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Taking stock and looking forward

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Short bio: Anca Prisacariu is a PhD candidate at the Doctoral School of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bucharest, Romania and currently a Doctoral Research Fellow within the Institute of Behavioural Sciences in University of Helsinki, Finland. Her research preoccupations are around the quality assurance of higher education, focusing on enhancement-led systems and processes.

Apart from her studies, she has broad working experience with organisations for higher education and quality assurance: EQAR, EURASHE, IEP-EUA, ENQA, ESU and the European Consortium of Accreditation. Additionally, she is acting as an expert for different national quality assurance agencies across Europe and outside of it. From these positions, she has been a member of numerous review panels at study programme, institutional and quality assurance agency level.

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Outside of her work at ICS Learn, Emilia has been actively contributing to developments in the area of Quality Assurance as a founding member of the QAA UK Student Advisory Board, steering committee member for the IEP, external reviewer for several quality assurance bodies such as QAA UK, QAA Scotland, EUA, ENQA, ECA and more, and her research in learning and teaching practices.



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Short bio: Mahsood Shah is an Associate Professor at the University of Newcastle, Australia. In this role, Mahsood is responsible of strengthening research capacity with staff who are engaged in teaching open access courses to young and mature age students from various equity groups. Mahsood's area of research include: quality in higher education, student experience, student feedback, student retention and attrition, student engagement in quality assurance, and private higher education.

Prior to joining the University of Newcastle, Mahsood led strategic planning and quality assurance in a number of Australian universities and private higher education providers. Apart from working in universities, Mahsood has extensive experience in private higher education and has published many papers on the subject. He has assisted more than 10 private providers in Australia in quality and accreditation.

Proposal

Title: Does quality assurance reflect the social dimension of higher education?

Abstract: Given the ten years since the introduction of the ESG and the five years since the formal launch of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) quality assurance of higher education has gained significant prominence on the public and political agendas. The focus has so far been on core areas including research and education, while importance is now emerging in internationalisation and support functions. With increased diversity of the student population, questions are asked on whether traditional quality assurance frameworks are innovative and morally just in assessing higher education activities. The present paper analyses how various higher education quality assurance frameworks in different countries across the globe address the development and prioritisation of social dimension across the higher education sector. The paper argues the need for governments and institutions worldwide to recognise the importance of social dimension of higher education across the world, and the need for quality assurance frameworks to be innovative in this regard.

Text of paper:

Taking stock

The concept of quality in higher education has become an increasingly important matter for institutions, as well as for public policy and debates on education. Quality assurance (QA) has been used for the overall improvement of institutions, in core and support areas. As the demand for higher education has increased, so has the demand for its accountability, reliability and value for money (Harvey and Askling, 2003). Institutions are held accountable for the internal management of their own quality and the effective implementation of systems and processes to achieve better outcomes. Nationally, QA agencies provide an external evaluation of the institution and/or its programmes. From country to country the mechanisms can vary and how quality is achieved and monitored can be very different. However, institutions now face much larger competition from other institutions and providers, both at home and abroad. In order to attract more students, institutions are under the constant pressure of having to maintain their quality, standards, reputation and especially the student experience they provide.



Basing itself on Recommendation CM/Rec (2012)13 (Council of Europe, 2012), the 24th Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (Helsinki, 26 and 27 April 2013), on the theme of "Governance and quality education" (Council of Europe, 2013), agreed that quality of education was closely linked to four inter-related purposes, namely:

- preparation for sustainable employment;
- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- personal development; and
- the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base (Bergan, 2005).

In the same recommendation, Council of Europe underscores the social dimension of quality: an education system cannot be of high quality unless it provides adequate opportunities for all students. QA agencies have the responsibility to institutions and the public to assure that the education and experience providers deliver is of acceptable standard, in order to maintain trust in the education system nationally and internationally. Most importantly, however, QA review mechanisms provide valuable recommendations to how institutions can enhance their provision and therefore improve the students' experience. When defining "quality education", Council of Europe states as first characteristic that education should give access to learning to all students, particularly those from vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, adapted to their needs as appropriate.

The social dimension as a concept encompasses a variety of issues which make up the student experience – access to education, effective participation and successful course completion, study and the living conditions, student support in terms of guidance, financial support, and the participation of students in governance and student mobility (EHEA, 2007). More specifically, social dimension includes the following:

- Equal opportunities to quality higher education which are accessible to all;
- Opportunities for all citizens to follow lifelong learning paths into and within higher education;
- Studying conditions;
- Living conditions;
- Guidance and counselling;
- Student support services;
- Financial support and
- Students are full partners in the governance of their institutions;
- Tailored support and guidance in regards to widening access;
- Access to mobility and free movement of students, teachers and researchers (EHEA, 2007).

Statsna (2005) identified that the social dimension in the EHEA is much wider than just student support and it should integrate access to higher education whilst allow flexibility in the learning journeys. However, in order to achieve this and to allow students to "successfully complete their studies within an appropriate period of time without obstacles related to their social and economic background" (Bologna Process, 2003), students should have access to adequate support structures (Statsna, 2005) and thus be fully equipped to face the challenges of higher education - financial, psychological or practical.

The European Council has also emphasised the importance of improving social dimension across education sectors by recognising equality of access, participation and completion of higher education to be the best ways to tackle the challenges of modern Europe (Council of Europe, 2013).

Harvey et. al. (1992) introduced the term "total student experience" implying that learning does not only take place in the classroom but is a whole range of experiences, bridging the gaps between academic, administrative and support programmes. The term is described as a mixture of social factors, learning experience and studying arrangements. Financial, social and psychological challenges can often be reasons for students leaving education



and completing their course only partially or not at all (Kuh et al 2006). For example, financial implications can not only cause a negative student experience, but also could be a reason for why some students choose not to enter in higher education in the first place. Recommendation (2007) 6 of the Committee of Ministers to the Council of Europe member States on the public responsibility for higher education and research underlines the importance of adequate measures to ensure equal opportunities and financing. When referring to “equal opportunities” the basic principle is that quality education should be inclusive. Given the fact that public authorities have the responsibility for ensuring quality education also for those who are unable to make successful use of mainstream education, we will approach different QA types of frameworks, having a close look on the way in which they reflect the social dimension.

Quality assurance methods and the social dimension

Assuring the quality of the comprehensiveness, functioning and effectiveness of the quality assurance systems themselves – methods, procedures, instruments and processes

This model is usually based on an institutional review and might, additionally, include a sample of study programmes in the institutional evaluation procedure. Some countries across Europe have already implemented this model (Austria, Finland, Norway, the UK, New Zealand) while others are planning to (Slovenia). The review evaluates how well the quality system meets strategic and operations management needs, as well as the quality management of the HEI’s basic responsibilities of the higher education institutions and the extent to which it is comprehensive and effective. In addition, the review focuses on the institution’s quality policy and the development of the quality system, as well as on how effective and dynamic an entity the system forms.

The review also focuses on the procedures that the institution uses to maintain and develop the quality of its operations. It is based on the principles of enhancement-led evaluations and autonomy of the higher education institutions. Secondly, the model looks at the way higher education institutions manage their responsibilities for standards and quality of the education they provide.

When looking at the intersection between this model and social dimension, differences appear between the countries. Finnish audits have several focuses out of which one section focuses explicitly on societal impact and regional development work (including the social responsibility, continuing education, distance education, as well as paid-services education). However, it is important to mention that the audit does not evaluate the provisions on societal impact, nor the quality of the provisions on social dimension, but the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the internal QA system in relation to those provisions.

In the United Kingdom the system evaluates the effectiveness of the internal QA mechanisms and the use of national reference points - the UK Quality Code (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2014). One of the main areas the reviews look at is the quality of learning opportunities, while social dimension is not directly looked at. Rather, the review looks at the institutions’ ability to monitor the effectiveness of their processes and how they measure their success.

The audits used in New Zealand are based on principles such as peer review, evidence based, externally benchmark, and enhancement led. The Academic Quality Agency (AQA) has outlined the audit focus on several social dimension factors such as inclusive campus environment, and assisting in the access and transition of student from equity groups or other priority groups.

Given the fact that this model is a meta-level approach to the quality management system, it is not the task of the external review panels to provide recommendations on the introduction of some practices, nor on the improvement of social dimension, but to focus



on instruments, structures and mechanisms of monitoring data collection (and usage) in social dimension. Exceptions are, of course, countries that has specifically added social dimension features as audit focuses or targets.

Assuring the quality itself, against fixed external standards, what is referred to as "the initial contribution", what the education systems (should) provide to students

This model's main purpose is to assure the academic community, the stakeholders and the public at large that the accredited institution satisfies the minimum quality standards of a higher education institution. At a later stage, it is also the aim of this model to consecrate institutional standards for quality management and a quality culture and demonstrate their status through relevant evidence and documents. The standards are formulated so as to stress the institution's compliance with a predetermined or predefined set of quantitative and qualitative conditions. We can identify this model implemented in for example Romania, Lithuania, Hungary, Spain, Australia, Malaysia, Oman, and Hong Kong.

While governments have adopted QA frameworks to monitor the quality standards, there is a lack of innovation in setting and monitoring the criteria related to social dimension. For example, the standards used to accredit and re-accredit institutions in Australia have failed to include social dimension in assessing the institutional quality. However, there are separate national policies and funding to increase the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the USA the Higher Learning Commission does not use any criteria related to social dimension either. Similarly, in countries such as Malaysia and Hong Kong that have renewed the QA frameworks, the importance of social dimension is not reflected by the new provisions. Likewise, the national agency in Oman does not use any student related social dimension indicators as part of its accreditation and re-accreditation procedures. While governments have introduced national policies related to social dimension, there seem to be lack of innovation in assessing and monitoring the social dimension by external agencies. The developments in emerging countries seem to be taking positive steps. For example, in the United Arab Emirates, the QA agency has explicit criteria related to social dimension such as: focus on institutions to define the characteristics of the students it seeks to enrol and provides an environment that contributes to their cultural, social, moral, intellectual, and physical development (UAE, 2011).

What makes the difference between this model and the others analysed in this article is the level of detail that the standards include: for example, Romania is closely assessing the teacher/student ratio, number of students in a classroom, the number of learning resources in the library, the percentage of students that are accommodated in the institution's dorms, the number of classrooms and labs, the number of computer in labs, square meters per student in different types of teaching rooms. The existence and minimum functionality of social dimension is as much in the attention of external review panels as other indicators. Therefore, we can conclude that this model assesses the existence and quality of the social dimension in the most direct way comparing to the other models

Assuring the quality of "results", what is (should be) achieved through education, the performance of the educational system – intended/achieved learning outcomes.

This type of evaluation focuses on "results" of education, defined as the extent to which students in the study programmes achieve the outcomes specified for qualifications in the National Qualifications Framework (and, implicitly, the European Qualifications Framework and the overarching framework of qualification of the EHEA), not on prerequisites and processes. This model gives the higher education institutions greater self-determination



over their operations; they must maintain a high standard and are allowed a greater degree of control over how this is ensured. This means, for instance, that their own internal QA procedures as well as the prerequisites for the implementation of their programmes are assessed in relation to student attainment of outcomes. The degrees awarded in the systems embracing this model are no longer seen as proof of participation and successful completion of a programme but as the recognition of having achieved certain predefined learning outcomes. Given the fact that evaluating the presence or quality of prerequisites and processes is not the objective of this model, we can conclude that present actions and regulations of institutions, including social dimension, are its own responsibility. In this case the institution's attention to social dimension will have to arise from its own responsibility since no direct external standards are assessing this segment (Sweden, Netherlands, Flanders).

Assuring the quality against the institutions' mission and objectives only, rather than against external established criteria, standards or targets

The model evaluates the quality of "governance" of the education system, the guiding principles and internal processes which (should) ensure that the education system can provide quality initial contribution. The focus of this model is the institution as a whole rather than individual study programmes or units. It focuses on decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic management, as well as relevance of internal quality processes and the degree to which their outcomes are used in decision making and strategic management as well as perceived gaps in these internal mechanisms. As part of this larger framework the evaluations address the issues on internal QA identified by the first part of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. (EUA, 2015)

Even if the principle of evaluating an institution against its mission and objectives is to some extent present in the other models as well, this particular example does not use any standards/target/criteria at all except the institution's goals and ambitions. Therefore, an external review panel would not (or it is not likely to) recommend an improvement in a segment of activity which is not of high priority to the institution. Following the same thinking, if an institution's ambitions are also directed to social dimension, which will of course influence the focus and recommendations direction of the review panel. We can find this model implemented across Europe where Institutional Evaluation Programme (European University Association) operates. This model also acknowledges the international, national and institutional context in which higher education operates. For example in South Africa, the external agency uses 'fitness of purpose' approach to quality. The fitness of purpose of the mission, goals and objectives of an institution is determined in relation to institutional responsiveness to the local, national and international contexts. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) in South Africa uses one explicit social dimension criteria in external review of institutions 'Mechanisms which promote access to students from previously disadvantaged groups, for example, through the provision of academic development programmes' (CHE, 2004).

We can conclude that the institution's potential focus on social dimension can only arise from its own responsibility and willingness to keep the institution attractive.

Looking forward

Undoubtedly, QA has seen many improvements since the launch of the Bologna Process in 1999. However there are many challenges still remaining. Many external QA mechanisms still do not manage to take a holistic view of quality, "with student services being the most commonly neglected key issue" (EHEA, 2012). The emergence of social dimension in higher education and increased flexibility of course delivery (especially open access courses)



challenge the rigor of traditional QA frameworks. The analysis of various quality frameworks suggests that national agencies do not reflect the importance of social dimension and are yet to develop innovative measures to assess it.

Governments in various countries are providing funding to increase and participation of students from poor backgrounds and support needed to achieve social dimension provisions. Some institutions have a mission to provide access and opportunity to students who are first in the family to attend university based on their regional profile. The institutional mission is also aligned with resourcing to support social dimension in teaching, research, and various support services for students. However, the national QA frameworks do not always recognise institutional diversity and its' characteristics. The growth of higher education globally has not influenced innovation in QA frameworks in terms of social dimension and flexibility in quality reviews and assessments. A typical case is the global recognition of university rankings; most of the rankings do not recognise social dimension as a measure of national or institutional quality.

We can only speak about good quality education if the social dimension is also of good quality. Ensuring equal opportunities in higher education is not only a question of social justice, but also about improving and strengthening the quality of higher education, therefore QA must take account of the social dimension of higher education in making certain that institutions would operate with the goal of fostering equality within the academic world and ultimately in society. QA should strengthen its role in regularly monitor and foster the access, succession and completion rates of underrepresented groups in higher education (ESU, 2011).

Furthermore, we could say that a balanced view of the focus of external QA processes would have to be in line with UNESCO Global Monitoring Report "Overcoming inequality: why governance matters", according to which the monitoring of education quality should include three dimensions: (a) input or enabling conditions for learning (from infrastructure and learning materials to qualified, trained teachers and adequate budgets); (b) pedagogy and the learning process, including an appropriate language of instruction, and learning time; and (c) learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2008).

Ensuring quality education for all, including vulnerable and disadvantaged groups is considered to be a public responsibility. According to the Council of Europe, an education of adequate quality ensures real opportunities for all potential students to access, participate and finalize with success tertiary education programmes and is adapted to their needs. Therefore, the purpose is already defined and results from the engagements that EHEA member states have made within the Bologna Process: to ensure quality education for all in such a manner that the social and economic background of a person does not represent an obstacle in the way of participation to HE and personal fulfilment.

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