Quality assurance and university governance: Complementary activities

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Invited lecture presented at the Annual International Conference of the Austrian Science Board on “Where is the University Going? Quo vadis, Universitas?”

Vienna 6 – 7 November 2014
“Gentlemen, you will be relieved to know that I have fired Alex Lu, our Director of Quality Control.”
Quality assurance has become the most popular umbrella term in Europe referring to all kinds of assessment/evaluation in HE linked to activities aimed at developing and improving the quality of HE (Teichler, 2007).

The emergence of national evaluation schemes in HE in Western Europe occurred in the mid-1980s, and originated in The Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom.

In the years thereafter many other Western European countries established similar evaluation systems.

In Central and Eastern Europe such schemes were introduced from the 1990 onwards.

Over the past twenty five years these systems have undergone important changes.
In this presentation I will discuss the following topics relating to quality assurance in HE:

* Emergence of quality assessment for HE and its relevance for university governance

* From quality assessment aiming at improvement of HE towards accreditation focused on accountability

* Distinguishing between an institutional quality assurance assessment and a (limited) program assessment

* A future perspective: separating accountability from improvement in quality assurance activities

* Final comments: Quality assurance and governance entwined
Accreditation and Evaluation in the European Higher Education Area

Stefanie Schwarz and Don F. Westerheijden (Eds.)

Kluwer Academic Publishers
Quality Assessment for Higher Education in Europe

Edited by
Alessandro Cavalli
Emergence of quality assessment in the 1980s and its relevance for governance

Pursuing quality in view of achieving excellence has always been a major goal in HE

Until the 1970s this quality was controlled by bureaucratic measures such as legal conditions for starting institutions, faculties and study programs, formal rules for the appointment of academic personnel, etc.

In addition there was in the society a good degree of trust that universities themselves could guarantee quality

However, in the late 1970s there was a loss of confidence in the role of academics as guardians of quality and efficiency

Moreover, quality assurance used as a management tool in the industrial sector was seen more and more as an instrument that could also be appropriately applied in the management and governance of HE
Application of this tool was strongly stimulated through several other developments:

* First of all, the enormous expansion and “massification” of HE in the 1970s and the related concern about quality called for new forms of management and governance

* Second, whereas in the previous era governments were heavily involved in the planning and organization of HE, there occurred in the 1980s a loss of trust in their capacity to guarantee its quality, relevance and efficiency. As a consequence HEIs were made and granted more institutional autonomy Hénard & Mitterle, 2010).

Nevertheless governments, being the major financial source of universities, were eager to maintain and even to improve the level of quality and performance of HE through the application of external tools of control
* Third, in the 1980s and 1990s hopes raised that the use of quality assurance as a management tool would stimulate institutionalized reflection on the activities and outcomes of universities, and that growing managerial capacity in HEIs would foster good governance and consequently improved levels of quality and performance.

These developments have certainly had impact on the establishment of an evaluation scheme in the pioneer countries, The Netherlands, France and the UK. For instance, using quality assurance governments aimed at making universities more accountable for the funding they received.
However, quality assurance systems intended also to stimulate and foster quality improvement, taking into account the changing demands on HE graduates resulting from the development from industry-based to service-based economies and toward a knowledge society.

It is obvious that the outcomes of an evaluation procedure with respect to both aspects, *accountability and improvement*, can substantially contribute to the elaboration of good governance arrangements, at the institutional as well as at the program level. As argued by Hénard and Mitterle (2010b), *governance and quality issues are intertwined*. 
From 1990 on the quality assurance movement disseminated quickly throughout Western Europe

And in 1998 the EU decided to launch the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

Soon thereafter this network played an important role in the well-known Bologna Process initiated by the Bologna Declaration of June 1999, and aimed at harmonizing HE in Europe

By the end of the 20th century almost all Western European countries had installed a policy and system of quality assessment in HE
From quality assessment aiming at improvement of HE towards accreditation focused on accountability

When quality assessment schemes emerged in Western Europe in the 1980s *their focus was on the improvement of HE*, and thus *not on accreditation*, i.e. a procedure that leads to a formal statement by a supra-institutional authority about achieving certain quality threshold levels, giving the evaluated unit (institution or program) an official right to exist or not in a higher education system.

Assessment was seen as a tool to initiate reflection on the quality and performance of HEIs as a lever for improvement. A representative example of this kind of HE evaluation is the system that was developed in The Netherlands.
The Dutch system became operational in 1988, and consisted of the following steps:
(for a more detailed discussion of the system, see Jeliazkova and Westerheijden, 2004, and Wijnen, 2007)

- internal quality assurance as the starting point
- writing a self-evaluation report by the institution
- visitation by an external review or evaluation committee
- writing of a report by the external review committee;
- meta-evaluation by the inspectorate
As stated by Wijnen (2007) important characteristics of this quality assessment scheme were:

- final responsibility by the institution
- important role of peer assessment
- formal sanctions as an exception
- improvement as a major goal
- trust as a leading principle

This quality assurance system was mainly based on internal quality assessment. HEIs themselves were granted the main responsibility for the quality care. The autonomy of the institutions was highly valued, and no decisions were taken by external agencies such as the external committee or the inspectorate.
Notwithstanding the largely positive influence of this quality assessment system, in 2003 The Netherlands switched over to an accreditation approach resulting in a formal judgment that the quality of a degree course or an institution meets certain standards.

This judgment is based on quality assessment showing that accreditation and quality assurance are connected (Dittrich, 2004).

Taking into account the positive influence of the previous quality assessment procedure, a relevant question is why The Netherlands moved to accreditation?
Major reason for the change: the impact of the Bologna Process that stimulated international benchmarking to enable comparison between programs within Europe. Accreditation makes such comparison possible, which is important in view of facilitating student mobility in Europe, a major objective of the Bologna Process.

But an additional reason was also that the quality assessment system slackened: over the years it lost some of its effectiveness due to the development of routines and the fact that the expected improvements did not materialize. Therefore, the need was more and more felt to establish a new, more strict and more effective approach to evaluation of HE.

Accreditation was considered as the appropriate answer also because it facilitates governmental decisions. Indeed, a positive outcome of an accreditation has clear consequences for an institution or a program: it qualifies for government funding, students can get bursaries, and an institution can issue degree certificates recognized by the government.
A major change in the procedure was that the external review committee had to evaluate a program on six subjects:

- objectives,
- quality
- quality and quantity of the personnel
- facilities
- internal quality assurance
- academic outcomes

The six subjects were evaluated dichotomously:

satisfactory or unsatisfactory

Unsatisfactory judgments had to be justified

A single unsatisfactory judgment for one of the six subjects was sufficient to refuse accreditation

The decision about accreditation was taken by the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization
This accreditation scheme differed substantially from the previous quality assessment system

Wijnen (2007) describes the major changes as follows:

* From improvement to accountability
* From trust to distrust
* From peers to bureaucrats
* From institutions to governments
* From decentralization to centralization
Very important is that
* the ownership of quality assurance shifted from the institutions to the State

* the improvement dimension almost vanished

Because of these fundamental changes, but also because of the bureaucratic burden and the fact that the system became very expensive, the accreditation scheme was heavily criticized, especially by the HEIs

This led to very intensive discussions and consultations that resulted in a revised accreditation system that is operational in The Netherlands since 2012 (see: www.nvaonet.net)
In this revised system of accreditation the focus is still on the quality of individual programs. However, a major innovation is that HEIs can ask the Accreditation Organization to conduct an *institutional quality assurance assessment*.

Such an institutional assessment by an external audit panel aims at determining whether an institution as a whole has implemented an effective quality assurance system that enables it to guarantee the quality of its individual programs.

This assessment addresses five coherent questions:

1. What is the vision of the institution with regards to the quality of its education?
2. How does the institution intend to realize this vision?
3. How does the institution gauge the extent to which the vision is realized?
4. How does the institution work on improvement?
5. Who is responsible for what?
Institutions that have received a positive evaluation as result of an institutional assessment can benefit from a *limited program assessment scheme*:

an assessment panel of independent experts evaluates an individual program on three standards that relate to the educational quality and the content of the program:

* intended learning outcomes
* teaching-learning environment
* assessment and achieved learning outcomes

Based on these evaluation the panel formulates an overall judgment in terms of one of four options: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, or excellent

The final decision about accreditation is taken by the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization.
Since a few years there is also a framework for the *initial assessment and accreditation of new programs*:

* very similar to the procedure for existing program

* also based on a discussion with peers regarding the content and quality of the program

* an additional standard is whether the program has sufficient financial resources
A future perspective: separating accountability from improvement in quality assurance activities

Notwithstanding the effort to focus more on quality, the revised system remains in the first place an output measure aiming at assuring a basic level of quality, and accountability still tends to dominate the improvement function.

Moreover, the scheme also still involves the risk of a negative accreditation, and, together with the focus on basic quality, this can indeed lead to uniformity and window dressing. It easily induces a tendency to conform to traditional, accepted ideas and patterns, and to over-accentuating in the self-evaluation report positive aspect of a program, and hiding weaknesses.

Consequently, accreditation is also an obstacle for innovation, because institutions do not want to take any risk: new approaches and innovative ideas could be rejected by the accreditation organization.

Moreover, to what degree the bureaucratic burden will decrease remains to be seen, and the same holds true for the reduction of the costs.
Taking especially into account that accreditation seems to be a serious hindrance for the improvement function and for innovation,

the important issue is whether it is possible to combine the accountability and improvement functions in one quality assurance scheme

I tend to join the viewpoint of several authors that both functions are relevant and needed, but that they require a different approach

(van Kemenade & Hardjono, 2010; van Schijndel & van Kemenade, 2011; Wijnen, 2007)
In this respect, taking into account the results of an empirical study with a large group of university lecturers, van Kemenade and Hardjono (2010) have proposed what they call a two-way system of intelligent accountability wherein accountability and improvement are separated.

In this system *accountability* is realized through
- an external audit based on an analysis of documents
- a site visit by external professional auditors to objectify the performance outcomes of an institution or a program

*Improvement* is pursued and achieved through internal audits organized by the HEIs themselves based on
- self-evaluation
- site visits by peers
Final comments: Quality assurance and governance entwined

As the main aim of governance is to foster and sustain quality of HE, it is obvious that quality assurance can contribute to develop effective governance. As argued by Hénard and Mitterle (2010a):

“Quality assurance encompasses the multi-faceted aspects of governance which is put under scrutiny by audits or program accreditation:

- accreditation consists of appraising the academic content of a program, its consistency with the institution’s educational offering and its relevance to the job market and societal demand

- good governance allows the program to ensure that quality is attained at reasonable cost to benefit students and ultimately society and economic growth.” (p. 72)
Considering the criticisms presented above, one can say that an ideal system for quality assurance is still not available.

For instance, a two-way system that separates accountability and improvement has not yet been elaborated.

But notwithstanding some criticisms practical experience shows that the current quality assurance procedures can provide relevant and useful information to generate and support recommendations and guidelines for effective governance.

Let me illustrate this with two examples based on personal experience.
A few years ago a university in The Netherlands submitted a new training
program to an initial accreditation procedure

The evaluation committee that I chaired came to the substantiated
judgment that the program could not be accredited, but granted the
institution an improvement period

At the request of Rector of the institution for clarification of the negative
judgment a meeting took place with the chair and the secretary of the
committee and the director of the accreditation organization

This led to the submission of a revised proposal for the training program
that was then accredited
A second example concerns the quality assessment of an existing training program

At the end of the visit of the review committee that I chaired a provisional report of the findings was presented

Afterwards a member of the staff came to me and said:

“I’m pleased that your committee points to some weaknesses. Now that an external panel puts them forward there is a good chance that the management will pay attention to it.”
Finally, it is obvious that the current advance of open and flexible HE based on and stimulated by the fast increasing application of digital and blended learning will have an impact

* on the further developments of quality assurance systems

* but also on the use of such systems to support and underpin good governance
Thank you for your attention

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