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Quality Assurance in Higher Education: For Whom and of What?

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Abstract

Over the past two decades the quality assurance of higher education institutions has been of growing interest, as evidenced by the increasing number of national and transnational bodies engaged in this area. Yet as the first decade of the twenty-first century draws to a close, higher education systems and thus the regimes designed to ensure their quality are faced with significant complexity. Issues of accountability, authority and responsibility are paramount when responding to industry bodies, to globalisation and the transnational provision of higher education, and to the use of market mechanisms. In this paper we raise some of the challenges for quality assurance for higher education presented by this growing complexity through the question, quality assurance in higher education, for whom and of what, highlighting our concern for a need to expand the centrality of accountability to include authority and responsibility as part of the quality assurance regimes for higher education.

Key words: quality assurance; higher education; accountability; responsibility; responsiveness; external regulator

Biographical notes:

Hitendra Pillay is Professor of Education at the Queensland University of Technology. His interest in the nature and development of knowledge and system theory has led to a diverse research and consulting portfolio. He has been a consultant to private and public sector organisations, and to the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank on education reform and social change projects. Drawing on his extensive academic research and social sector work, his current research interest is on synthesising the fragmented research agendas into more holistic and cross disciplinary models of knowledge creation, innovation and global development.

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Australian politics, and higher education policy and management. Her current research interests include the ethical dilemmas faced by leaders in educational and public sector institutions, the micropolitical strategies used by school leaders, and the accountability of ministerial staff. She has an interest in internal mechanisms for ensuring quality in higher education.

Introduction/Background

Market driven globalisation has not escaped the higher education sector. We now witness increasingly both inter-state and transnational provisioning of higher education services, driven in part by principles of the market economy. The demand for knowledge and skills that are portable across state and national boundaries, as a consequence of globalisation and increased mobility in the labour market, provides stimulus for the above. This globalisation of higher education is inevitable and will continue to grow. New higher education providers including private partners will be an important part of this growth in developing solutions to optimize the benefits of a global higher education system that serve the interests of both higher education providers and recipients.

In responding to these demands, increasingly higher education provision is accommodating new forms of learning that are flexible and innovative. These new deliveries of higher education services have entailed the adoption of a range of modalities ranging from the traditional institution based through workplace based to online systems and to off-shore programs. These innovative modalities present challenges for setting standards and regulating the quality of higher education services. Partnerships with private sector enterprises and transnational higher education providers are also expanding rapidly. Many of the emerging partnerships often do not depend on much government funding thus linking funding to performance (as can be witnessed in many OECD countries) to enforce quality may not be that easy. Against the above delivery modalities and increased demand issues, the authority, responsibility and accountability dimensions of the quality of the higher education system is becoming not only highly complex but significantly more important.

Key attributes of a quality assurance system in higher education

Quality assurance in higher education is a contested concept. Thus the questions of quality for whom and of what are central to our understanding of the evolving higher education system. Vidovich (2002) describes quality assurance as 'a suite of accountability mechanisms' (p. 391). There are quality indicators with expected minimum standards of performance and reporting requirements. Often, as is the case in Australia, these quality indicators are clustered around key functions of higher education institutions such as research, teaching and service, with increasingly more weighting being given to research. There are various sub-indicators in each of these three categories that are used to operationalise the quality accountability mechanism. In Australia, as in many OECD countries, the quality assurance system, 'has become an effective mechanism to enforce the accountability of universities... by central authorities to increase control over desired outcomes/ends but deregulate processes and means' (Vidovich, 2002, pp.

391-392). This notion of accountability, despite its 'chameleon like' definitions in recent years, fundamentally, means 'to account to some authority for one's actions' (Jones, 1992, p. 73). This debate on accountability has distilled into two key types – responsibility and responsiveness. Accountability as a responsibility involves a notion of 'answerability' derived from the public sector whereas responsiveness is about consumer interaction derived from the private sector, driven by the market paradigm (Martin, 1997; Mulgan 2000a, 200b; Uhr 1999; Kimber, 2000; Kimber & Maddox, 2003). We mention the role of market paradigm and consumer interaction here because it involves different levels of moral and social values and consequently a different interpretation of accountability and quality. In the above discussion the notion of quality is accountability to the funding agencies whether it be the central government, the free market or a mix of both.

Given that Jones (1992) notes that accountability is always linked to an authority, the nature of this authority can be state of central governments or professional boards or 'market driven' authority. When dealing with a single jurisdiction such as State of Central government this may be fine but when higher education institutions operate across national borders understanding who the authority is (or authorities are) can be problematic. There are issues such as sovereignty and national expectations; cultural values; content; relevance to local demands as well as to national and international demands; professional competencies; and equity and access, all of which are closely linked to any system associated with quality in higher education. Opting for a 'market driven' authority may not be wise, as Skidelsky (2008) notes, free markets are generally amoral and have no conscious for public good, and thus can be risky. Quality accountability for them as noted above is responsiveness—how efficiently can a good or service be provided.

The focus on accountability as a mechanism for quality assurance in higher education has seen the emergence of frameworks or guidelines for national and transnational delivery of higher education services by agencies such as Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) (eg. AUQA, <http://www.auqua.edu.au/aboutauqa/policies/002/>); International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), Good Practice Guidelines (http://www.inqaahe.org/Upload/Upload/INQAAHE_documents/INQAAHE_-_Guidelines_of_Good_Practice.pdf); the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross Border Higher Education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2005); and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_v03.pdf). Many of these agencies do not seem to have very little authority in terms of legislative or regulatory functions nor do they have the means to influence the quality assurance standards. Thus the current overwhelming focus on 'accountability' as the key mechanism for quality assurance may need to be expanded to understand who has the authority and responsibility for quality assurance and what the measure of quality is in higher education systems in respective jurisdictions, particularly for transnational provisioning of higher education. Also, the notion of impact of higher education services on the end users should be a significant measure of quality.

Another attribute of a quality assurance system is developing and adopting minimum standards and level of performance against which quality may be judged. There are two interrelated aspects of standards, one is level of impact the higher education services have on their local community and the second is the standards of the technical quality of programs they offer. University charters under which higher education institutions are established outline their roles and functions, which is often to firstly support the development of national capacity and secondly to support the development of selected global capacities. However, the current push for commercialisation and globalisation of higher education services is challenging the nature and relevance of these standards. In recent years, because of a need for universities to generate income to off-set shortfall in their budgets and the increasing demand (particularly in the Asian market) coupled with a less regulated market in developing countries, transnational provision of education has become a very lucrative business that will continue to grow (Varogluz & Wachholz, 2001). As a consequence, caution needs to be exercised to understand whose standards and for what quality measures, given the questionable moral integrity of a free market system (Skidelsky, 2008) are being adopted.

Thus standards for the quality of teaching and of research programs in higher education should be measured against the relevance to local context (quality and extent of impact), the professional practice (standards of programs and innovations) and to a lesser extent the international context (league tables). Higher education is the core source for a skilled labour supply and for the generation of new ideas and appropriate practices for a local context/country, it should not about corporatisation and achieving global dominance as per the league tables. Chasing the rankings on a league table may suit the privileged countries but matching a significant percentage of the worlds higher education institutions against such league tables undermine the excellent work many universities are currently doing in their respective countries. The transnational provisioning of higher education services seems to assume some global benchmark for standards, as can be seen in OECD countries exporting higher education services to developing countries. Most of these exporting countries, within their own jurisdictions, set their standards to suit their own development agendas. They have, in partnerships with professional authorities developed mechanisms that allow higher education institutions to self accredit courses and self regulate quality. Further discussion on this development can be seen in the later section on the issues stemming from the interplay between national and global higher education provision and standards of services.

Quality standards in a highly competitive market place will be varied but what is important is the minimum acceptable standards. For instance, in Australia, the entry requirement for a Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) degree varies between institutions and across states and territories. In some cases it is considered a postgraduate program and thus an undergraduate degree with a good Grade Point Average (GPA) is required for entry over an above an acceptable Graduate Australian Medical Schools Admissions Test score to qualify for entry whereas in other cases students may enrol in the program as an undergraduate degree, needing a high tertiary entrance score and a high score in the Undergraduate Medicine and Health Sciences Admissions Test (eg. Griffith University, n.d., University of Queensland, n.d.,

Bond University, n.d.). How and who determines this double entry requirement with regards to quality, access and equity is not very clear. The point here is that who has the authority to determine what these standards may be—is it the university, the Australian Medical Council (<http://www.amc.org.au/>) which accredits medical courses, or the Australian Medical Association (<http://www.ama.com.au/>), which is the professional body for medical practitioners in Australia. Our research indicates that it is the latter organisations that set the minimum standards for the quality of program suggesting that any quality assurance system for higher education should require extensive participation from professional standards setting agencies. Further discussion on the relationship between industry and higher education is presented in a later section.

The third attribute of a quality assurance system is monitoring and regulatory system. Most quality assurance systems in higher education thus far seem to have focused more on monitoring and regulating process to ensure quality. Monitoring and regulating quality provides a transparent and meaningful articulation between the standards and the outcomes and may include delivery processes or the substantive content of services provided by higher education sector. In most quality assurance system process monitoring may be done by higher education quality assurance agencies but the monitoring of standards of outcome are left to professional accreditation/or licensing bodies that employ the higher education graduates and thus provide a useful feedback loop to the those involved with standards setting (see Queensland College of Teachers [QCOT] discussion in the next section). Given the labour intensive nature of monitoring and regulating quality, self regulation and accreditation is a common approach used. Through the self-accreditation process adopted by the higher education sector in many OECD countries, institutions manage and regulate quality based on the on perceived demand for particular programs and thus the entry point often fluctuates. For instance, in some Australian universities entry requisites are differentiated based on the required tertiary entrance scores and the percentage of fee a student can afford—however, there is a minimum threshold for the required entrance score on these differentiated fee structure. In such cases full-fee paying students may be allowed to enter a program with lower score than a government supported student. This situation indicates the difficulties of regulating the quality of a higher education system when market mechanisms play an increasingly important role in managing demand.

Currently, models of higher education quality assurance seem to be more concerned with monitoring the use of public funds and the organisation's efficiency rather than the quality and relevance of teaching programs and research (Vidovich, 2002). This lack of relevance is further confounded when considering the applicability to other countries at different stage of their economic development, particularly when providing transnational services. The need for a rigorous and systematic quality assurance proposed by the Bradley report (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008) in Australia is welcomed by university leaders such as Professor Ian Chubb, who notes that:

Accreditation needs to be taken seriously – it must be about standards of achievement and not time spent, or activity. The sooner we get on with identifying and comparing standards the better. It is important for Australia that the term 'university' means something. And it means validating claims beyond self belief based on self-assertion (Chubb in The Australian, 2008).

It is assumed that this national regulatory body will be more like a secretariat and its officers would invite representatives of professional bodies and other stakeholders to actively participate in the quality assurance process. These stakeholders would have legitimate expertise and credibility to contribute to this process. This proposal highlights that the separation between a service provider and a regulator is a critical function in quality assurance systems. In the next sections we explore some of the complexities associated with quality assurance in higher education mentioned above from two perspectives namely; the role of higher education in relation to industry bodies and the interplay between national and global expectations of higher education quality.

Higher education quality enhancement mediated by industry bodies

Higher education institutions are 'service providers' and thus have a limited role in setting standards and regulating the content quality of teaching and research programs. As noted above, the quality of higher education programs is often judged by its relevance to national, global and professional practices. In recent years we have noticed that the quality of programs delivered by higher education institutions is increasingly being aligned to professional knowledge and skills. Consequently, we now see marketing slogans like "job ready graduates" and "work integrated programs" used by higher education institutions. This aspect of quality deals with the relevance of the programs (content and delivery) to the profession and higher education providers are sometimes judged by the 'employability rate' of their graduates. As a result of this employability agenda a trend of integrating professional qualifications such as the Chartered Professional Account courses in accounting, the Cisco Academy's courses for Information Technology programs and, in Australia, the Certificate V program for vocational education practitioners is common. Acknowledgement of the need for a mix of academic and professional knowledge can be seen in the degree structure agreed to in the Bologna declaration (<http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf>). However, this mix seems to have been increasingly leaning towards professional knowledge in recent years. In light of the above movements, the issue of who sets the standards for quality of programs also seems to be more closely aligned to the representative professional bodies rather the universities per se. Hence, in many OECD countries such as Australia, the professional bodies have significant influence in what is taught in respective programs. Professional associations, private industry representative bodies and government statutory bodies have directly and/or indirectly mediated as higher education quality regulators by influencing both standards for content and delivery modes

The involvement of professional agencies and industry bodies is an excellent way to separate those who set standards from the service providers. It will be unethical to have the same entity set the minimum standards and also be the service providers. Market expediency can easily result in conflict of interest when a single entity deals with both quality aspects and can obstruct transparency and credibility. Whilst one may argue that there are stringent rules and guidelines to mitigate any conflict, it is still risky, particularly with the increased commercialisation of the higher education sub-sector. Involving external professional bodies as part of the quality assurance increases transparency and accountability and credibility. In support of this need to create a distance between the higher education providers and the quality assurance agency, the

recent Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008, pp. 116-120; Lane, 2008) in Australia has indicated the possibility of an independent super regulator with appropriate legislation to enforce minimum performance and quality standards. Whilst the distancing of the regulator from the service provider is welcomed, how this super regulation will engage with the professional organisation and other external stakeholder is not clear. An example of a current system that has successfully separated the service provider from setting standards of regulating quality is the Queensland College of Teachers (QCOT) in Queensland, Australia. QCOT is the regulator for performance of teacher education providers wishing to prepare teachers to teach in the State of Queensland. The Queensland state government has also mandated the jurisdiction for setting teacher quality standards to QCOT (Queensland College of Teachers, n.d.a, n.d.b). Individuals may successfully obtain degrees in education but for them to be able to teach in any Queensland school you need to be registered with the QCOT. To register individual have to take a writing assignment followed by an interview. QCOT sets the minimum standards for teacher quality through its registration process, which the higher education service provider respond to when developing the teaching and research programs. The above demonstrates that at the State level in Australia the quality standards are set and regulated by a local agency that is separate from the higher education providers. It demonstrates the importance of contextual relevance of higher education to local context. Implication of this contextual relevance is also valid for transnational provision of higher education and is discussed in the next section.

The perception that, if higher education services are integrated with industry it enhances the higher education provider's relevance and applicability and consequently its quality, has encouraged closer alignment with industry resulting in the emergence of private public partnerships to provide higher education teaching and research services. In seeking a competitive edge, relevance and increased graduate employability, all perceived as indicators of quality, traditional public and private higher education institutions world wide are embracing the Cisco Academy courses—an industry-run online training program. The Cisco programs are integrated with core programs to programs and market as industry relevant and job ready programs. Similarly, Aptech in partnership with the Indian Technical & Economic Co-operation, part of a Government of India initiative, provides software design and applications training in partnership with national and foreign higher education providers. These courses are driven by specific industry demands and have globally recognized credentials thus recognised as being of very high quality.

From the above discussion, it seems the higher education quality is more and more driven by the vocational/professional aspects of discipline-based knowledge and associated practices. Furthermore, the nature, scope and demand for professional knowledge from different states and countries will also have an influence as to what is quality in higher education. This challenges the current narrowly defined higher education quality agenda of accountability to funding authorities. As per the Bradley report (2008), it must be broadened to include the representation for the various professional areas to ensure greater relevance in the current higher education context. This need has been heightened by globalisation.

Complementarity and tensions between national and global quality agendas in higher education

A fundamental aspect of any quality assurance system is to have some agreed accreditation and performance regulations to ensure legitimacy and authenticity of higher education providers and protect the consumers. Good governance suggests that each country and state should have its own legislations and regulatory frameworks to protect its national interest, particularly when different jurisdictions for the service provider and the importing country are involved. What constitutes relevance and quality in different jurisdiction may not be the same. Many of this accreditation requirements often deal with operational and procedural issues and do not delve deeply into the quality of the 'soft issues' such as, quality and relevance of program content, teaching and learning processes and social impact, nevertheless, it provides a first level quality check. Harmon and Meek (2000, pp. 40-41) provide a summary of types of legislations that regulate the establishing of universities in Australia and it illustrate the administrative nature of these. In recent years, the over reliance on the market to regulate quality, has witnessed the public regulators becoming more relaxed and willing to accept more compromises with regards to accrediting higher education service providers. As a consequence, to ensure minimum standards are maintained at all times for international service delivery, the authors of the Bradley report (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008) propose that accreditation should be only for a period of five years and if renewal is sought, there needs to be a comprehensive audit of the institutions capacity and capability. While this is an excellent proposal, such an expensive process maybe feasible in r developed country but may not be financially viable for less developed countries that often depend on the 'perceived' quality of transnational providers until something goes wrong.

The emergence of virtual universities, off-shore private companies and universities operating independently or as twining programs and other similar arrangements make continuously monitoring quality a complex and expensive process. This lack of physical presence of the transnational service provider in importing countries makes it difficult for local authorities to regulate accreditation and licensing and consequently ensuring quality and authenticity. Similar complexity can be seen in other models of off-shore operations provided by universities from the many OECD countries, where quality is often judged by the standards enjoyed in OECD countries —which may not be relevant or appropriate standards and not be financially viable for importing countries. In many of these cases the authority for quality assurance seems to reside within the jurisdiction of the country of the higher education provider and not the jurisdiction of the importing country, often due to a lack of capacity in the importing country to develop a comprehensive quality assurance system.

In considering transnational provision of higher education, what constitutes quality when operating outside the national/state jurisdiction becomes complex. As alluded to above, issues of relevance to the local context and to cultural sensitivities become important factors. The recipient country is often made to believe that the exporting country, being from OCED group, always has high quality higher education, which may be true, but may not be relevant to the immediate local needs of the importing country. Thus imposing a quality standard from a

different socio-economic or cultural background may not be ethical. In some cases importing country approvals are sought and carte-blanche permission to offer programs from the OECD countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom are granted. Whereas, some of the more advanced developing countries, conscious of a need to have some level of quality assurance to secure national interests, are now requiring local accreditation of the local partner entity (which is subjected to local legislations) offering overseas program as a de-facto measure of quality of the program (this can be seen in some off-shore twining arrangements in Malaysia), and a full local accreditation of the overseas program as can be seen in UAE (Carroll, 2006). Interestingly, Carroll (2006) seems to begrudge that the Australian self-accreditation process does not transfer across national boundaries, which opens up another debate on knowledge-based colonisation and the ethics of such operations.

As noted earlier, quality is often judged by the relevance of the higher education services to its potential end users. The charter of each higher education service provider is often closely linked to services required by its immediate community, whether it is a developing country or a rural higher education institute in a developed country. Thus one need to appreciate that quality in higher education is not an arbitrary nor just a global concept, it has to be judged against the ability to respond to immediate social and economic responsibilities. The perceived higher quality of transnational higher education providers often undermines local providers, some of who feel threatened for their continued viability. In a highly commercialised and competitive higher education market, opening the market to national and transnational providers may introduce some new knowledge and practices but it also has implications for the survival of local providers, as the larger national and transnational providers have the advantage of economies of scale. This advantage can eventually lead to monopolies and homogenisation of the higher education sector, which in turn can have a serious effect on the quality of higher education in many of the developing countries. The small developing countries that import higher education services often do not have mechanisms to regulate the quality of these transnational providers and depend on 'perceived quality' through de-facto indicators such as the provider being from an OECD country or from Australia or from the United Kingdom. The perceived quality may not be true, as was recently found by Indian and Maldivian students whose higher education qualifications were not recognised by their national accreditation agencies (eg. Waheed, 2005, http://www.apacc4hrd.org/conf_workshop/apacc05/CR/mldv/).

The final point on the tension between national quality assurance and the globalisation of higher education we would like to make is in regards to the emphasis on the higher education institutions ranking league tables (Bowden, 2000; Moodie, 2006). These tables are also often used to judge the quality of the higher education service providers which in turn is used to market their services. These league rankings have become de-facto quality benchmarks for higher education providers despite the existence of significant questions about their validity (eg. Bowden, 2000). The existence of these tables has seen many universities relentlessly investing, just to be on the list in these league tables. These league tables are highly biased towards research outputs, which may be appropriate for research intensive higher education providers from developed countries but has little value to institutions in developing countries or to teaching-intensive universities. The notion of impact as a measure of quality is appropriate here. As mentioned earlier, these developing country universities generally have limited resources

and predominately a teaching and service charter. Therefore the quality of these institutions should be measured against the impact they have in achieving the mandate noted in their charter not the impact they have in relation to research-intensive universities in developed countries. Despite such facts, unfortunately, many higher education institutions are investing huge amounts of resource with a hope of securing a higher place in the ranking league. The question one has to ask then is should all higher education in the world be judged by a single league table? With the use of market mechanisms, we might be seeing attempts to do just that. While higher education providers might argue that they are responsive to consumers or clients, the use of market mechanisms like league tables might artificially create demand for programs where the quality of those programs has not been fully assessed as relevant to local needs. Market responsiveness, then, might not meet the requirements of accountability to the common good that might be achieved through the existence of a strong external regulator.

Conclusion

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century quality assurance of higher education institutions has become increasingly complex. Governments, professional and industry bodies, globalisation and the market are presenting a multitude of challenges including accounting for the use of funds, meeting professional standards, the need to raise revenue and meeting the needs of the end users. In the face of these complexities, accountability needs to be at the heart of any quality assurance regime. We have understood accountability in terms of responsibility and noted that responsiveness to consumer demand cannot replace the sanction of an external regulator as markets can be amoral, generating distortions such as those seen by the use of league tables. In an era of transnational and market provisioning of higher education, it is imperative for those charged with ensuring the quality of higher education that they ask the questions who's interests are being served and exactly what is being assured.

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