

QA: Less Quality Assurance, more Questioning Assurance! Pleading for complexity, ruptures, and even some joy.

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Abstract

Since its introduction to higher education about twenty years ago, formal quality assurance developed to an important and mostly uncontested pillar of university management. But although QA procedures are operational in all countries adherent to the Bologna process, and although large amounts of public funding are spent in setting up and improving national and institutional QA systems, there is still not much empirical evidence proving the effectiveness of QA.

This paper raises a number of critical questions concerning QA in its existing forms. In particular, it investigates why QA matters mostly remain in the responsibility of university administration instead of becoming an issue of the academic community as a whole, and what risks this development can bring. Concluding, several alternate approaches are denoted, concerning not only internal QA but consequently also external QA and public accountability.

Introduction

During the last years, due to my professional work at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, I had the opportunity to participate in the elaboration of a very specific QA approach. This process being carried out in the innovative context of an arts university, within a very open communication culture, led me to a more and more critical reflection on current QA practices.

After delivering a workshop dedicated to this topic at last year's EQAF together with my colleague Oliver Vettori¹, we decided afterwards to dig deeper, accepting an invitation by the *Journal for Development of Higher Education Institutions* to act as guest editors of a special issue, for which we proposed the title "In Quality We Trust? – Investigating the impact of more than two decades of QA in European Higher Education".²

This year's EQAF-topic "How does quality assurance make a difference?" came to me as an invitation to elaborate my personal beliefs as they developed during the last years into a position paper, inspired by continuous exchange with academics, students, decision makers, alumni, agency representatives and colleagues nationally and internationally.

My goal is not to judge any existing practices; rather do my thoughts and concerns address the in my opinion exaggerated focus on QA routines. This emphasis can be somehow compared to the use of potent antibiotics against every disease, thus missing out potential for more focused treatment and risking bacterial resistance in the long run.

Due to the constraints concerning the length of the paper, I cannot elaborate every thought in detail, I try to focus on the main arguments instead, for the sake of completeness of the idea.

¹ Kernegger, Bernhard; Vettori, Oliver: Sabotaging trust and managing distrust – an inventory of our best bad practices. Workshop, EQAF 2011.

² This issue is published in March 2013, see <http://www.zfhe.at>

Historical background and changing stages

Since the second half of the 20th century, higher education institutions have been confronted with an increasing necessity to continuously adapt themselves to major changes in society. The self-concept of universities came more and more under discussion, additionally pressed by the rising demand for higher education, consequently leading to bottlenecks in teaching capacities.

European universities can build on strong traditions, once having been almost-feudalistic centres of academic elites. When they were transformed into institutions funded and in continental Europe also directed by government, they mostly succeeded in defending their academic autonomy and freedom (cf. Paletschek 2007). Trying to impose reforms on universities has always been a heavy challenge for governments; universities have been demonstrating highly developed skills in outlasting political initiatives by their sheer size, slowness and complexity. The ministerial administrations on the other hand have developed some creativity in continuously inventing new governance models and concepts, to break up old and resistant structures.

Besides the introduction of quality assurance, the following examples for such concepts can be given:

- management structures that base on participation of all university members,
- extended flexibility regarding budgeting in combination with respective accounting procedures,
- autonomy in designing study programmes,
- learning outcomes and qualification frameworks,
- conditions for research and teaching staff or
- performance contracts.

On the hidden agenda of all these governmentally invented reforms we can always sense the intention to break up sometimes dysfunctional structures and the need to bring the universities into interaction with the challenges of societal change. A common outcome of this kind of strategy was continuous conflict between universities and governmental bodies, consuming a major part of the available energies for transformation.

In many European countries it is now acknowledged that the complex needs of modern society require flexible institutions in higher education that are in the legal position to autonomously dispose over necessary funding and to set out their appropriate self-organisation – all that to create a stronger basis to unlock their full innovative potential (cf. Amaral 2012).³ The demand for quality assurance could, in this context, also be interpreted as a necessary trade off in return for the given autonomy, or, in the words of the Berlin Communiqué (2003): “consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework.”

Strengths and limitations of quality assurance?

With no doubt, the introduction of formal quality assurance to higher education institutions had notable consequences on their self-conceptions and strategies. As the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* strongly focus on teaching, this led to considerable institutional attention on teaching quality all over Europe. External quality assurance procedures stimulated knowledge transfer between different institutions throughout Europe, also improving the conditions for international exchange and recognition, triggering a change of self-conceptions of teaching.

Looking on the objectives of QA – and it is not even uncontested if there is a common understanding of those objectives! (cf. Vettori 2012) – it seems but interesting that the quoted benefits must rather be classified as side-effects. Whether teaching itself really improved or whether students' learning now became more effective as a consequence, whether higher education institutions perform better as a result of accreditation or being peer reviewed, we do not have sound evidence. Reality confronts us with a superposition of different developments, like still increasing numbers of students, budgetary restrictions as a consequence of the financial crisis, international competition for the best teachers and students, new societal demands to be met, and lots more.

³ Author's remark: This is not at all a statement in favour of neoliberal management logics. Yet more differentiation is not possible in this context and also not necessary for the purpose of this paper.

What we can see without any difficulties is a considerable amount of public funding spent for people busying themselves with the elaboration of systems meant to bring institutions forward by simplifying almost any given situation to the same model: an eternally moving PDCA-wheel rolling up never-ending hills, and even more people occupied with fulfilling the new tasks defined by those systems or with inventing strategies to hide away from or to defend against them (cf. Ewell 2007)

When the introduction of QA in the first place brought necessary attention to relevant issues, caused salutary irritation, confrontation and sometimes even chaos and institutional ruptures, many QA processes now show a tendency of reduction to a meta-world defined by quality management terminology, being of little inspiration for any innovation-oriented academic. This development is not really surprising, as power and fascination of new ideas always tend to vanish over the years. In higher education, newly introduced concepts were often additionally burdened with unrealistic expectations to solve all major problems, be it a new method of governance, a new didactic approach or even the establishment of new institution types.

Matured concepts normally get contextualised in a more realistic way, with a clear notion of their strengths and shortcomings. Is it not an interesting phenomenon that this down-to-earth-shift did not yet happen to quality assurance, although the academic environment already adapted to the new situation, be it by real improvement or by dismissive coping strategies (cf. Geuna 2003)?

There still remains a strong belief that most of the core problems of a university can be tackled, if only its system of quality assurance could be perfected. This belief becomes manifest in the remarkable efforts that are all the same put in elaborating better procedures of internal and external review all over Europe. It seems at least questionable, if it is a sensible approach to invest in upholding a concept, ignoring that the conditions for its original success have mostly vanished due to the simple life cycle of concepts and ideas.

How can quality assurance really make a difference?

A systematic reflection and development of objectives, strategies and procedures is a core issue in higher education, especially for autonomous universities. This task, like teaching and research, is therefore not suitable to be assigned exclusively to university management and administration.

Identifying a significant number of academic staff or students who would volunteer to take responsibility for quality assurance as it is understood at the moment would be merely impossible, but whose fault is this? Why should leading academics feel responsible for a given task, only because they are told it is important for the sake of improvement and efficiency? Why should students more and more under pressure to complete their studies in as little time as possible put any effort into processes that do not result into visible effects nor contribute to their understanding of academic systems or society?

But first of all: Why should academics feel a need to use pre-formulated systems to assure their quality? Is not systematising a genuine strength of scientific disciplines? Is not the quest for improvement, for innovation, even for bettering the world, one of the main assets of arts and science? There seems to be a strict incompatibility between this intrinsic aspiration for quality and improvement on the one hand and participation within a quality assurance system on the other.

When the concept of quality management was transferred to Europe and then to European universities, the very specifics of European culture were not taken into account much. Yet, individuality, creativity, inventive genius, cultural diversity and social responsibility are commonly seen as European core values that need to be further strengthened in future, to keep a leading role in the world of tomorrow.⁴ Why the establishment of a multitude of rather uniform PDCA cycles could contribute to this target is not easy to understand, especially not for academic people who themselves are supposed to be key players to contribute to European and national innovation strategies.

⁴ cf. European Commission: Europe 2020 – A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Brussels (2010). or: European Commission: Horizon 2020 – The Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. Brussels (2011).

Perhaps it is time to stop insulting intelligent people with high abilities to analyse complex systems with their particular methodologies by confronting them with the ever same boring QA models that were invented for use in business enterprises in mass production? Is it really wise to put the backing and the involvement of the majority of the academics at stake, thus risking that universities lose their distinctive character or even fall apart? There is no need to slavishly transfer QA models to universities, only because it is possible to do so with some effort, and because politics would accept it as a simple answer to the complex challenges of higher education: Universities have often proven that they can stand their ground in essential matters, refusing inappropriate simplicity.

Why not allow some internal complexity?

Members of expert organizations like universities are characterized by an above-average intrinsic motivation (cf. Laske 2006), concerning their scientific or artistic goals. As curious people, they are eager to discover and communicate, especially concerning issues of their very interest.

The quality of research and teaching is a major intrinsic concern of academics, but why is this not the case all the same with quality assurance? One major task of quality assurance could be the identification of current and future relevant issues for an institution, also backed by (empirical) research – as a basis to formulate **questions**. It is not always best to offer solutions to an expert community, even if they appear to be good ones. Openness to innovation needs openness to alternate responses, surprises and new ways of thinking.

Setting a stage for serious discussions, as a measure of systematic institutional self-reflection (and definitely not in the sense of just another working group with quickly fading outcomes) is a very challenging task and implies a totally different kind of expertise, to meet the diverse demands of diverse higher education institutions, regarding their academic culture, size, history or urban context. But a communicative setting that enables people to effectively elaborate contributions to relevant future questions together, combined with the management commitment to handle results responsibly and transparently, can be a much stronger contribution to a genuine quality culture than increasing participation in student feedback or occasional external assessments to check conformity with given standards.

And finally: A setting of vivid exchange where people eagerly attend, not only because of the importance of the questions but also because they benefit from a mutual exchange, would be far more attractive for students to participate in.

External QA as generator to provoke ruptures?

External QA procedures usually are highly regulated. Lists of criteria and standards set out a narrow stage for the academic peers who are then trained in the application of these lists by administrative members of QA agencies.

Since the existence of external QA, we all know that the crucial task is the follow up, after a review is done. But still how many reviews of QA systems come to the conclusion that exactly here lies the weakness? Is it not incredible, especially in an academic context, that regardless of this knowledge, we continue to run against the same wall, again and again, only varying speed and technique of the startup?

What if external QA were not externally imposed, e.g. for accreditation or funding purposes, and if there were no constraint to publish every single outcome? What if it were the institutions themselves who can identify the relevant questions where they desire for professional feedback? And what if the external experts could speak out frankly about their findings and ideas, not being strictly bound to predefined schemes?

Perhaps such a setting would not have a follow up problem at all, because when university members themselves would have defined the relevant questions for a peer review, they would be curious to learn about the outcomes, even demanding possibilities to collectively discuss and integrate those results in their individual practice. To my judgement, this is not mere phantasy, if only a shift of the ownership over the external review process in the direction of academic staff could be achieved.

But what about accountability?

There remains one strong argument against shifting quality assurance away from its more regulated and standardized fashion towards a flexible tool for organisational and personal development: Society as the funder of higher education rightly demands reporting about the use of budgets and resources, and governmental bodies and higher education institutions themselves are well advised to make an effort to meet this demand.

If quality assurance were able to guarantee accountability to the public, then it would be hard to argue the need of changes, even given the lacks described above. But is it not another unhidden secret that not even accreditation by detailed analyses of every single study programme can deliver valid and broadly comprehensible information about quality? Is it not widely known that there are often overlaps between peer judgement, political necessities and other forces that lead to decisions?

These restraints given, it might be worthwhile to think of other possibilities of accountability – perhaps the public is less interested whether its higher education institutions are still living up to previously set expectations and standards than in their articulation of a serious endeavour to further develop and re-innovate, and how they proceed?

In our postmodern society which is strongly characterised by its heterogeneous composition and democratic pluralism, a more diverse approach towards the accountability of pluralistic higher education institutions would for sure be more fitting than a one-for-all technocratic accountability machinery.

Conclusions

To avoid misunderstandings before concluding, I like to point out that I do not propose to generally cancel the existing QA activities. Many of them undoubtedly have their justification and benefits when they are used deliberately and according to clearly defined goals. Opening new institutions and new study programmes without any external QA would certainly not be a good idea, excluding students from giving their critical feedback on course quality would neither.

Yet it is a crucial question of philosophy and strategy what to focus on, and under whose lead. Only because it is far easier to do some questionnaire-based evaluation or to entrust an external agency with some organisational review, and only because there is perhaps a lack of experience or even internal competence in elaborating relevant questions and creating appropriate settings for communication and discourse, this cannot be the argument to restrict oneself to the application of PDCA-cycles over and over again.

When universities, internally, want to get rid of the original governmental mistrust that led to the introduction of QA to the universities, they will have to transform QA to a powerful tool of their very own, at full disposal for and owned by the community of academics and students: a tool that can really assure quality, not in a (pseudo)-objective way, but by assuring that relevant questions for university development are systematically addressed, creatively discussed and solved together in appropriate and transparent ways – thereby contributing to an atmosphere of motivation, inspiration and even joy about what is to be done.

For accountability purposes this would also mean to take responsibility away from external agencies, back to the universities themselves and then also to the governmental bodies in charge: Universities would have to explain to a competent government authority in a coherent way what they do to improve their quality, using an appropriate mix of internal and external quality assurance to tackle relevant development issues. This also would mean a new challenge for governmental bodies, as they would have to come back into a more substantial discussion again, instead of narrowing their political responsibility to judgements done by external agencies.

QA is not able to make a difference on its own, but higher education institutions can make a difference by responsibly and cleverly using QA principles for their further development.

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Questions for discussion

- Why do we find such a widely uncontested belief that not yet working systems will reach the set objectives in the future, if we only put enough effort in their development?
- Could it be possible in practice to come back to the intrinsic motivation of academic staff to redefine QA as a tool for collective university development?
- Do not political decision makers risk losing the necessary fundamentals when they transfer a large part of their own responsibility onto external quality assurance?