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# Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Recent Progress; Challenges Ahead

*Elaine El-Khawas*

with

*Robin DePietro-Jurand*

and *Lauritz Holm-Nielsen*

Republic of Lebanon  
Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform  
Center for Public Sector Projects and Studies  
(C.P.S.P.S.)

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# **Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Recent Progress; Challenges Ahead**

by

**Elaine El-Khawas**

**Graduate School of Education  
University of California, Los Angeles**

Robin DePietro-Jurand  
and  
Lauritz Holm-Nielsen

The World Bank

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## Introduction

Economic development is correlated with the development of higher education: enrollment ratios in higher education average over fifty percent for countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), compared to twenty-one percent in middle income countries, and six percent in low income countries (World Bank, 1998a). The World Bank realizes the importance of investment in higher education for economic growth and social development and its publication *Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience* (1994a), focused its attention on the challenges and the constraints facing higher education institutions around the world and recognized these as a symptom of a crisis. The report found that developing countries were particularly hard hit by the crisis in higher education. In fact, the fiscal constraints faced by many countries, coupled with increasing demand, has led to overcrowding, deteriorating infrastructure, lack of resources for non-salary expenditures, such as textbooks and laboratory equipment, and a decline in the quality of teaching and research activities.

Based on a review of country experience, *Lessons of Experience* suggested four key directions for reform:

- ◆ Encouraging greater differentiation of institutions
- ◆ Providing incentives for public institutions to diversify sources of funding
- ◆ Redefining the role of government in higher education, and
- ◆ Introducing policies explicitly designed to give priority to quality and equity objectives

Since the release of *Lessons of Experience*, some exciting changes have taken place in higher education. The use of technology has expanded access and spawned new ways of teaching and learning that were only imagined just four years ago. But it has also brought with it new challenges and concerns for quality control. This paper address some of the challenges to quality assurance faced by higher education as we enter the 21st century.

### **Box 1. Argentina Case Study: The Lessons of Experience in Practice**

Prior to 1994, programs and institutions in Argentina were subject neither to formal evaluation nor to accreditation. This led to the creation of a number of new programs, particularly at the graduate level, resulting in duplication in some disciplines and shortages in others. New programs often did not have the resources necessary to ensure minimum quality standards: the composition and qualification of faculty was insufficient to ensure good quality teaching, poor compensation made it difficult to recruit and retain qualified personnel, and universities cut back on capital investment to compensate for decreasing financial resources from the federal government. As a result, learning and research materials, and equipment deteriorated and were a major constraint to improvement.

Since that time, the Government of Argentina has been working to improve the quality of higher education through (i) improving the legal and regulatory environment for the creation of new institutions and programs in the public and private sectors, for university management and quality evaluation (ii) creating incentives and supporting initiatives and investments which will increase the efficiency and quality of institutions, and (iii) improving the allocation of resources within universities and supporting initiatives to diversify resources.

The National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAU), supported in part by a World Bank project, serves as the main conduit for quality enhancement and assessment in Argentine higher education. The mission of CONEAU is to (i) promote the process of self-evaluation by public and private universities; (ii) consolidate and extend external evaluation of the universities; and (iii) accredit undergraduate programs of public interest, and graduate studies in all disciplines. Project design emphasizes greater reliance on incentive instruments to implement policies. Experience from OECD countries shows that the behavior of autonomous universities can be influenced most effectively by improving the availability of information and modifying the way resources are allocated. Therefore, this project relies heavily on two instruments: (a) an information and evaluation system that provides transparent and objective information to the different actors - students, managers and teachers; and (b) an allocation system which provides incentives for efficiency, thus creating a more competitive environment

Universities carry out their own internal evaluation in order to provide the documentation required by CONEAU for the evaluation process. The accreditation of graduate programs is the result of an analytical process carried out by external evaluators organized as peer committees, who study the information provided by the postgraduate programs, conduct site visits, and issue recommendations. Accredited programs are evaluated periodically to verify whether their quality has been maintained or improved. General criteria of excellence, established for all postgraduate programs, are specific to each discipline and serve to guide the evaluation. All criteria are public information so both the postgraduate programs and the external evaluators are aware of the rules of the game. CONEAU makes its recommendation for accreditation according to reports prepared by the peer review committees.

*Source: World Bank. 1995.*

### Quality Issues

As governments in most parts of the world have considered their agenda for higher education over the last few decades, issues of quality assurance and quality enhancement have been a major focus of attention. Despite differences in the size and stage of development of their higher education sectors, many governments have decided that traditional academic controls are inadequate to today's challenges and that more explicit assurances about quality are needed. Organizations such as the European Commission or OECD have reinforced this trend by their own calls for new structures and new approaches to quality assurance.

**Box 2. Romanian Higher Education: Institutional Management as a Means to Quality Assurance**

A 1994 education sector reform strategy adopted by the Romanian Government led to the 1995 Education Law. The new Education Law replaced centralized Ministry of Education (MOE) control with system oversight through intermediary councils, or "buffer organizations." This was achieved by devolving professional and policy functions from the MOE to four, semi-autonomous, intermediary councils: the *National Council on Accreditation and Academic Evaluation*, the *National Council on Academic Titles and Degrees*, the *Higher Education Financing Council*, and, the *University Research Council*.

The higher education system is now more responsive to the needs of the emerging market economy. This has been accomplished by changing the content of programs, readjusting the size of programs, and building in more flexibility. New fields, such as business and modern macro and micro-economics were introduced, while other fields, such as central planning, were eliminated. Over-specialization and over-enrollment in certain technical and engineering fields have been adjusted and interdisciplinary programs have been introduced. Flexibility has been increased through the introduction of short programs, retraining programs and continuing education.

In addition, revitalization of academic programs, through the *Accreditation Council*, is ensuring higher quality standards, especially in the newly developing public and private universities. Quality of faculty, in fast growing fields, is being upgraded through the development of postgraduate programs to train the next generation of academic staff, while the *National University Research Council* is funding the development of new postgraduate programs and related research.

A set of actions remains to be taken to strengthen the quality assurance mechanisms already introduced. Accountability for maintaining standards will be achieved through periodic review of programs as provided for in the Accreditation Law. Standards and procedures for periodic quality evaluations will be developed and applied. Incentives for quality improvements at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels will be introduced through competitive grants for program innovation and research. Public expenditures will be allocated to make up for past neglect by increasing resources to development, innovations and capital investment to at least 20 percent of total public spending on higher education. Postgraduate studies will be concentrated in selected institutions so that resources can be focused on developing high quality programs.

The Education Law provides for the establishment of internal governance structures and efforts began in 1995 to establish separate administrative and academic functions. Eventually, all institutions will have to prepare institutional development plans as part of their participation in the competitive grant programs. The managers of institutions will determine institutional priorities through internal review of competitive grant proposals submitted by the institutions. Further measures to be introduced in the next year are the building of professional management through separate salary streams for administrators and the creation of management information systems to support institutional and system decision making.

Source: World Bank, 1996a.

There are wide differences among countries in their approaches to quality. In some countries, governments have taken steps to strengthen quality by introducing new reporting requirements or other mechanisms of management control. Argentina, for example, has introduced quality assurance mechanisms that depend on an enhanced information and evaluation system and new rules for funding the universities (Box 1). Many countries have developed accreditation systems, while others have established evaluation committees or centers that carry out cycles of external review. In many countries, independent bodies have been established, often a single national agency but sometimes, as in the Netherlands, Mexico, or Romania (Box 2), separate agencies are responsible for different types of institutions, regions, or purposes. Such variation in approach reflects political and cultural preferences within each country, differences in governmental leadership, as well as varying stages of development for the higher education sector.

The scope of responsibility given to quality assurance systems also has ranged widely. Scotland and England, for example, have procedures to monitor teaching effectiveness, while Hong Kong is focusing on high-quality management processes. Other systems have been established to license new institutions or to certify education credentials. Still other efforts have been directed toward rewarding research productivity, either of individual scholars (as in Mexico) or of entire academic departments (as in the United Kingdom). There is wide variation too in the extent to which quality assurance agencies have addressed issues related to student transfer and to study in other countries, as well as the issues related to the expansion of new modes of educational delivery, including video-based education, interactive transmission to remote sites or, most recently, Internet-based learning.

This paper reviews the current status of national policies for quality assurance. It offers a brief assessment of recent trends and identifies some areas of emerging consensus as well as issues still being debated. The paper also considers some of the unresolved issues that are likely to shape policy debate over the next decade. It concludes with some suggestions for ways that governments and international organizations might hasten the pace of change.

### Recent Trends

Although circumstances vary among countries, several broad trends have contributed to growing governmental interest in establishing policy mechanisms to ensure quality and accountability in higher education. Particularly significant has been the trend toward mass higher education. Many countries have seen a doubling or tripling of post-secondary enrollments in the last few decades, along with increased participation rates for young people. In most middle income countries today, between 25 and 45 percent of young people enroll for higher education. Greater diversity of educational offerings has emerged in response to mass higher education; most countries have introduced different types of institutions, different lengths of study programs, and varying modes of instructional delivery as ways to accommodate rapid enrollment expansion. Other responses are seen in the growth of a private, entrepreneurial sector of higher education and, in many countries, an expansion of educational offerings by distance learning. Further, as universities have become larger and more specialized, they have adopted more diverse roles, often seeking to serve needs of business and industry or to strengthen their contributions to local, regional or national needs.

**Box 3. Two Cases of Diversification in Higher Education: Brazil and Chile**

Brazil has a long tradition of university education and a large segmented system of higher education. Public higher education, which accounts for 28% of higher education enrollment, is provided by municipal, state and federal governments which operate parallel, essentially autonomous systems. The remaining 72% of higher education students are enrolled in the private sector. The private universities which have become the government's instrument for expanding access are self-financing and generally provide a lower quality of education.

The principal policy mechanism for controlling the higher education system is the Federal Council of Education (FCE) whose chief function is to approve the charters of new institutions, accredit courses of study, and set tuition, fees, and enrollment levels in both public and private institutions. However, the FCE does not possess sufficient staff resources to exercise their powers nor does it have the authority for directing resources to the institutions which are placed under its supervision that would give real authority to its statutory powers. Private universities and colleges receive indirect support from the government in the form of loans to students attending the institutions but only about a fifth of students avail themselves of loans. The loan scheme is administered by the Ministry of Education, not by the FCE which has accrediting functions and thus could use this policy device to improve the low standards of many private institutions

Chile's higher education system is at a crossroads between an elite higher education system and a completely diversified, mass higher education system. In 1981, the government launched a comprehensive series of structural and financial reforms. Tertiary education was diversified and stratified into three tiers: Universities, Professional Institutes (PI) and Technical Training Centers (TTC). Fees were introduced in public institutions. A loan scheme for students in public institutions was introduced. The procedures for financing public universities were changed to encourage income generation and cost saving and award research funding on a competitive basis. Public university personnel lost their regular civil service status.

These reforms, aimed at deregulating the sub-sector, have had a profound impact on its size, organization, financing and management. They have led to more than doubling the enrollment, increasing gross enrollment from 10.8% on 1980 to 28.2% in 1995. They also resulted in the proliferation of institutions, from eight universities to a total of 270 institutions, including 200 TTC's and PI's, many of which are in the regions. Nearly all of the expansion has been financed by private sources. Funding, in public and private institutions, comes from student fees (33%), income from services (26%), and public subsidies (41%). At the same time, the Chilean higher education system has become fragmented. There is incomplete diversification, with low enrollment at the technical level, and in science and technology undergraduate and graduate programs; it is highly segmented, since transfer between the different institutional levels is limited, hampering the aspirations of learners and adversely affecting equity, as well as linkages with the public and private sectors, and regional development.

The Government strategy to address these issues consists of developing a vision for the higher education system with quality, equity and efficiency as priority objectives. To this end the current accreditation and evaluation will be enhanced and expanded to cover all higher education institutions.

*Source:* Eisemon and Holm-Nielsen, 1995; World Bank, 1998b.

Governmental initiatives on issues of quality assurance represent another response to a larger and more diverse higher education sector. Traditional, often informal procedures for quality assurance, deemed suitable with only a few institutions and relatively small enrollments, are now seen as insufficient for the more diverse circumstances of a larger system of higher education.

The shift to formal systems of quality assurance, evident across many countries and regions, is among the most significant trends affecting higher education over the last two decades. Today, many countries have organizations or agencies responsible for conducting quality assurance reviews of academic institutions. Indicative of this shift is the emergence of international networks, journals, conferences and newsletters that address issues related to quality assurance.

In international settings and within individual countries, debate continues over the proper role and form of quality assurance for higher education. The issues have evolved over the years, however, from an initial questioning of whether new forms of quality assurance were needed to current debates on what are the more effective approaches to quality assurance. Many academic leaders criticized early approaches and defended academe's traditional methods for quality assurance even though they were largely internal and not transparent to external audiences. More recently, academics seem to have conceded that the pressures of mass higher education and financial constraints have changed the conditions of higher education sufficiently that formal, externally validated methods of quality control must be a central component of higher education systems. Recent debate in England reflects this shift. While approaches to quality assurance are still widely discussed and analyzed -- by special commissions and in published articles, conference papers, evaluation studies and the media -- much of the debate focuses on whether one approach is better than another, whether a certain procedure should be simplified, or whether a procedure unfairly advantages some institutions over others.

#### Emerging Areas of Consensus

Although the policy debate continues, some elements of consensus have emerged, especially around the core elements of an approach to quality assurance that is appropriate for higher education. Box 4 lists some of these consensus elements of quality assurance. In part, this convergence reflects wide-scale cultural "borrowing" among countries. In part too, quality assurance structures share common features because they represent modifications of traditional academic review processes.

#### **Box 4. Core Elements of Quality Assurance**

- ◆ Semi-autonomous agencies
- ◆ Explicit standards and expectations
- ◆ Self-study by the academic institution or unit
- ◆ External review by visiting experts
- ◆ Written recommendations
- ◆ Public reporting
- ◆ Attention to both process (i.e., capacity) and results



## Public Reporting

Key elements of today's models, having emerged from processes of negotiation between policy leaders and academic leaders, have political support from both sides; the academic side considers them to be appropriate, not overly intrusive, and allowing academic views to be heard, while policy officials consider them to be satisfactory and useful. As can be noted, the typical approach is to allow the initiative for review to rest first with the academic institution or unit being reviewed, through the self-study.

### **Box 5. Indonesia Case Study**

In 1987 the World Bank supported the introduction of accreditation mechanisms in a project to improve teacher training standards in public institutions. A pilot program was established to develop a scheme to accredit teacher training programs in selected institutions after the government decided to up-grade all pre-service teacher training institutions to university status. The objective was to agree upon a set of standards by which all teacher training institutions could be evaluated as well as establish a baseline for institutional development. Institutions were identified through a competitive mechanism. Small planning grants were made available to each institution to enable them to do a self study, which was externally evaluated and validated by professionals and education practitioners. The pilot study was useful in generating acceptance for accreditation as a mechanism to improve teacher training.

Since the original project, three higher education projects, involving competitive funding and accreditation have been successfully implemented in Indonesia: University Research for Graduate Education (URGE); Development of Undergraduate Education (DUE) and Quality of Undergraduate Education (QUE). All three projects focus on improving the quality and efficiency of higher education through competitive development grants. Institutions write development proposals based on the results of a self-evaluation which is prepared according to explicit standards and expectations. The plans are reviewed by a panel of Indonesian and international experts for attention to process and outcome. Successful institutions receive development grants to implement their proposals. Progress is monitored on a regular basis and continued funding of the plan is based on successful implementation.

*Source: Eisemon, 1992. World Bank, 1997, 1996b and 1994b.*

Academic perspectives also predominate in the external review, particularly if the visiting team is mainly comprised of academics. Tilting toward governmental interests, however, is the development of explicit standards, the requirement for public reporting and the attention that is paid to actual results, or accomplishments. Overall agreement on these core elements still leaves much room for variation, certainly, and important differences can be seen when specific settings are compared

Some agreement is emerging about the general effects of quality assurance, at least in systems that have had extensive experience and that have undergone systematic evaluations. Several studies have documented, for example, that quality assurance systems have caused academic institutions to give greater attention to issues of effective teaching and learning. Degree completion rates have improved in some systems, as student services and advising have received more attention. Quality assurance systems that focus on institutions, as in France, have reported that institutional management has improved, that strategic

planning has been strengthened and that programs have become more responsive to changing needs. In Indonesia (Box 5), an emerging process intended to encourage internal program review and revitalization has had considerable success. Some analysts see these changes as evidence that, among university leaders, there is greater acceptance today of the need for having open and accountable management procedures. Drawbacks have also been identified, including concern that quality assurance systems have led to "compliance" behavior and inordinate paperwork burdens. Quality assurance systems also impose considerable administrative and financial burdens on governments that, in many countries, can be difficult to sustain over an extended period and as political leadership changes.

### Areas of Continuing Debate

Significant differences still exist on many policy and implementation issues regarding quality assurance. The same issues tend to appear in the debates occurring across many countries, while other issues, equally as important, receive much less attention. Generally speaking, issues of policy and practice have received more attention than some of the educational or learning issues that undergird approaches to quality assurance.

#### **Box 6. The British Open University**

The Open University (OU), created in 1971, is a separate, autonomous, institution offering university level, distance education to part-time adult learners. It is the largest university in the United Kingdom, accounting for approximately seven percent of all higher education enrollments and 20 percent of part-time enrollments. The Open University is the same, in many important ways, as any "traditional" university:

- It operates within the same regulatory environment and has the same status as other universities;
- Teaching and research programs are assessed in the same way - through a combination of internal review and external audit and evaluation;
- A full range of university level subjects is offered and degrees are awarded at the Bachelor, Master and Doctoral levels;
- Undergraduate courses are rated in accordance with the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Schemes to facilitate transfer to other institutions and students may obtain credit for prior academic work, and;
- Tuition fees are charged in accordance to course of study and limited financial assistance is available to needy students.

Where the OU differs dramatically from other higher education institutions in the UK is in its student profile and in its method of course delivery. The typical OU student is much more likely to be enrolled part-time and to be older than students at other universities. Consistent with its policy of open learning, there are no academic entrance requirements for study at the OU. A series of modules is offered to assist potential students in assessing their capacity for higher level, independent study.

The OU has pioneered the use of different technologies to meet the needs and schedules of its students. Courses use a combination of materials for independent study - radio and television broadcasts, computer based learning and short residential courses held over the summer.

Subject to wide debate, for example, is whether the entire academic institution should be reviewed or whether, instead, individual academic programs or disciplines should be the focus of quality review. Countries in Western Europe, despite a general consensus among them on other elements of quality assurance, vary widely on whether programs or institutions are the focus of review. Denmark, the Netherlands, and Portugal have focused on reviews of academic programs. France, in contrast, began with institutional evaluations but now conducts both types of review. Some universities in Germany have adopted institutional audits or other institution-wide reviews. In the United Kingdom, both institutional and program reviews have been conducted, although under the sponsorship of different bodies while, in Ireland, one agency conducts both types of review. Outside of Europe, many countries have begun with an approach to quality assurance issues based on an institutional review but, as their systems experienced growth in professional fields of study, the pressures have been strong to conduct quality assurance reviews on a program-by-program basis.

Much debate also continues on the appropriate use of quantitative information in monitoring the operations and accomplishments of higher education institutions. Public officials in most countries have advocated the development of a few relevant performance indicators, with comparisons among institutions and over time. England took a further step by linking the amount of research funding to performance scores of academic departments. Whatever the specific approach, academics have resisted the move toward performance indicators, arguing that such indicators are reductionist, offer inaccurate comparisons, and are unduly burdensome. In the face of such opposition, some governments have adopted an incremental stance, requiring that universities provide an increasing amount of quantitative information to quality assurance bodies. Others have introduced performance indicators, not in quality assurance systems, but as part of their institutional contracts or in other forms of conditional funding. Thus far, only a few countries link performance information to governmental decisions on levels of funding or eligibility for funds. In Romania, a set of coordinated improvement efforts include both accreditation reviews and the establishment of a competitive fund to support innovation (Box 2).

These issues, currently subject to discussion in both policy and academic circles, are only a few of the many complex issues that could be considered in developing a quality assurance system in higher education. A comprehensive approach needs to reflect thoughtful decisions on a range of questions, including: what to inspect and how; who does the inspecting and who administers the process to ensure it is conducted fairly; what is reported following the inspection and what are the consequences of the report. Consensus seems to have been achieved mainly on the division of labor in quality assurance, especially the respective roles of government and of academic voices. The debate over whether to emphasize programs or institutions involves some decisions on what should be inspected, but many design questions are still unresolved. Even less agreement appears with respect to what actions should follow from inspection results and, especially whether bad results should have financial consequences. Some want to reward good results, possibly through supplemental funding or incentive systems. Others want to punish bad results, for example, by withholding funds or not allowing a program to enroll new students. Still others want to shape results so that they lead to voluntary improvements.

Despite the many unsettled issues, most countries can be expected to continue to sponsor quality assurance systems for years to come. Differences across countries are also likely to remain in specific approaches to quality assurance, which are responsive to different conditions and felt needs within each country. Nevertheless, the next decade is likely to see some movement toward consolidation and greater coherence of procedures in quality assurance systems. These systems will be under continuing scrutiny in most countries and, therefore, are likely to modify their procedures as various issues gain attention. Pressures for greater efficiency can be expected, in light of the administrative burden created by many current systems. Further, as their results have greater public impact, quality assurance systems will face greater demands for consistent treatment of all types of institutions and for greater transparency in their procedures and decisions. In light of these pressures, the current period of experimentation – with ideas and approaches being tried and debated – may be superseded by a trend toward stable structures and settled routines for many quality assurance systems.

### Challenges Ahead: New Forms of Education Delivery

Quality assurance systems will find continuing challenges in the decade ahead, not only on their procedural decisions but also on the fundamental educational issues they must address. Complex questions about how to measure educational quality are gaining new urgency because of two recent developments: the widening use of educational technology and the burgeoning interest in global delivery of educational services. There has been some effort to address each of these emerging trends, especially in some major systems of quality assurance, but much remains to be addressed.

### **Box 7. Quality Control in the 21st Century**

Over the last twenty years, a new paradigm of the function of higher education in society has emerged. While universities still maintain their role as the “conscience of society,” more pragmatic roles have been evolving over time: universities no longer pursue knowledge for its own sake, rather they provide qualified manpower and produce knowledge. With this new economically oriented paradigm, comes accountability. Higher education will be judged in terms of outputs and the contributions it makes to national development.

Criteria to assess the quality of the work and of the teams which carry out research in this new university will differ from those of more traditional, disciplinary science. In the past, quality was determined through peer review. Control was maintained by careful selection of those judged competent to act as peers, which was in part determined by their previous contributions to their discipline. In the new university additional criteria are added through the context of application which now incorporates a diverse range of intellectual interests as well as other social, economic or political ones. To the criterion of intellectual interest and its interaction, further questions are posed, “ Will the solution be competitive in the market? Will it be cost effective? Will it be socially acceptable

Quality assurance will be more complex as universities move to broaden the range of their knowledge missions. Until now, quality control in teaching and research has been exercised through essentially the same type of peer review system. Quality has been a matter for academics and academics alone. It has been up to them to determine when quality in both

teaching and research has been achieved. Hybridization of the disciplinary structure is likely to continue to be the main mode of expansion in teaching provision in the future. If new research practices diffuse more widely throughout universities, entirely new assurance mechanisms will be necessary for the problem-oriented teaching that will accompany it. One can expect to see the development of new bench-marking methodologies and the production of a range of bench-marking studies across the higher education sector. These studies will help rank universities according to various quality indicators by region, by country and even globally; not only according to teaching and research but across the entire range of knowledge missions (Schofield, 1998). In the quality assurance processes which are now emerging, a much wider range of factors is being considered. Universities will not be able to insist on criteria which reflect their intellectual interests alone rather they will be one actor among several and the challenge for them will be to ensure that their legitimate interests survive the negotiation process.

*Source: Gibbons, 1998.*

Some quality assurance agencies have begun to adapt their review procedures to address a growing variety of distance education and other electronic learning opportunities, including television-based courses, and instruction over the Internet. In the United States, for example, accrediting agencies and other organizations have developed statements on ways to evaluate distance learning. However, most statements offer a limited response, mostly following procedures that were developed for conventional learning settings, rather than developing new assessment processes to fit these new modes of education. Such adaptations may be appropriate when electronic learning is used by a few institutions, involves small numbers of students or, as in Australia, where electronic delivery is undertaken primarily by traditional institutions with long experience in distance learning. Limited oversight mechanisms also can be suitable when distance learning is the responsibility of one public organization, as in India or the United Kingdom. However, there is growing awareness that the review procedures developed for conventional learning settings are not sufficient for electronic delivery methods, especially as these new delivery vehicles grow in importance and reach. Yet, little clarity has emerged about how electronic delivery can be better evaluated.

Because of the rapid development of electronic media and delivery infrastructure over the last decade, distance learning has now reached a stage where substantial growth can be expected. Prospects for expansion are especially great in view of the burgeoning enrollments forecast for many countries and the limited prospects they have to invest in physical facilities to match rising demand. Over the next decade, an increased number of institutions can be expected to offer distance learning, and with much higher numbers of students enrolled. This growth poses serious implications for quality assurance agencies: a greater number of providers of distance learning must be monitored, in a greater variety of learning sites and modes; and an increasing number of students will be seeking recognition for distance-based courses to fit a greater diversity of study objectives.

Similar issues arise in considering the implications for quality assurance of the growing trend of international student mobility. Whenever students enroll in other countries as part of a degree program, their study plan must be evaluated for how it can be compared to the academic work they might have completed in their home country or institution. In considering how to monitor such learning, most quality assurance systems follow a decision

strategy broadly similar to their stance on distance learning, i.e., assuming that small adaptations of conventional procedures can accommodate this variation in study pattern. In Europe, several universities cooperated on a multi-year European Commission project to develop guidelines for student transfer and credit recognition, but the project resulted in the type of inter-institutional agreements that has long been used with cross-national study. In the United States, accrediting agencies generally rely on each university to extend its own internal procedures to ensure that study abroad is compatible with its regular program. These approaches may be more suitable to short-term study than to an extensive period of study abroad, however.

Efforts to evaluate and recognize extended periods of academic study across country borders have been problematic. Many countries refuse to recognize academic study outside their borders. Most of the bi-lateral agreements that do exist are found among the few countries with large enrollments of foreign students and are not easily extended to other countries. U.S. procedures, for example, are based primarily on detailed analyses that compare U.S. programs and degrees and those of another country, looking to details of course and curricular structure, examination systems, etc. Heated disputes have arisen between countries with respect to whether degrees in one country can be recognized as employment credentials in another country. Similar disagreements have arisen regarding what level of prior work will be recognized when students wish to take a further degree in another country.

Recognizing the flaws in today's arrangements, one can expect increased pressures for better solutions in the future as more students seek to extend their studies in other countries. Important forces of globalization – symbolized by multi-country compacts in Europe, in North America, and in South Asia – already portend a much greater mobility of students and scholars in the next century. Thus, difficult as the issues are, quality assurance agencies must address the assessment and monitoring issues that will arise as increasing numbers of students seek to complete an entire degree program, or a specific component of a program, in another country.

### The Key Challenges for Quality Assurance

The challenges to quality assurance raised by electronic learning and by international student mobility are closely related. Both force attention to questions of how learning can be assessed and monitored when it takes place apart from the instructional process or away from the sponsoring institution. With electronic delivery methods, learning need not occur at the same time or place as instruction. How is this learning monitored when the instructor does not have face-to-face contact with a student, and how well can learning be assessed by remote methods that are not buttressed by direct contact? With international study, learning occurs at a different time and place and the sponsoring institution has limited control over the circumstances in which it takes place. How is this learning monitored and how can the coherence of a program be assessed across different instructional settings, including cultural and linguistic differences or differences in how educational programs are structured?

In both circumstances, the critical evaluative task for quality assurance agencies is to focus on what remains central, i.e., what the student learns. Educators, as well as quality assurance agencies, must look to the actual results, or outcomes of an instructional process.

Furthermore, as many quality assurance agencies have recognized, these same challenges also apply to study in traditional settings, especially when students enroll part-time, change field of study, interrupt their studies or transfer to a new institution. Whether a unit of learning takes place in a workplace, in another country or university, or over the Internet, the instructor or assessor may not have the full range of knowledge about the student that is possible in a traditional classroom situation.

Yet, it is also true that giving attention to learning and outcomes raises new and complex issues likely to concern quality assurance agencies for the next decade or more. They will need to work with higher education institutions to develop effective ways to assess learning accomplishment, not time spent in a certain place or with a certain program. They also will need to develop inspection methods appropriate to a new focus on learning, regardless of its setting or provider.

This sets out an ambitious agenda, but it is also an area in which education scholars have already conducted much sophisticated research. In a number of countries, potentially useful approaches and models exist, including examinations and other methods that test students when they complete a degree program as well as modularized methods that assess specific units of learning. Some developmental work also has been conducted to develop assessment and inspection methods for different learning circumstances. Procedures to allow credit transfer or to give recognition to degrees earned in other countries also offer useful precedents for further work to equate electronic learning or study abroad with traditional units of academic learning.

With new attention to learning, it is also necessary for quality assurance systems to re-examine their conventional expectations for monitoring characteristics of higher education institutions. In traditional terms, many attributes of a university were considered when its education was assessed: its library and classroom quality, the strength of its staff credentials, or the reputation it had for providing good education. Electronic methods of instructional delivery call into question whether and how such institutional characteristics matter. So too, international study challenges the relevance of physical setting and raises questions about the purpose of inspection visits to an institution.

Thus, a second key challenge stemming from electronic learning and student mobility is for quality assurance agencies to clarify their assumptions and to have appropriate reasons for looking to an institution's capacity to offer a good educational program. In the past, quality assurance agencies may have confused some traditional thinking about institutional capacity and reputation with a more defensible focus on *educational* capacity and effectiveness, i.e., whether an institution or other provider can demonstrate the resources and the ability to offer an entire program and its related services at an expected level of quality.

Such clarification is also called for by the growing variety of "providers" of higher education. In some countries, private higher education institutions can be organized on a profit-making basis, may offer primarily short-cycle courses, and may offer instruction in multiple sites and without permanent staff. Such organizations may offer electronic delivery of instruction and, too, could sponsor study abroad programs using distance education modes of delivery. For such new types of higher education, quality assurance

agencies face the same necessity to clarify what issues relate to the capacity to offer programs of sufficient educational quality.

### Toward Quality Assurance for the Twenty-First Century

Differences by country and region can be expected on the pace of transition toward a quality assurance paradigm based on learning outcomes, regardless of setting. Some countries can rely on a substantial base of scholarly research on learning as well as on extensive project experiences of individual universities or national organizations. Others have little direct experience with outcomes assessment. Some governments have already taken steps to shift their systems of quality assurance toward learning, most often through the use of performance measures but in several recent instances through calls for attention to standards of learning (e.g., in England) or for the development of overarching qualifications frameworks for higher education (e.g., in New Zealand and South Africa).

Developing a system of quality assurance based on learning is a major task for every country. Decisions are needed on the learning objectives to be assessed, as well as the evidence that would demonstrate its accomplishment; methods must be developed for applying evaluation techniques to actual learning situations. With a focus on learning, rather than on the setting in which learning takes place, all of these new decisions and methods must be made applicable to a wide variety of learning circumstances, including different fields of study, different degree levels and stages of learning accomplishment.

To be successful, such an effort requires collective action by universities and by governmental agencies, along with scholars in educational research. Cooperative action is needed both within and across many countries. Fortunately, several precedents exist for such cooperative approaches to quality assurance and might offer a basis for building still further cooperation. In Europe, for example, a pilot project was supported by the European Commission between 1991 and 1995 to explore aspects of joint cooperation on quality assurance; a Europe-wide quality assurance network has been formed to follow up on the pilot project's work and to take further steps. In the United States, the separate regional commissions that accredit higher education have recently given their joint endorsement to a set of guidelines for the evaluation of distance learning, guidelines that earlier had been developed by a consortium of states in the western part of the United States.

Such national and multinational steps are promising and, if sustained and extended, could offer a framework for developmental action in other countries as well. Individual governments and agencies could contribute to this larger effort by sponsoring conferences or other efforts to learn from the developmental work underway in several countries. A mechanism to encourage this developmental process also exists in a recently formed international network of quality assurance agencies, which sponsors an annual conference to discuss mutual issues and to share progress on developmental efforts such as those just mentioned. This network, or a similar structure, could facilitate discussion of how progress in one country might translate across national borders.

Concerted international action is needed, however, to hasten what will otherwise be a slow, long-term shift by quality assurance agencies from a focus on settings to a focus on learning. Because the problems posed by electronic delivery and by the increasing pace of



international student mobility will affect all countries, an uneven pattern of change -- with some countries adopting new practices while others do not have access to these new practices -- will undercut the overall objective on ensuring that learning, in any place, can be assessed appropriately.

Wide-scale international cooperation is needed to spur the process of developing new alternatives and building inter-country agreements for using new ways to assess and validate learning across settings. Strong multinational organizations should assume leadership roles to further the development of truly international standards for assessing quality in higher education. The OECD might be asked to take on such a role, based on its respect and legitimacy and on its expertise in conducting country reviews of national education policies and, recently, in completing a twelve-nation review of higher education. A project sponsored by the institutional management program of the OECD offers a good precedent: this IMHE program helped to develop and test a quality review process appropriate for reviewing the quality of internationalization initiatives within universities. Also underway is another relevant IMHE project which makes cross-national comparisons of the impact of quality assurance on institutions of higher education.

Other international and non-governmental organizations also could be called on to help develop new models of quality assurance. A network of quality assurance agencies that has recently formed in Europe could offer assistance, possibly by identifying certain tasks where it could undertake developmental projects. The international network of quality assurance agencies could also be a resource for identifying special expertise for certain tasks.

Before any substantial amount of developmental work can move forward, a separate effort is needed to develop greater clarity and consensus on what types of new structures might be appropriate for assessing learning, regardless of setting. An international approach is needed for this task, too, and needs to be organized by a multinational body. Various options need to be debated for what the broad developmental objective should be; areas of agreement and cooperative research need to be identified. The options to be considered might range widely, including:

- ◆ Harmonization of degree levels across countries, for example, to organize levels of learning to more closely conform with the ISCED levels developed by UNESCO;
- ◆ Identification of general competencies or skills that should characterize holders of a degree, regardless of where or how they earned the degree;
- ◆ International standards for student achievement, specified for each profession and discipline;
- ◆ International leaving examinations, comparable to the *international baccalaureate* that has been established at the high-school-leaving stage and that becomes more feasible worldwide as computer-assisted examination techniques are developed;
- ◆ Assessments of institutional capacity based on international standards and review teams, organized separately for research universities, technical institutes, etc.; or
- ◆ Internationally-recognized methods for assessing educational capacity.

Many other options are possible, particularly on the assumption that widening use of Internet resources will facilitate communication among universities and agencies throughout the world. Consistent performance indicators might be developed across several countries, for example, and their development, experimentation and eventual use could all be carried out and made available through the Internet. The Internet also lends itself to the development of a common approach to student transcripts and records, or to an internationally available resource that offers descriptive detail on study programs and courses offered at universities anywhere in the world.

International agencies should consider ways in which they could contribute to the development of these or other new models for quality assurance. The issues are global, and will be increasingly shared across countries. Solutions are needed that are consistent throughout the world of higher education.

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