perspectives drawn from both the conference debate and our analysis.

Institutionalization: processes, actors and degree achieved

During 1980–1990, the word ‘quality’ and its related concepts, tools and goals, gained more and more prominence and diffusion in almost all sectors of organized social life. It is embedded in the reductionist anthropology linked to market ideology and rhetoric with its view of social networks in terms of client–supplier relationship, where the former has interests, demands and needs that the latter must fulfil and satisfy at best. The reductionist view, in the end, is a general model of social actors and social relationships basically grounded on an instrumental and materialistic view.

Reform processes of the last 20 years in education and especially in higher education are triggered, inspired and based on such rhetoric and tools. In the first instance, higher education reforms have been embedded in the national contexts and their primary goals are to restructure both systems and institutions on the basis of larger autonomy from the State to achieve a greater efficiency as well as cost savings. This restructuring entails that the higher education sector and institutions are reorganized as a quasi-market in which operate quasi-enterprises, witnessing a thrust toward entrepreneurialization and competition. Autonomy of systems and institutions had to be balanced with their accountability towards the State and society at large. This need was generally deemed to be achieved by means of evaluation, quality assessment, quality assurance and, more recently, by accreditation schemes.

Thus quality assessment in the higher education sector is deemed to be useful to stimulate, attain and increase systems’ and institutions’ effectiveness, efficiency, cost savings, quality and transparency towards users/clients/stakeholders interested and involved in it.

In the last few years, quality assessment and assurance have gained, especially in the EU (European Union) on the wave of the Bologna

Process, a supranational dimension, legitimization and thrust. But similar processes seem to characterize regions other than Europe.

One of the main themes emerging from both the literature on quality in higher education and from the contributions collected in this book, is that quality is a product of a wide social process that can be conceived of as a process of structuration of an organizational field [2], where a plurality of institutional and collective actors are playing some roles in this process. The concept of an ‘organizational field’ refers to a set of heterogeneous organizations that in aggregate constitute an area of institutional life: suppliers, clients, regulatory agencies, stakeholders and other organizations providing similar, or the same, products or services. Thus this concept draws attention to the totality of relevant actors operating in the field with different degrees of mutual interconnectiveness. Given these characteristics, the boundaries of an organizational field cannot be conceived of in geographical terms, but in functional ones: its units are functionally interrelated, even though they may be geographically remote. Thus an organizational field is a delocalized institutional area [3]. ‘Structuration’ is a concept drawn from Giddens [4] used to account for the process of institutional elaboration, building and definition of an organizational field [2].

Between the 1980s and the 1990s, quality entered the higher education sector on the wave of State restructuring linked to market and New Public Management ideologies. In this first phase, the process was mainly nation-based, albeit that supranational institutional actors such as OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), World Bank and IMF (International Monetary Fund) played a relevant role in the elaboration, definition diffusion and legitimization of the new institutional patterns. In particular, OECD was very active in legitimizing, supporting and stimulating reforms in the education sector and especially in the higher education one, incorporating the new rhetoric of enterprise and its contents, of which quality is part. In the late 1990s in European higher education reforms, thrust stemmed from the supranational level of the EU through the so-called Bologna Process, while, in general respects, the action of the international agencies cited above

was growing, and, more recently, they have been joined by WTO (World Trade Organization) and GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services). Higher education has thus entered an international dimension, where national governments and HEIs are more and more influenced by, pressed by and, to some extent, dependent on this wider dimension. Higher education policy-making, as well as higher education activities, are no longer an 'internal affair' of individual national governments or institutions.

As an integral part of these internationalization and structuration processes, the issue of quality in higher education has grown in importance and elaboration, up to configuring itself as an international subfield of activity. As El Khawas [1] has underscored, individual national quality evaluation and assurance programmes are to be complemented by international understandings and recognition, as a part of internationalization of higher education. The most manifest clue is the construction of international organized network ties among quality assurance and assessment agencies such as INQAAHE (International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education), gathering 80 agencies in over 50 countries; ENQA (European Network for Quality Assurance), with 36 organizations and 30 government members; EAU (European University Association), whose task is measuring the quality of international programmes and strategies of institutions; and ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) programmes for quality evaluation of university education [1,5–7]. Moreover, OECD, the European Commission and the EAU have launched and sponsored several international projects in quality assurance, assessment and institutional review [1]. Finally, academic journals of higher education studies and research have dedicated monograph issues to higher education quality, and, since 1995, there is also a journal devoted to this theme, *Quality in Higher Education*.

On the whole, these networks, projects, publishing initiatives and the individual national policies in quality are creating a new infrastructure for quality in higher education. In other words, there is an ongoing structuring process of the organizational field of quality in higher education at both a national and an international level. As a result, while

in the 1980s no industrialized country had a higher education quality assessment system and policy and almost none had any kind of accreditation scheme, in 2003 almost all have both, yet still with some differences in their scope, arrangements and practices (see Chapter 1).

Regarding the consequences and the likely outcomes of the field's structuration process, it is possible to highlight three aspects. First, concerning institution building and the interorganizational relationship dynamics, it is possible to highlight the four aspects that follow.

1. *Increase of interactions among unities in the field.* There is a growing number of organizations participating in the quality assessment and assurance field and, above all, a growing interconnectedness and relationships among them: individual institutions, national governments and quality agencies, supranational agencies, authorities and networked organizations.
2. *Emergence of structures of dominance and patterns of coalition.* As El Khawas [8] underscores, quality assessment has produced, or is producing, asymmetric relationships among governments, quality agencies and HEIs, even in countries where the higher education sector is dominated by universities with strong academic traditional values. Governments play a role of prominence in both quality agencies, since they have to be authorized and legitimized, and institutions, since they have to be evaluated by governments via quality agencies. Besides, quality agencies play the dominant role in the relationship with HEIs, since the latter cannot negotiate, contradict or renege on the agencies' evaluations and recommendations, because of government's legitimization of the agencies and their role. In Europe, this structure of dominance could gain a supranational dimension through the role played by the EU in building the common space of higher education and research in connection with ENQA and EAU, pressing national governments to incorporate the European frameworks for quality in higher education and to impose them via policy-making to respective

higher education systems and institutions. EU, ENQA and EAU, on the whole, also represent the coalition supporting and diffusing quality assessment in higher education.

3. *Increase of information circulating in the field.* All of the collective actors are engaged in efforts both to disseminate information about quality schemes, procedures, methods and practices, and to deal with all the information in order to structure and pursue quality arrangements and requirements. In particular, the main organizations affected by the information load about quality are governments and individual institutions, in their efforts to elaborate policies, structures and practice in quality assessment and assurance. Besides, the dissemination of information, at least in the academic field, is also supported by journals whose articles provide examples, templates, theories and critical as well as supporting insights.
4. *Awareness of being involved in a common enterprise.* The most manifest indicator of such an awareness is the growing process of network-building, spreading to the international dimension. HEIs are also more and more concerned with quality in the context of their growing internationalization: being involved in quality movement, incorporating quality assurance structures and being assessed means for them the possibility to attract funds, students and researchers, to gain social prestige and legitimization, and to compete effectively for them in the international and national higher education marketplace.

Secondly, although, at present, there is still a rather high degree of heterogeneity in quality assessment schemes, the processes analysed are likely to produce, at least in the long run, a process of isomorphic convergence in higher education systems with regard to quality assessment and assurance. The role of supranational and international networked agencies for quality are the primary actors in the elaboration of similar, if not common, schemes for quality, as well as the primary source of diffusion acting as normative

carriers of them [9]. These outcomes are more likely to occur if we consider that higher education is getting more and more embedded in an international dimension and competition, and this could trigger a growing need for similar (or common) comparable quality schemes, evaluation practice and parameters to use as comparative benchmarks for institutions as a whole, their study programmes and research capabilities. It is worth noting, in the EU context, that the European Commission in 2004 presented a proposal regarding accreditation for a recommendation about it to both the European Council and Parliament. The proposal is intended to create a supranational agency for the accreditation and recognition of the national and international, public and private accreditation agencies operating in the EU (see Chapter 4). If it will be pursued and achieved, this means a more homogeneous structure and thus a convergence at least in the accreditation criteria and activities.

Thirdly, it is possible to make a first appraisal of the institutionalization of quality assessment and assurance at the present stage, using the interpretative framework of the institutionalization process elaborated by Tolbert and Zucker [10]:

1. *Habitualization.* A pre-institutionalization stage where there are relatively few adopters and, moreover, a greater variability in the way the innovation is adopted and implemented.
2. *Objectification.* The innovation starts diffusing through organizations in the field by imitation and normative processes (but also coercive ones triggered by State). At this stage, there is also a high degree of theorizing about the innovation and its evaluation in term of positive outcomes that it produces or could produce. As theory develops and becomes more precise, the variance in the innovation's implementation declines. This stage is labelled semi-institutionalization.
3. *Sedimentation.* It refers to the full institutionalization of the innovation, when it is taken for granted and reproduced by actors in the field. Sedimentation could be undermined by opposition by a set of actors who are adversely affected by the innovation and able to mobilize against it, or by the lack of evidence

that innovation actually works effectively, bringing positive results to organizations.²

By the reconstruction made so far, we can say that quality assessment is achieved at the second stage of institutionalization, albeit with some clarification needed.

First, 'supportive' theorizing about quality assessment is getting more precise in relation to its necessity as a governance tool, while there is still a certain degree of variance in contents, procedures and arrangements of the practice. This is reflected by the heterogeneity of national quality assessment schemes and structures, which are in turn explained by the different historical and institutional trajectories of structuring national higher education systems. As two examples, derived from a European context and constituting two opposite extremes, we can use Italy and The Netherlands. The former has only recently reformed higher education, and, moreover, its structure of governance, evaluation, quality assessment and accreditation are still at their first stages of development and their tools, practices, scope and purposes are still under debate and elaboration. The latter had started structural reforms and had introduced the issue of quality and its evaluation almost 20 years ago. In The Netherlands, quality assessment is in a very advanced stage of structuration and institutionalization.

Secondly, and more generally, beside supportive theorizing, there are also critical concerns, fears, resistance and vested interests' defences towards quality assessment practice enacted by academics, which can be labelled as 'critical' theorizing or counter-theorizing. To this second kind of theorizing, we must add scholars whose research and reflections on quality assessment (like those in this book) highlight the unintended outcomes, more or less perverse effects, rhetorical and ceremonial uses, contradictions, ambiguous outcomes, interpretative translations, domestications in the implementation and in the concrete practices of quality assessment.

All that could undermine, at least to some extent, the further step toward its full institutionalization. This last point leads to the next section.

Practising quality assessment: problems and difficulties

The presence of heterogeneity of quality policies, schemes and their different degree of structuration in the various national contexts, the semi-institutionalization of quality assessment that exposes it to a certain degree of contention and, above all, the emphasis placed on systems' and institutions' accountability give rise to some problems, tensions and contradictions in the practice of quality assessment. In this section, I focus on the most crucial problems that arise from the practice of quality assessment as they are detected and underscored during the conference.

The conference presentations and debates, as well as most contributions in this book drawn from them, highlight that the emphasis on accountability has an adverse impact on the improvement dimension of quality assessment at the institutional level and thus at the system level on the whole. In particular, accountability produces some contradictions and hindrances in relation to institutional autonomy and quality improvement processes, since it appears as a new mechanism of control, replacing centralized regulative and bureaucratic arrangements, over systems, institutions and academics with which they have to comply. OECD [11] explicitly recognized these aspects, stating that "Government is generally withdrawing from direct management of institutions, yet at the same time introducing *new form of control* and influence based mainly on *holding institutions accountable* for performance via powerful enforcement mechanisms including funding and *quality recognition*". This shift from improvement to control through accountability exerted by the State was highlighted a decade ago by Trow [12] who underscored that, under the new institutional conditions, there is a process of growing distrust

²However, organization theorists have demonstrated that there is a loose, if not weak, link between a new arrangement and its perceived actual outcomes, since the assessment and demonstration of the innovation's impact is often difficult and ambiguous.

towards academia and this distrust is tightly coupled with accountability.³

In Chapter 1, Westerheijden shows how the introduction of accreditation in Flemish Belgium and The Netherlands, although it was presented as merely the addition of a formal decision to the previous systems, actually initiated a thorough change: the ownership of quality assurance shifted from the institutions to the State, and the improvement dimension almost vanished. According to John Brennan in Chapter 2, the two factors that most contribute to improve quality are self-assessment, as it gives the academic community an internal opportunity for discussion, dialogue and interaction, and peer review, as it allows the exchange of good practice with the external evaluators (consequently, the broadest dissemination should be encouraged and the use of professional evaluators be avoided). But self-evaluation, peer review and academic standards of quality linked to them are tendentially at odds with the need of the State to make academia accountable in order to allocate financial resources effectively, to pursue cost savings and to ensure that an institution will operate in the way it wants them to operate. In other words, there is a contradiction between two deeply different conceptions and logic of quality assessment.

1. The professional-based quality of academia, is grounded on standards elaborated by the academic community as a professional body, sharing a number of core assumptions and values about quality, its assurance and assessment, and deals with intrinsic, substantial and normative aspects of quality. Thus the only competent and responsible body to evaluate quality in activities, work and 'products' of individual academics and institutions is the academic community itself.
2. The new quality framework that combines extrinsic and formal aspects of quality (i.e. formal requirements, as in the bureaucratic model), intrinsic aspects (i.e. how systems, institutions and academics work, what they

do and what kind of results they produce), with a prominence of the former, and above all substantial and normative aspects defined and imposed externally from academia (i.e. how systems, institutions and academics should work, what they should do and what results they are expected to produce), which are elaborated, defined and imposed externally to systems, institutions and academics.

The contradiction and tension produced by these opposite kinds of quality assessment conception and logic have a practical backlash: from the point of view of an institution, how to use an external agenda in such a way that it is internally beneficial? The problem, as underlined by Ulrich Teichler in Chapter 5, is that the objectives of the assessment schemes are more and more mingled, leading to the confusion of the actors themselves; it might not be possible for them to agree on the content of 'improvement'. Moreover, the term 'improvement' itself, its content, goals and pursuing are contended on the grounds of the two different conceptions of quality and quality assessment. But there are other problems linked to that tension.

Since quality assessment is based on external evaluation of performance indicators, it is paralleled by an increasing reduction of the role and of the power of academics to define quality standards of their activities and to evaluate them. Furthermore, since quality assessment is based on quantitative parameters and indicators, it is perceived, represented and lived by academics as a bureaucratic procedure. One must note that it is also the way by which these quantitative parameters are conceived and the practices nested in that conception that make quality assessment resemble more a bureaucratic scheme with which institutions have to comply.

Finally, the emphasis on the quantitative side of indicators and parameters with which to evaluate institutional and individual performances obscures and neglects the qualitative side. This is manifest in criteria such as the number of graduates 'produced',

³This process is embedded in the more general distrust toward the regulatory/bureaucratic/welfare function of the State, of which higher education is, or at least is seen as, a part. Besides, distrust also concerns institutions' and professorates' autonomy in their relationships with the wider societal environment and its demands.

the ratio between teachers and students, the amount of published research and the use of citation index scoring as an indicator of quality in research. As these examples show, the qualitative side of quality is largely, if not completely, left out. Those quantitative indicators do not say anything about the quality of graduated students, or the quality of teachers and their teaching, or about the quality of research. Although quantitative criteria are useful and necessary as an 'objective' basis, or premise, for evaluation, yet they also seem not to be sufficient, and, above all, they could generate contradicting decisions such as in the case of Imperial College, which got the best results along with Cambridge, but decided to close down the departments with little research, although they were necessary for teaching and learning purposes; or as in the case of citation index parameters, as highlighted by Blockmans (Chapter 9), which penalize research in non-English languages and in some disciplinary fields such as humanities and also in mathematics.

So far, I have highlighted some problems, contradictions and their consequences related to quality assessment practice. One could wonder whether these critical aspects are intrinsic to quality assessment schemes and practices, or are the product of social relationships that shape, or try to shape, quality assessment in a certain way. I believe that the second is the answer, to the extent that those problems are the reflection of some conflicting cleavages involving different actors, with their interests, dispositions and definitions, operating in the quality assessment field.

Quality assessment: multiplex and contentious meaning and contents — actors and conflicts in the organizational fields

The organizational field is not only a social environment that exerts pressure on organizations, but is also a social space where individual and collective actors occupy different positions in it and thus are characterized by different dispositions, interests and power that could be and actually are in conflict. This conception of the organizational field as a field of struggle is derived from work by Bourdieu [13–15] and it was used by DiMaggio [16]

to account for the emergence of a different definition of art and its social use in the art museum field.

Quality assessment in higher education is not an exception. In the previous sections, we have seen that: (i) it is at the semi-institutionalization stage and thus it is, to some extent, an ambiguous and contended concept, hence it may have different meanings for different actors; (ii) consequently, its purposes, scope, tools and uses may be thought of and conceived of differently in relationships of different interests and contexts; and (iii) finally, it is a contended and contentious terrain where different actors, with different positions, interests and power, struggle to shape the form, the scope and functions of quality assessment. In other words, the stake is what kind of quality assessment is to be institutionalized. Thus, from this point of view, what are defined as *problems* in quality assessment actually are the reflections of different definitions of its meanings, contents and purposes that different actors with different positions, dispositions and interests carry in the field. Hence, 'problems' are not only a matter of difficulties in translating principles such as quality assurance and assessment in higher education, or that quality is a concept which has uses, meanings and purposes that are contingent to contexts, people and time. Surely they are, but it is also a matter of social definitions and of struggles for them.

There are several relational dimensions that structure this conflict arena and the positions of actors inside it that could be conceived as lines of cleavage crossing the field. We number some of the most manifest which are also present throughout both the debate and the various chapters of this book:

1. State–higher education relationships
2. Society–higher education relationships
3. Academics–institution relationships
4. Interdisciplinary relationships

The first two identify external cleavage, and the second two identify internal ones.

Starting from State–higher education relationships, which is probably the most important structural relationship concerning quality assessment, we can find two main cleavage and tension lines. First, the policy of autonomy is awarding wider degrees of freedom to HEIs, but, at the same time, this freedom

has not to be too wide, otherwise institution could pursue their own (private) interests in their own (self-established) ways, in spite of public interests and policies. Quality assessment is one of the most important control and steering tools in the hand of the State in order to secure that institutions will operate in the way in which it wants them to operate. Accountability replaced bureaucratic controls, performance evaluation replaced the conformity-to-rules principle and economic sanctions replaced the administrative ones. But the basic purpose still remains the control of the institutions. In this perspective, it becomes manifest the sense of loss of autonomy is suffered by academics and institutions, upon which they then enact responses characterized by manifest and latent strategies of resistance, aimed at weakening the impact of quality assessment on them. For example, the enactment of ceremonial, cosmetic and formal compliance behaviours is to be viewed more as a resistance and decoupling strategy than a consequence of the intrinsic property of the quality assessment procedures, or at least as a strategic use of its bureaucratic features as a resource to decouple quality from daily activities and to regain some room of autonomy. Concerning that, to some extent, the bureaucratic drift of quality assessment could be explained as an outcome of such defensive responses of institutions and academics.

Secondly, since quality assessment is based on performance indicators, the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of quality is shifting more and more towards the latter. That means that performance evaluation cannot be pursued only by the academic community through a peer review mechanism. Intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of quality not only relate to improvement and accountability respectively, as noted, but also to whom is in charge to evaluate it. The growing importance of external evaluation is paralleled by an increasing reduction of the role and of the power of academics to define quality standards of their activities and to evaluate them. Furthermore, since quality assessment is based on quantitative parameters and indicators, it is perceived, represented and lived by academics as a bureaucratic procedure, and thus they enact behaviours contradictory with such, as a demonstration. Again, the bureaucratic drift

of quality assessment could be seen as linked to academics' perceptions and behaviour.

As far as higher education and society relationships are concerned, their dynamics are far more complex, given the heterogeneity of actors and interests involved, and this has a direct impact on quality definition, its ends and the tools to evaluate it. For example, on the one hand, students and families are interested in the quality of study courses and of teaching, since they consider higher education to be an investment that they undertake for their future cultural and, above all, economic gains. On the other hand, economic actors are interested in the quality of formative supply and didactic and applied research, because all of them are linked to the competitive advantages, in terms of a highly skilled labour force and innovative knowledge that they are expected to produce for enterprise. In brief, both students and economic actors bring mainly an instrumental conception of quality which should be evaluated on the basis of outcomes and gains that HEIs are able to generate. HEIs are not indifferent to such problems, but they have different conceptions. First of all, the quality of education and research that they provide cannot be assessed solely in instrumental terms. It is also highlighted that outcome evaluation cannot be assessed in a short time span, but requires a long-term perspective both for the graduates' working careers and scientific knowledge-generated gains for industry and society at large. Secondly, societal actors are not deemed to be able to define and to assess what 'good' teaching or research is, since their quality is embedded in the professional knowledge, practices and standards institutionalized in the academic field. The tension here is between laypersons' conceptions of quality and the ones held by competent professionals, who perceive the external demands for quality as an undue interference. Thirdly, and linked to the previous point, there is a strong divergence (at some times manifest, at others implicit) on the definition of education, research and knowledge ends, that opposes instrumental and interested perspective to the expressive, curiosity-driven and non-interested (or knowledge for its own sake) one. All this produces tensions and sometimes conflict between society and higher education. One of the most manifest clues is, on the one hand, resistance

and manipulative strategies of institutions and academics to reduce the risks to be co-opted by the societal environment and, on the other, the growing efforts of societal actors to influence and induce institutions and academics to be responsive to their needs and interests, basing their strategies on the growing economic power that they have on higher education. The balance between these two opposing views and behaviours is very difficult and, for higher education, it is often represented as a hard trade-off between conserving their autonomy, but at the cost of their social irrelevance, and following the market, but at the cost of losing their autonomy.

Coming to the internal lines of cleavage, the first one is related to academics–institution relationships. In systems where the institutional leadership, in managerial terms, the policies for quality and the entrepreneurial model are developed to a relevant degree, the relationship between academics and institutions are characterized by a tendential divergence in the way institutions are managed. Institutional leaders are pressed by State policies and societal demands to make their institutions responsive to them, to demonstrate that the institutions that they lead are responding to quality imperatives, or at least that they are working in such a direction. This is due both to legitimacy and social support concerns and to raising and securing the economic resources for their institutions. In this framework, institutional leaders are pressed to adopt an extrinsic and instrumental view on quality assessment and thus to enact institutional evaluation policies and tools consistent with that view. This often clashes against the academic community's values, by which the necessity of such institutional policies, what those policies are aimed at measuring and evaluating and, above all, how they do that are contended. In short, the tension is between a managerial view of quality assessment and a 'corporate' one expressed by academics. What is explicitly or implicitly assumed in academics' view of institutional quality assessment is, again, that their autonomy is under attack. Thus defensive and resistance strategies are enacted by academics against this 'institutional aggression' and, at the same time, they struggle to demonstrate and highlight the inconsistency of quality assessment tools, procedures and goals with the nature of their

work. Moreover, there are two kinds of critical and complaining remarks on the academics' side. The first concerns their feeling to be overassessed (see Chapter 9); the second is that quality assessment activities are a further burden encumbering on their already overburdened work. These two kinds of overload again trigger defensive and resistance strategies in the professorate.

The last internal cleavage is related to interdisciplinary relationships. Disciplines could be conceived as specialized subsystems of the more general academic profession system. Thus they are very different not only in the research objective, methods and epistemology, but also in the standards that each of them sets as definition of appropriate scientific work. In other words, disciplines are structured around different assumptions, conceptions and norms defining how research and teaching activities are to be carried out and what purposes they aim towards. As an example, Becher [17] has highlighted ideal-typically these differences among disciplines structured by two dualistic couples: hard–soft sciences and pure–applied sciences.

These differences cannot but be reflected in different assumptions and conceptions of what quality assessment is or should be. For example, quality standards in the humanities are rather different from those in hard science fields and the same holds for differences that we can find in applied disciplines compared with pure ones. It is manifest that some disciplines react negatively to attempts to provide and use homogenous and homogenizing quality assessment standards and procedures in spite of their peculiarities, because such attempts menace their territories and their jurisdiction on them and thus their control over the definition of quality criteria. Quality parameters such as the citation index, borrowed from hard science fields and generalized as a quality assessment tool for all disciplines, could work well for sciences, quite well for some social sciences (such as economics and, to a lesser extent, sociology and psychology), and quite badly for humanities and social sciences such as law. This means that, in some disciplinary fields, the citation index criteria for quality assessment are perceived as something extraneous, improperly imposed and as an expression of hard science's

'imperialism' in those fields. Furthermore, there is also a perceived risk by some disciplines, linked to such a kind of assessment, of being marginalized both in their cultural importance and in their possibility of gaining access to research funds. Finally, the citation index has at least two more 'structural' biases. First, it only considers publications in the English language and not those written in other languages. This drives to underestimate a high portion of the production of research published in national languages and in non-Anglo-Saxon national contexts. But this is also linked to a discipline's characteristics, since some of them (think again to the humanities) are not suited, for the knowledge objects with which they deal, to have a relevance for the international academic audience and debate and thus to be published in English. Secondly, the citation index is a quantitative measurement scoring the number of citations an author's publication receives. In this kind of measure, there is an unrecognized short-circuit between quantity and quality, i.e. the more a work is cited, the higher its quality. Obviously, this correlation is wrong, since a work could be highly cited in a critical sense, to demonstrate its inconsistencies and fallacies, or also just as a ceremonial homage without any theoretical and heuristic repercussion.

Concluding remarks: a balance and some perspectives

Two main aspects of quality assessment in higher education can be highlighted: first, its growing degree of institutionalization as a part of the restructuring and governing of higher education systems; secondly, its contended and disputed features that undermine its legitimacy and then its fully fledged institutionalization. As noted above, this tension is typical of the semi-institutionalization stage of an innovation where it is, at the same time, diffused and debated, practised and questioned. From this tension, I draw some remarks or, playing on words, assess quality assessment.

The first remarks concern the necessity of quality assessment in higher education. In the current landscape characterized by the mass (if not universal) access to higher education, the changes in economic sector and in the labour market demands

the rationalization of public expenditure and the growing internationalization of higher education, it is manifest that quality assessment based on peer review is no longer an appropriate mechanism. Given its self-referring nature and its tendential closure towards societal demands, it cannot but reproduce a detachment of higher education from society and its developments. Society and, above all, higher education systems and institutions cannot afford to run this risk. Quality assessment is therefore an important leverage to stimulate HEIs to pay attention to the social environment dynamics and changes. On the other hand, it is also legitimate that the State and society at large, since they both contribute economically to and are interested in higher education, have the right to ask HEIs to be accountable for what they are doing and how they are doing it.

Considered in this perspective, many, if not all, would agree with quality assessment. But there is also the other side of the coin. As Verhoeven notes in Chapter 3, academics are not generally against assessment, but they are against the tools and the methods used. Quality assessment cannot be just another word for control and another tool to centralize the governance, reducing both the institutional and academic autonomy. Many of the complaints of academics and institutional leaders about quality assessment are not simply the reaction of traditional, conservative and corporate attitudes in and of the higher education sector. Many of the critics are as entitled as the States and 'clients' to call for accountability. The problem is to balance properly autonomy and accountability; currently, there is an imbalance toward accountability as control. The fact that quality assessment arrangements and tools are, for the most part, currently used as a controlling mechanism by the State and as reporting procedures by institutions instead of as an evaluation mechanism to improve them, is the most manifest clue of this imbalance. This is the grounds for the often noticed drift toward ceremonial, window-dressing, cosmetic and compliance behaviour, detached from and without any practical consequences for improvement.

This last point brings us to some remarks on how quality assessment frameworks are structured and operate concretely. As the various chapters of this book, the wider literature on the topic and the

aspects highlighted in this chapter show, quality assessment is based on quantitative measures of input and output, for example: how much money was asked for research (input) and how much was spent with what results in terms of number and type of publications (output). There is nothing to contest about this measure that is undoubtedly important, but does it tell us anything about the *quality* of the publications? Another example from the teaching side: questionnaires ask students about their satisfaction, utility, difficulties and so on, regarding a course that they attended. Often the answers printed on the questionnaire are organized as a numerical scale grading the satisfaction, utility, etc.; if they are not organized on numerical scoring, they are structured in a way that they can be converted into numerical values and treated as such. At the end, we have a quantitative measure of the course which is important but not complete. How can a student tell if the course was useful for him/her? Maybe it was not at the time of the survey, but it could be 1 year later or at the end of his/her studies or when he/she enters the labour market. Thus is the *quality* of that course good or not? Even more importantly, this kind of measure favours bureaucratic and compliance behaviour which is the antipode of quality, not to say of improvements.

At the end of the conference, Ulrich Teichler proposed some conclusions and follow-up orientations in the form of questions to investigate further. We quote them here as perspectives for quality assessment in the near future.

1. The basic assumption is that quality assessment is here to stay, for it is indispensable or even desirable.
2. Why is it so? Because we need specific procedures for quality improvement and for accountability, since, currently, the academic self-regulation, the supervision exercised by ministries and the market control cannot fully achieve these ends.
3. Looking at quality assessment developments and trends, we see that we are not moving towards an integrated system, but, on the contrary, towards multiple systems.
4. In the last 15 years, we cannot perceive any kind of optimization or a positive trend towards more satisfactory systems. Conversely, we observe increasing disinformation, as well as a pressure for uniformity.
5. It is therefore worthwhile to try to improve quality assessment systems, especially with regard to information.
6. Since there are multiple systems, it is necessary to tend towards an overall system that works properly, i.e. that serves teaching and research appropriately, and also to see that the diversity of systems is adequate to the specific conditions in which they operate.
7. Do certain countries need certain systems in order to counteract some forms of specificity? (see the analysis of varied cultural conditions for evaluation by Kells [18]).
8. Do quality assessment systems have hidden agendas? For example, ranking systems. What are the political agendas?
9. How can quality assessments serve quality assurance? What kinds of actions are appropriate? How do we limit the management burden?
10. In Europe at present, we see mainly national schemes, but also international accreditations and rankings. Are we moving towards pan-European systems? Or towards an exponential growth of quality assessment systems? Are we moving from a predominant national system towards a predominant supranational system?

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