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A common approach to quality assurance and enhancement: Three lessons from overseas

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ABSTRACT

Scotland is embarking on a major reform of its quality-enhancement framework that unifies the tertiary sector under one roof. This presents both opportunities and risks. Amongst the opportunities, the prospect of providing learners with seamless pathways ranks certainly first. The risks, however, are also important, notably the temptation of sliding into a single set of academic standards across the tertiary sector and thereby promoting institutional isomorphism.

Keywords: academic standards, common approach, diversity, enhancement-led, learner and societal needs

Introduction

This commentary highlights three major lessons, based on my 30-year experience in higher education and quality assurance (QA) in Europe and beyond. I was lucky to be involved since the mid-nineties in the introduction and development of QA in Europe, first among European Union members and then in central and eastern Europe. This has allowed me to observe and analyse longitudinal QA policy developments. In addition, as Deputy Secretary General of the European University Association (EUA), I managed the EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme and participated actively in the development of the European QA architecture: the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) and the European Quality Assurance Forum. I sat on the boards of various agencies and chaired the Icelandic Quality-Enhancement Framework in Iceland, (now the Icelandic Agency for Quality Assurance), which was created by Norman Sharp, based on the Scottish model.

The lessons

The first lesson

The first lesson is that whilst protecting academic standards and enhancing the student learning experience must be at the core of any QA framework, a quality-enhancement (QE) framework must be mission and context-driven and resist the temptation of treating all tertiary institutions in the same way. Iceland provides a good rationale for the necessity and soundness of this approach. It has seven universities with a wide gap in student numbers between the largest and comprehensive University of Iceland (about 15,000 students and 1,680 staff) and one of the smallest, Holar University, with three departments and about 200

students and 50 staff. Issues such as governance and management, or internal quality processes are coloured by the significant difference in size and required the review panels to consider this aspect when analysing each institution and providing recommendations for enhancement.

In other words, the starting point of any review must be each institution's strategic objectives, its profile, and its positioning. This is the best, and probably the only, way to ensure that institutional diversity is preserved and promoted, that institutional innovation thrives, and that the different types of learners are offered a variety of options that fits their diverse needs.

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) of the EUAprovides another good illustration of this approach. IEP shares with Scotland an enhancement-led approach. It has carried out during the past thirty years more than 460 evaluations in 50 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. These have covered institutions that are either comprehensive or specialised, research-intensive or teaching-intensive, online or hybrid, private or public. IEP has also evaluated music conservatoires and art schools, and even police, naval and military academies. That the IEP methodology has remained unchanged for thirty years has proven its adaptability and usefulness across all types of institutions and countries, whether poorly- or well-resourced.

IEP's approach is driven by four deceptively simple questions that can be applied to a range of institutions, do not promote institutional isomorphism, respect institutional diversity and autonomy and promote the notion of institutional change and agility. These questions are:

- *What is the institution trying to do?* This refers to the institution's mission, aims, and objectives and their appropriateness, how the university sees itself locally, nationally, and internationally.
- *How is the institution trying to do it?* This refers to the processes, procedures, practices and activities in place and their effectiveness.
- *How does it know that it works?* This refers to the feedback systems in place, in particular the internal QA and QE mechanisms.
- *How does the institution change in order to improve?* This refers to the strategic vision, and the capacity and willingness to change.

The questions are used as a framework to explore governance and management arrangements, teaching and learning, research, service to society and internationalisation. A special chapter explores internal quality management. Although it is based on the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (2015), the aim of this chapter is to feed into the discussion on the institutional capacity to manage change.

The second lesson

And this brings us to the second lesson about today's international higher education environment. Whilst it is important that QA/QE look backward at the institutions' track record in protecting academic standards and enhancing the student learning experience, it is also essential that we look forward and ascertain how the institutions respond to changes in their environment. In a recent article, Steven Mintz (2024) talks about how course content must change radically across all disciplines. The new aspects that should be

folded into many disciplines include, but are not limited to, artificial intelligence, algorithmic development, data science, information security, machine learning, risk management, etc. He adds, however, that "Most of higher ed is, alas, about perpetuating what's already there and sustaining the existing hierarchy, and many emerging fields are scoffed at by established faculty."

In other words, if QA/QE processes only look at how well academic standards are protected they will pass up an equally important question of how course contents are evolving to meet the current and future needs of learners and society and how the higher education institutions are anticipating and adapting to their new environment. As mentioned, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) is a case in point. AI will affect almost all professions and it is incumbent upon all higher education institutions to develop the contents of their courses to reflect this major revolution. The same applies to the issue of managing the environmental crisis or providing students with the tools to understand the current political developments (e.g., geopolitical, the crisis of democracy, the impact of social media on society). Course delivery might also change abruptly as the COVID pandemic demonstrated. Therefore, institutional agility is an important aspect to examine, assess and encourage.

The third lesson

The third lesson to draw from the international experience is that whilst QA/QE have an impact on institutions (at least, we hope they do!), they generally have limited impact on a tertiary sector, unless certain conditions are met.

Again, to use the IEP as an example, the programme undertakes large-scale evaluations in which all or most institutions in a jurisdiction are reviewed. Each institution receives an individual report with recommendations geared at the institutional level. The institutions are not compared or ranked but a system-wide report is written that identifies shared issues across the sector and recommendations to both the institutions (reinforcing the individual recommendations received) and, most importantly, to the government. Most frequently, the latter would refer to funding and legislative changes (see, for example, Sursock, 2014).

Conclusion

In sum, the national objectives that are associated with QA/QE processes must be realistic and fit for purpose. QA/QE should not be viewed as a magic wand that can affect the national level, that can solve all national problems and can meet all national objectives. QA/QE can, however, support institutional and national change as one mechanism amongst others.

Biography

Andrée Sursock is Senior Advisor, European University Association (EUA). She was Deputy Secretary General of EUA and the head of its Institutional Evaluation Programme (2001 and 2009). She served as chair of the Icelandic Quality-Enhancement Board (2017-2023) and as board member of various quality assurance agencies and universities around the world.
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