The Global Dimension of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Quality assurance in higher education has become an endeavor of global proportions. Leaders within institutions of higher education are required to make choices about what quality assurance and self-regulation mechanisms to implement and how to respond to external pressures in an environment of increased accountability and competition. University leaders also need to make choices about what standards of quality their institutions will follow. This paper outlines the changing environment of international quality assurance and its implications for management practice and further research. Critical engagements with quality assurance are necessary in order to make decisions that are not only effective but also consistent with the institutional mission and the purposes of higher education. While quality in higher education becomes global, university leaders encounter new opportunities to exercise institutional agency.

Keywords: Competition, Globalization, Higher Education, International Education, Networking, Quality, Quality Assurance, Strategic Management in Education

INTRODUCTION

Quality in higher education is no longer taken for granted. Traditionally, institutions of higher education were backed by powerful institutions—the State, Monarchy, or the Church—and enjoyed autonomy and respect from society (Altbach, 2011; Lemaitre, 2011). Today’s environment for higher education is different as new groups think of themselves as stakeholders of higher education (Harcleroad & Eaton, 2011). In addition to the traditionally recognized stakeholders of higher education—students, academic staff and governments—new stakeholders and interest groups are now involved. These include employers and other industry representatives, and multinational organizations. These stakeholders have different expectations and may influence the outcomes of higher education. Even though these are new influences, their power should not be underestimated as they hold significant material resources and influence. In addition, public funding for higher education is shrinking which results in increased cost transferred on students (Altbach, 2011). Increasingly, students are considered costumers of higher education institutions. Simultaneously, and as a result of globalization, institutions of higher learning are placed on an international stage and face ever increasing competition and high expectations (Marginson, 2007). As a result of these changes, accountability in higher education has become progressively salient.

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Accountability is generally understood as the capacity to respond for resources invested on institutions (Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2011; Reisberg, 2011). Increased accountability requires campus leaders to manage, improve and demonstrate the quality of their institutions. In order to do so, managers at all levels of the organization need to make complex decisions about the mechanisms they will employ and the processes they will participate in. For instance, heads of academic planning units or compliance offices may need to identify what programs or institutional accreditation they are required to have. Additionally, they need to decide what optional or voluntary quality assurance mechanisms will attract the highest recognition and symbolic value to their organizations, e.g. particular rankings, international accreditation, or membership in consortia.

The number of choices available to campus leaders can be daunting; globalization adds new levels of complexity because quality management not only requires making decisions at the local and national levels but also incorporating the international dimension. The notion that institutions of higher learning exist simultaneously at the local, national and global level (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Marginson, 2007) has become one of the most influential ideas for the study of higher education. One of the implications of such perspective is that higher education institutions are now accountable to stakeholders at the local, national and global level as well. Furthermore, the expectations at each level may conflict with each other.

Clarifying the most frequently used concepts in this chapter is necessary. First, the lack of consensus in the field of quality in higher education cannot be understated (Harvey & Newton, 2007); the scope of the definitions I will present—though based on careful revision of current literature—is limited to the purposes of this chapter. When using the term accountability, I refer to external pressures on institutions of higher education to explain or account for the use of public resources (Harvey, 2007; Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2007), and for their overall effectiveness. Quality assurance is the use of a wide range of strategies—accreditation, audits and quality reviews for example—to monitor the quality of institutions and their programs (Vlasceanu, Grunberg, & Parlea, 2004). As such, quality assurance is a consequence of increased calls for accountability and is often externally imposed. Quality management is the sum of actions taken within a given institution of higher education intended to evaluate, demonstrate and improve quality (Pratavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010; Vlasceanu et al., 2004).

Before delving into the main issues and potential solutions, given the international audience of this journal and the international nature of the topic, the use of certain terms needs to be further explained. Institutions of higher learning encompass a wide variety of postsecondary—tertiary—education. When referring to institutions of higher learning or universities, I do so in an inclusive way. Community colleges, institutes of technology and other postsecondary institutions are included. Using the phrase campus or university leaders is a necessary shortcut to avoid misleading reification of higher education or universities when discussing management. To be clear, institutions do not make decisions or take action—people within institutions do (Berger & Milem, 2000). University leaders refer to presidents, chancellors or rectors—depending on the national context—as well as other managers throughout the institutions who make decisions that impact quality. Finally, academic staff—known in the United States as faculty—including professors, lecturers, adjunct professors, etcetera.

It has been long accepted that effective higher education management consists in interpreting and responding to environmental changes that surround higher education institutions (Birnbaum, 1988; Mccaffery, 2004; Shattock, 2003). Such responsive model of higher education (Peterson, 2007) gave origin to some of the most established systems of quality assurance in the world, including American institutional accreditation (Brittingham, 2009). Effective quality management in higher education requires responding to the pressures of an increasingly integrated global economy. This
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