

Introduction

Quality assessment: many tools for many purposes

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The diffusion of mass systems of higher education, the increasing complexity and differentiation of these systems, the tendency to strengthen the autonomy of each institution, the establishment of several international exchange and co-operation networks both in the fields of research and of teaching: all over the world, these factors have strongly favoured the establishment of systems of quality assessment and/or accreditation over the last two to three decades.

The enormous variety of contexts, institutions, schemes and tools related to quality assessment inspired the Hercules (Higher Education, Research and Culture in European Society) group of the Academia Europaea to promote the organization of a conference, offering an opportunity for experts in the field to find some common reference points and to discuss present and future likely developments. Under the supervision of Alessandro Cavalli, Erik De Corte and Ulrich Teichler, the conference was organized in March 2006 at the University of Pavia, with financial support from the Compagnia di San Paolo.

Evaluation, quality assessment and quality assurance constitute the family of terms that designate the collection, elaboration, utilization and dissemination of information, facilitating the decision-making of various stakeholders and actors involved in the system. Assessment schemes are essentially instruments to support the decision-making of a variety of actors.

The agencies that provide the economic resources for the functioning of the higher education system are the first category of stakeholders. In Europe (but also elsewhere), these actors/stakeholders are, directly or indirectly, national governments and, increasingly, supranational and international institutions such as the European Union (see Chapter 3 by Verhoeven and Chapter 4 by

Amaral et al.). The term 'accountability' has become fashionable and is frequently used even in languages (such as Italian) where there is no corresponding word. In some European countries, the financing of universities (and of other educational institutions) has long been calculated essentially according to the number of enrolled students, producing perverse forms of competition with the effect of lowering quality standards. If the simple criterion of number of students is abandoned, other performance criteria measuring efficacy and efficiency are needed. When a new study programme is to be established, one should know in advance whether there is a real demand for the kind of skills to be produced, whether necessary material and human resources are available, and whether the envisaged curriculum is adequate for the desired goals. Similar evaluation criteria, applied after the fact, are needed in the case of already established programmes.

As Brennan points out in Chapter 2, assessment criteria have an impact on power relations between governments and institutions, but also within institutions. In traditionally centralized systems of higher education, the trend towards higher degrees of autonomy for each individual institution is probably quite irreversible. When faced with greater autonomy, governments, as resource providers, need to exercise control in order to make institutions more accountable and responsible. Quality assessment becomes, then, a most relevant tool. The same is true when institutions traditionally enjoy great autonomy: governments seek greater control, and assessment can serve this purpose.

For individual institutions, more autonomy implies the need and the opportunity to develop their own strategies: they have to make choices regarding which sectors should grow, which should

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remain stable and even which should be closed. This is generally the kind of decision that academic staff are unable to take. The managerial tendency in the governance of HEIs (higher education institutions) (as Westerheijden stresses in Chapter 1) is strongly linked with high levels of autonomy within each single institution. Managers need criteria to inform their choices about the future of their institutions, and quality assessment is often designed to provide such criteria.

Employers, both public and private, should also be considered among external stakeholders, even in cases in which they do not contribute to the financing of HEIs. Sometimes, traditionally oriented academic staff resist the idea that the institution should take care of students' futures once they get their degrees. Employers are, of course, interested in quality assessment and can themselves provide useful information to assess the quality of the output of educational institutions, since they are the final users of the skills and competencies produced.

In considering quality assessment, one should not forget that students (and, to a certain extent, their families) are among the main stakeholders of higher education systems. In all such systems, students can normally decide where and what to study, within the limitations of the recruitment rules and application procedures of different countries and institutions. Countries and institutions differ in the ways in which they regulate admission, ranging from extreme openness (no or minimal restrictions in terms of location and/or subject matter) to strict selection of the type and number of students admitted in each academic speciality. Given the degrees of freedom available, a student's choice depends upon personal interests and the self-assessment of one's personal capacities, on the aspiration to social mobility, but also on the availability of an adequate offer of study programmes on the local and/or national or even international markets. Students with high aspirations and well-defined interests in specific fields will need to know which and where are the institutions that best fit their desires. Those with lower aspirations will probably need the same information to avoid institutions too demanding for their assumed capacities. Everybody has an interest in knowing which institutions or study programmes have a very

good or a very bad reputation. Rankings of institutions and/or study programmes are therefore clearly in the interest of students making decisions about their future study course. The academic marketplace is not perfectly transparent, and, if one buys a bad product, the costs to remedy the error can be quite high; a good assessment system, however, avoids a great deal of costs due to inadequate choices.

The criteria for the assessment of research activities are a different story: here, the evaluation units are departments, laboratories and individual research projects. Relevance, feasibility, expected results, reputation of proponents and competence of research teams are to be assessed beforehand; research processes should be monitored regularly, and progress and results should be evaluated at the conclusion of the project. In research evaluation, peer review is a universal tool. Evaluation teams or commissions are increasingly international, particularly in areas where scientific communities have long since expanded beyond national boundaries, as in mathematics and the natural sciences (but much less in the humanities). As Daniel et al. point out in Chapter 7, analysing the evaluation of contributions submitted to academic journals, peer review procedures, although unavoidable, are not without their shortcomings and criticisms.

Peer review is also fundamental to the recruitment and career development of faculty members, despite the great variety of arrangements and formal procedures regulating the matter in different countries: from highly centralized systems, such as in Italy, where recruitment occurs through national competitions and selection committees elected by disciplinary communities, to the quasi-market systems of several North-European and Anglo-Saxon countries. Wide use is made in many disciplines of the quantitative indicators produced by bibliographic databanks such as Thomson's. The universal acceptance of these criteria does not preclude the advancement of strongly critical arguments about their reliability (see Chapter 8 by Figà-Talamanca), also considering the fact that the pool of indexed journals under-represents publications that are not in the English language. The scientific communities of Slavic, German and Latin languages (not to mention Chinese and

Japanese) risk marginalization if scientific productivity is measured only, or even predominantly, by the number of citations in English language publications. As Wim Blockmans argues in Chapter 9, these shortcomings are particularly relevant in the humanities and social sciences. Obviously, the quality of research in, for example, mediaeval law of the late Carolingian age cannot be adequately measured by the number of citations in journals predominantly in the English language. The opposite holds in the case of all branches of physics.

The history of quality assessment began at different times in different countries, with different aims and following different schemes. Four chapters offer a sample of the great variation in these experiences. Chapter 10 by Yonezawa traces the development of the Japanese evaluation system which, as in several other countries, began as a self-evaluation process, later shifting towards a system ruled by government and implemented through a group of certified evaluation organizations. Dittrich and Klaassen (Chapter 12) describe the functioning of the accreditation organization in The Netherlands and in Flanders. The system was initially more oriented towards quality improvement and later developed in the direction of accreditation, encountering resistance from part of the academic staff, as Wijnen remarks in Chapter 13. Dubois presents in Chapter 11 a specific case of evaluation: how ministerial commissions in France evaluate proposals presented by HEIs for the establishment of new study programmes oriented to meet the demands of the labour market.

Despite the increasing trend towards internationalization of higher education and the considerable mobility across borders of faculty, staff and students, assessment schemes are still mainly confined within national boundaries. However, as Sadlak stresses in Chapter 6, the need for common indicators to facilitate international comparisons is strongly felt. In addition, given the great variety of public and private, national and international accreditation agencies, the need exists for some form of public recognition at least at the regional (first of all, European) level.

The need to increase comparability of study programmes across Europe is recognized also by Teichler in Chapter 5. He points to the danger of seeing quality assessment exclusively as a function of accreditation, forgetting its original function as a tool for quality improvement; he argues that accreditation schemes are overburdening academic administrations with bureaucratic duties and risk endangering other schemes of assessment more relevant to ensuring quality.

However critical one might be about current models and practices of quality assessment and quality assurance, it is safe to say that they not only will continue to operate, but also will spread in the world of higher learning institutions as a whole. The trend towards greater vertical diversification of such institutions requires reliable information about the threshold of excellence, on one end of the ladder, and the threshold of mediocrity on the other. Only schemes of quality assessment can provide such benchmarks to guide the actions of all those with a stake in higher education.

