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Improving the quality of higher education

Innovative forms of Quality Assurance for Innovative Programmes
by
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Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues and friends.

This was to have been a joint presentation with my ex-UNESCO colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, who is well known to many of you. Sadly, she had to leave unexpectedly for India, where her brother has been taken seriously ill. She was the main author of this paper but I will try to do justice to it in her absence.

Our title is *Innovative forms of Quality Assurance for Innovative Programmes*. We will cover five topics.

- Adapting QA to new needs
- CHEA/CIQG Quality Platform
- Guides to Quality in Online HE
- 7 International Quality Principles
- Combating corruption in HE

How quality assurance is changing: from inputs to outputs

First then, how is quality assurance adapting to new needs? QA evolved and developed strongly through the 1990s. By the 2000s a general model of quality assurance had emerged with the following elements:

- Regulations and guidelines produced by the QA agency
- A self-evaluation prepared by the institution
- Appointment of a peer group to review the institution or programme, starting by reviewing the self-evaluation
- Site visits by the peer group
- Publication of the report or, in some cases, only the decision.

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This basic model is now spreading throughout the world, with some variations, aided by the development of international and regional quality assurance networks, demonstrating convergence or what some call "the spread of the familiar".

But while QA methods may be converging, the focus of quality assurance is shifting. Not very long ago quality was judged by inputs – grades of incoming students, qualifications of teaching staff, number of books in the library and so on. Today the assessment of quality focuses more on the outputs: students' learning outcomes. What have the students really learned?

Multilateral organisations are supporting this development with international initiatives. One example is the OECD project AHELO (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes), which aimed to assess what graduates **know and can do** at the global level across cultures, languages and institutions. So far AHELO has not progressed beyond a feasibility study.

A similar project has now emerged in the European Union. It focuses on Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe and has the acronym CALOHEE.

A Quality Platform for Innovative Providers: Focus on Learning Outcomes

A new sector of higher education is emerging with offerings from private companies, often online, an example being MOOCs. We call this "post-traditional higher education". Students' Learning Outcomes provide the most solid basis for assessing the quality of these alternative providers of higher education.

In order to assist such alternative providers and the traditional institutions that might receive requests for credit recognition from their learners, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation/International Quality Group (CHEA/CIQG) developed a Quality Platform in 2013.

The primary intent of the Quality Platform is to assure and improve quality as this sector develops and serves more and more students. It is an outcomes-based review using standards established by the Platform, a self-review by the provider and peer (expert) review. If successful, the provider is designated as a "Quality Platform Provider" by CHEA/CIQG for a three-year period.

The Quality Platform is based on four simple standards, summarized as follows:

- Learning outcomes are articulated and achieved.

- Learning outcomes meet postsecondary expectations.

- Curricula provide opportunities for successful transfer of credit.

- Transparency is maintained and comparability is established.

The self-review by the provider uses a template requiring evidence that each of the four standards has been met. This is the basis for an external review and a site-visit by a team of experts.

The acceptance of the report by CHEA/CIQG is the basis for the award of the Quality Platform Provider Certificate. Colleges and universities could use this Quality Platform designation as an indicator of quality when considering the award of credit or recognition.

The Quality Platform was pilot-tested in 2015 with the DeTao Masters Academy in Shanghai, China, which is a private company developing innovative educational programmes that are not part of China's traditional higher education system. The programmes are designed and implemented with the guidance of teaching staff, most of whom are from outside China (designated as "Masters" by DeTao) and have distinguished backgrounds in a wide variety of disciplines.

DeTao works in partnership with the Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts (SIVA) by providing Advanced Classes to selected groups of students. Since DeTao Advanced Classes do not lead to a degree, but are really enriched majors in SIVA programmes, the traditional QA frameworks in China do not cover them. After reviewing the report of the external review last year, CHEA awarded the DeTao Masters Academy a Quality Platform provider certificate at a ceremony during its Annual Conference in January 2016 (CHEA, 2016).

Following this experience, the CHEA/CIQG Quality Platform is now being piloted by the US Department od Education (USDE) as part of a new experimental programme, EQUIP (Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships), designed to counterbalance what the Department called the "inflexible and unaffordable options" of traditional higher education for working adults and other non-traditional students.

Guides to Quality in Online Higher Education

Many alternative providers offer courses online.

In 2013 the company Academic Partnerships published a *Guide to Quality in Online Learning* prepared by Neil Butcher and a South African colleague (Butcher et al., 2013). The editors then asked Neil Butcher and another colleague to prepare a second *Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education,* because innovative or 'post-traditional' approaches to higher education continued to multiply and included MOOCs, OER, Open Badges, Experiential Learning, and so on.

Let's take the quality assurance of MOOCs as an example. With thousands of MOOCs now on offer their quality assurance is a topical question. Developing countries, in particular, want to know which MOOCs would be of greatest value to their citizens. How do MOOCs – and online learning generally – challenge traditional practices of internal and external quality assurance and accreditation?

There is bad news and good news.

The bad news is that since most MOOCs are short and do not offer credit, most universities have only skimpy academic procedures for approving them. Moreover, since they often by-pass

internal QA processes, external QA systems have also taken little interest in them – at least so far.

The good news, of course, is these 'light-touch' approval processes give institutions a chance to test innovations without having to submit them for approval to conservative academic governance bodies.

A recent publication by UNESCO and COL (2016), *Making Sense of MOOCs: A Guide for Policy-Makers in Developing Countries* addresses the issue of QA and MOOCs. It recommends including them in existing QA frameworks, especially those designed for ODL. COL and UNESCO acknowledge gratefully the tremendous help that EADTU gave them in producing this Guide.

Some European tools such as e-Excellence, OpenupEd and MOOQ are put forward as possible models, but QA for MOOCs remains a challenge. QA for Open Educational Resources is an even greater challenge but that is a story for another day.

I now move to the Seven Quality Principles developed by CHEA/CIQG

Sharing a common understanding of quality: The CHEA Seven Quality Principles

As Stamenka told you, CHEA, the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation, has an International Quality Group, CIQG, that she was instrumental in establishing. In an attempt to reach a common understanding of quality across the world CHEA/CIQG has articulated seven fundamental international quality principles that underpin all forms of higher education, whatever the curricula or delivery modes. They are available on the CHEA/CIQG website in English, Arabic, Chinese, French and Spanish.

You will find these principles simple and rather obvious, but that is the point. This is an attempt to create a global consensus on the basics. A series of essays on each of the principles, written by experts from around the world, explores each principle in more detail.

The seven principles are:

1. *Quality and higher education providers*: Assuring and achieving quality in higher education is the primary responsibility of higher education providers and their staff.

2. *Quality and students*: The education provided to students must always be of high quality whatever the learning outcomes pursued.

3. *Quality and society*: The quality of higher education provision is judged by how well it meets the needs of society, engenders public confidence and sustain public trust.

4. *Quality and government*: Governments have a role in encouraging and supporting quality higher education.

5. *Quality and accountability:* It is the responsibility of higher education providers and quality assurance and accreditation bodies to sustain a strong commitment to accountability and provide regular evidence of quality.

6. ***Quality and the role of quality assurance and accreditation bodies***: Quality assurance and accreditation bodies, working with higher education providers and their leadership, staff and students, are responsible for the implementation of processes, tools, benchmarks and measures of learning outcomes that help to create a shared understanding of quality.

7. ***Quality and change***: Quality higher education needs to be flexible, creative and innovative; developing and evolving to meet students' needs, to justify the needs of society and to maintain diversity.

Quality and Corruption in Higher Education

We conclude with some remarks on the issue of corruption in higher education, to which quality assurance processes should pay much greater attention.

CHEA's International Quality Group and UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning are committed to ensuring the integrity of higher education because integrity is the foundation for quality assurance.

Stamenka mentioned MOOCs a moment ago. I digress to note that I am a MOOCs junkie. I am now studying my 15th MOOC. Its subject is *Academic Integrity* and it comes from the University of Auckland, New Zealand. The title shows how the topics of MOOCs have evolved since the MOOCs frenzy of 2012: from orthodox academic topics like Electronics to courses like this one.

The increasing frequency of press articles about corruption in higher education all over the world led CHEA's International Quality Group and UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning to convene an expert meeting on corruption in Washington in March this year. Stamenka and I were both closely involved. The key finding of the meeting was that academic corruption is not something that happens somewhere else. All countries and universities suffer from it. The fact that a New Zealand university is offering a MOOC on Academic Integrity, which is a polite way of flagging the problem of Academic Corruption, illustrates this. New Zealand comes out as a rather uncorrupt country in international surveys.

Our CHEA/UNESCO group published a report, called an Advisory Statement, that is readily available and we commend it to you. The report includes examples of good and bad practices and a matrix listing actions that the various higher education stakeholders can take to ensure that good practice prevails.

In essence, the key to avoiding academic corruption is to verify regularly that all steps in the processes of teaching, learning, assessment and certification are conducted with integrity. This boils down to a question of institutional will at all levels.

Governments should take pride in the integrity of their higher education systems by ensuring due process and transparency in appointments to regulatory bodies. Institutions must make ethical practices a central focus of their internal quality assurance processes. Protection for 'whistle blowers' (the people who find and publicise corrupt practices) is particularly important and

administrators must avoid the temptation to sweep rumours of unethical practices under the carpet.

Conclusion

To conclude, we began by emphasising the importance of ensuring that the evolution of quality assurance keeps pace with the expansion and diversification of higher education providers. We then explored four examples of how quality assurance is being adapted to new circumstances. We have both been closely involved in these four initiatives and we hope that you have found our descriptions and reflections interesting.