

Enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's Higher Education institutions

LOUKIA E. SERGIOU

l.sergiou@faculty.pacollege.ac.cy

Summary

Quality assurance considers that 'prevention is better than a cure'. Quality is a continuous improvement, where it does not come by chance or by accident and is achieved when every professor succeeds in igniting the minds of students. Nonetheless, across the European Union, there is a diverse picture of how European higher institutions promote quality in teaching and learning. The issue of quality in higher education has been given the attention in the academic and legislative environment starting with the Bologna process. Together with the Bologna process, the Lisbon strategy has led to the development and consolidation of universities, with a view to instating a quality culture. It is the aim of this paper to present the challenges in the European Higher Education area. Moreover, this paper identifies European standards and guidelines that European institutions should implement for the continuous enhancement of quality.

Keywords: Quality; quality assurance; teaching; higher education; Europe; Bologna process

Introduction

Teaching and learning in higher education is a shared process, with responsibilities on both student and educator to contribute to their success. With this shared process, higher education must engage students in questioning their preconceived ideas and their models of how the world works, so that they can reach a higher level of understanding.

Quality teaching and learning has broad horizons, taking place in a research-rich environment, where the subject matter is driven by the latest knowledge and research, delivered in a way which encourages students to develop academic literacy and both subject specific and generic skills which they can apply immediately in the real world.

In this era of increasingly rapid globalisation, the teaching and learning experience for all students must be globally connected, enabling students to develop an understanding of how their subject is viewed and pursued in different parts of the world.

Definitely, new ideas on models of learning will be mainstreamed inspiring a new generation of students to reach levels of intellectual literacy that stretch them beyond merely ‘good enough’ to ‘excellent’.

Decades of rapid growth in higher education increased the need for greater attention to quality and relevance in higher education. The development of an international Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) was embarked to explore a comparison between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across countries (Yelland and Valle, 2008). Moreover, OECD in 2009, explained that AHELO sets out to identify and measure as many factors as possible influencing higher education, with the emphasis being always on teaching and learning.

A first step is to create the conditions in which the higher education sector gives parity of esteem to both teaching and research, so that the higher education lecturer/professor knows that he or she has to invest not simply to his or her discipline, but must invest in being a good educator and will be rewarded appropriately. Some Member States and some HEIs have taken substantial steps towards this goal and could be regarded a vehicle for ironing out the vast disparities in educational outcomes. It will make the profession of a higher education educator an exciting one, more fulfilling, self-updating and useful.

Challenges in the European Higher Education

Today the world needs more and better educated graduates. HEIs need to reformulate their missions and strategies. Quality and innovation are the key issues in achieving competitiveness in European higher education, especially when the focus is on its challenges in a global context (Orphanides, 2012).

Challenges of higher education exist and these follow in the following paragraphs along with an explanation of how a professional higher education would engage to effectively address them.

Quality assurance and multidimensional transparency tools

Quality assurance has been one of the most important components of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It is vital that all European countries and all

European HEIs implement punctually and with distinction the ‘Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance’ in the European Higher Education Area concerning internal and external quality assurance, and quality assurance agencies, as well as the function and operation of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).

The social dimension

As referred to in the Bologna Process, the social dimension is part of a multidimensional political and socioeconomic matrix that cannot be achieved by means of education alone. Widening access to higher education, would be an important step towards a more sustainable and democratic society, to which a growing number of individuals with different backgrounds can make equally valuable contributions.

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs)

NQFs are designed to facilitate recognition, mobility and employability through transparency, comparability and transferability within a national higher education system. To fulfil this purpose, NQFs have been developed with a strong emphasis on learning outcomes which ensure appropriate attention to design, delivery and assessment of learning within HEIs.

The employability of graduates

The underlying concern is to make higher education more responsive to rapidly developing societies, with equally rapidly changing demands from the world of employment. HEIs should be committed to ensure that their graduates are prepared as completely as possible and on a diachronic basis for the job market and the world of work.

Lifelong learning

An accomplished EHEA requires the implementation of a system of linked and progressive cycles, which permit any qualified person to have access to and benefit from higher education, irrespective of age and educational profile. Inculcation of a culture of lifelong learning in graduates, and provision of lifelong learning opportunities should be key elements of the mission of every higher education institution.

Student-centred learning

The learning-based society in a globalised world requires a number of competences that are universally accepted, such as interpersonal and intercultural competences, international awareness, ICT skills and most importantly, the ability to learn how to attain different formal

and informal settings, including autonomous learning processes with adequate support and guidance structures.

Education, research and innovation

Higher education is a major driver not only for economic and social development, but also for innovation in an increasingly knowledge-based world. A successful strategy for innovation has to strive for economic prosperity, while securing and safeguarding societal welfare.

International openness

The creation of the knowledge-based society requires global awareness and responsibility, and HEIs can play an important role in raising consciousness, and in finding solutions through internationalisation of programs.

Mobility

Mobility is important for sharing and disseminating knowledge and skills among students and professionals. HEIs should further develop as places for international academic exchange and as providers of internationally skilled graduates, fostering student, staff and researcher mobility.

The Bologna Context

The Bologna Declaration encouraged European cooperation in higher education quality assurance, with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies. Thus, from the beginning of the process, there has always been a strong focus on quality. The Berlin meeting by ministers acknowledged that the primary responsibility for quality assurance lies with HEIs and agreed on the core elements national quality assurance systems should include, comprising: evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results; a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures, and international participation, cooperation and networking. Additionally, at the Bergen meeting of May 2005, ministers adopted the ‘Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area’ (ESG). These standards aim to promote mutual trust while respecting diverse national and institutional contexts and subject areas. In 2008, it followed the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). EQAR is a register of those agencies that substantially comply with the ESG. The 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué also stressed that quality assurance will remain a priority in a landscape where new tools, mechanisms and initiatives are increasingly being designed to provide information about HEIs.

Creative Europe entered into force on 1 January 2014. It builds on the experience and success of the Culture and MEDIA programmes which have supported the cultural and audio-visual sectors for more than 20 years. It further reflects on the strategy launched by the Commission in September 2012, aimed at unlocking the full potential of the sectors in to boost jobs and growth.

European Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions

Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality (ENQA, 2009).

European Standards and guidelines should include the following:

1. Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards

Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.

2. Assessment of students

Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.

3. Quality assurance of teaching staff

Teaching staff should be qualified and competent to do their work. They should be examined by external reviews and commented upon in reports.

4. Learning resources and student support

Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.

5. Information systems

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.

6. Public information

Institutions should regularly publish up to date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering.

European Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance within higher education institutions

1. Use of internal quality assurance procedures

External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes.

2. Development of external quality assurance processes

The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes are developed by HEIs and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

3. Criteria for decisions

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on published criteria and applied consistently.

4. Processes fit for purpose

All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

5. Reporting

Reports should be published and written in a style, which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership.

6. Follow-up procedures

Quality assurance processes which require an action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

7. Periodic reviews

External quality assurance programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis, where the length of the cycle and the review procedures should be defined and published in advance.

8. System-wide analyses

Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations and assessments.

Modernisation of Higher Education

In today's interdependent global economy, success in innovative, high value sectors is crucial to Europe's economic growth and ability to create jobs in the decades to come. Creating and filling the knowledge-intensive jobs of the future requires highly skilled people who can respond to the opportunities and demands of the modern economy (CEDEFOP, 2010).

Nonetheless, across the European Union, there is a diverse picture of how-if at all- Member States and HEIs promote quality in teaching and learning. These policies and initiatives range from national strategies and programmes, institutional missions, educator training and centres of excellence in teaching, including pedagogical research.

Higher education institutions need to define their teaching and learning objectives in relation to their study programmes and how they should be delivered and assessed. This can be the starting point for the development of a quality management scheme that involves the entire institution, from the governing board to lecturers/professors, students and administration.

There are two main perspectives in outlining employability-related outcomes in higher education. Putting emphasis on the needs of the labour market focuses more on the demand side, while an emphasis on employable graduates implies a more supply-side perspective. In terms of concrete implementation, many practices at universities can increase graduates' chances of finding employment soon after graduation: examples include embedding practical training and work placements in study programmes (European Commission/Eurydice, 2014).

Data from both European comparative studies and national reports show that students who participated in practical training before graduation are more likely to find jobs than their counter-parts without relevant work experience (Blackwell et al., 2001; Garrouste and Rodrigues, 2012; Mason et al, 2009).

In the European Union, Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications regulates the embedding of practical training into certain, professionally oriented study programmes. In the majority of countries, the inclusion of practical training is required for such degrees.

Undoubtedly, we cannot speak of a common European Quality Assurance (QA) system for higher education. In Europe we have the European Standards and Guidelines as a general common framework for the Bologna signatory countries for quality assurance of higher education, the importance of which should be neither over - nor underestimated (Szanto, 2008).

The following section is a development of realistic and transferable recommendations of how Member States and HEIs will promote quality in teaching and learning presented by the European Commission in 2013.

Recommendations

1. Public authorities responsible for higher education should ensure the existence of a sustainable, well-funded framework to support HEIs' efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning.
2. Every institution should develop and implement a strategy for the support and on- going improvement of the quality of teaching and learning, devoting the necessary level of human and financial resources to the task, and integrating this priority in its overall mission, giving teaching due parity with research.
3. HEIs should encourage, welcome, and take account of student feedback which could detect problems in the teaching and learning environment early on and lead to faster, more effective improvements.
4. All staff teaching in HEIs in 2020 should have received certified pedagogical training for a continuous professional education.
5. Academic staff entrance, progression and promotion decisions should take account of an assessment of teaching performance alongside other factors.
6. Heads of institutions and institutional leaders should recognise and reward higher education educators who make a significant contribution to improving the quality of teaching and learning, whether through their practice, or through their research into teaching and learning.
7. Curricula should be developed and monitored through dialogue and partnerships among teaching staff, students, graduates and labour market actors, drawing on new methods of teaching and learning, so that students acquire relevant skills that enhance their employability.
8. Student performance in learning activities should be assessed against clear and agreed learning outcomes, developed in partnership by all faculty members involved in their delivery.
9. HEIs and national policy makers in partnership with students should establish counselling, guidance, mentoring and tracking systems to support students into higher education, and on their way to graduation and beyond.
10. HEIs should introduce and promote interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning, helping students develop their breadth of understanding and entrepreneurial and innovative mind-sets.

11. HEIs should support their educators so they develop the skills for online and other forms of teaching and learning opened up by the digital era, and should exploit the opportunities presented by technology to improve the quality of teaching and learning.
12. HEIs should develop and implement holistic internationalisation strategies as an integral part of their overall mission and functions.
13. HEIs should consult or involve employees, employers' organisations and business representatives in the various steps of developing and evaluating higher education study programmes.

Quality Assurance in the 21st 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 organisations. Others have little direct experience with outcomes assessment.

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.

The issue of quality in higher education has been given the attention in the academic and legislative environment starting with the Bologna process. Quality assurance is considered as a key issue for the Bologna process and the EU modernisation agenda for higher education. The Bologna process has changed higher education not only in terms of the place that quality assurance holds in the activity of a university. Together with the Bologna process, the Lisbon strategy has led to the development and consolidation of universities, with a view to instating a quality culture.

The literature on quality assurance underscores that an effective quality assurance system rests on several assumptions, including: (1) that an institution has a well-defined mission and goals, (2) that an institution's mission and goals are widely communicated and understood throughout the organisation, (3) that an institution has clearly defined quality within the context of its mission and goals, and (4) that an institution has a strong communications network. An

institution that lacks these “preconditions” will have a difficult time implementing a successful campus-wide program of quality assurance (Wilger, 1997).

Lemaitre in 2009, evaluated the impact of QA processes on the development of private higher education institutions. QA processes exercise a measure of quality control and only allow those institutions that meet a set of essential threshold standards to survive. Additionally, QA processes provide tools to the market in such a way that decisions by students and their families are based on sound information relying on those aspects of quality that are taken into account by QA procedures. It is clear that strong and socially accepted licensing processes and accreditation mechanisms, help increase the legitimacy of private higher education institutions.

A survey by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in 2012, concluded that the main priority to enhance higher education is the relationship between external quality assurance procedures and the development of mechanisms. This study further enlightened that excellence of higher education is seen as the overall goal of all external QA mechanisms. The idea of excellence is a way to motivate HEIs for self-improvement and further development. This is an emerging area that stems from different lines of thinking, the aims of which are generally to improve the provision of study programmes, encourage innovation in teaching and promote the attractiveness of certain programmes at the international level.

In several countries, studies have concluded that there is a trend towards greater centralisation in higher education institutions-in procedures and in organisational decision making- as a consequence of external quality assurance activities (Askling, 1997; Stensaker, 1999; Stensaker, 2003). These include bureaucratisation of HEIs, increased institutional transparency and more increased managerialism.

Ewell (2002) found that one of the characteristics of ‘best practices’ is consistency with the mission and core values of the higher education institution. It is argued that it is remarkable how best practice organisations are driven by only a few well- articulated core values or mission elements, with evaluation processes attached visible to these key areas in preference to being ‘comprehensive’.

Moreover, a range of analysts highlight the importance of coherence and interact activity between internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. Empirical evidence revealed that the most effective quality improvement seems to occur when external quality arrangements mesh with internal processes (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995).

Most probably, the most important feature of an effective quality assurance system is flexibility and confidence in HEIs. It is argued that in order to achieve quality improvement, trust in higher education needs to be re-established, and more attention should be paid to internal processes (Harvey and Newton, 2004). Similarly, Thune (1996) highlighted the importance of trust, commitment and understanding in successful quality assurance arrangements.

In addition, Kettunen (2007) investigated the integration of strategic management and quality assurance. The study presented the concept of the quality map which can be used to describe the general structure of the quality assurance system. The quality map emphasises the role of the environment in strategic planning. It is important to take account of education policy and regional needs in strategic planning and reconcile them with the internal resources of the organisation. The role of the management process is to communicate and implement the strategic plan in the internal processes and apply a quality cycle of continuous improvement.

Furthermore, the development and public provision of valid and reliable indicators of academic quality therefore is best understood as a pure public good, which must be subsidised by the government. It is imperative that academic institutions should operate within a national policy framework designed by the state to assure academic standards (Dill, 2007).

Quality and its assurance should be seen primarily as a professional issue, not a management function. Ultimately, quality is not maintained and enhanced through systems or controls but through professional commitment. Institutions need to provide an environment within which quality is everyone's responsibility and within which a self-critical commitment to its maintenance and enhancement is part of the professionalism of all faculty and staff. Establishing such a "culture of quality" where attention to quality permeates every aspect of the organisation is a high priority in successfully implementing quality assurance.

We can conclude that there is no definition of quality but we all recognise that quality is a never-ending journey.

Conclusions

As a result of the Bologna process and other global developments in the area of Higher Education, the issue of quality has acquired key significance. HEIs are called upon to embed quality culture in their education provision. Embedding quality culture is necessary for safeguarding against minimum quality standards for academic and professional qualifications.

Attaining excellence in the entire activity of a higher education institution is the only factor which can place it among the first, at an international level, implicitly leading to acknowledgement of the merits of both its professors and students.

The European Union should support the establishment of an Academy for Teaching and Learning led by stakeholders, building on existing initiatives to provide support to all European HEIs. The actions to be implemented by the institutions should facilitate and enhance the engagement of stakeholders in the debate on the concept of quality in higher education sector now and in the future.

References

- [1] Askling, B. and Almen E. (1997). "From Participation to Competition: Changes in the Notion of Decentralisation in Swedish Higher Education Policy". *Tertiary Education and Management*. Vol. 3, No. 3, pp.199-210.
- [2] Blackwell, A., Bowes, L., Harvey, L., Hesketh, A. and Knight, T. (2001). "Transforming work experience in Higher Education". *British Education Research Journal*. Vol. 27, Issue 3, pp. 269 -285.
- [3] CEDEFOP. (2010). Skills supply and demand in Europe: Medium-term forecast up to 2020. [online]. Available at <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/Files/3052.en.pdf> (Accessed 25 October 2015).
- [4] Dill, D. (2007). "Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Practices and issues". The 3rd International Encyclopaedia of Education. June 2007.
- [5] European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. (2012). Making the most of our potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area, EHEA Ministerial Conference, Bucharest. 26 – 27 April 2012. European Higher Education Area.
- [6] ENQA. (2009). Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Helsinki, 2009, 3rd Edition.
- [7] European Commission. (2013). Modernisation of Higher Education: Report to the European Commission on Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions, June 2013, pp. 11-79.
- [8] European Commission/ EACEA/ Eurydice. (2014). Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- [9] Ewell, P.T. (2002). "A Dedicate Balance: the role of evaluation in management. Quality in Higher Education. Vol. 8, No. 2.
- [10] Garrouste, L., and Rodrigues, M. (2012). "Employability of young graduates in Europe". *International Journal of Manpower*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 425–447.
- [11] Harvey, L. and Newton, J. (2004). "Transforming Quality Evaluation". *Quality in Higher Education*. Vol.10, No.2.
- [12] Kettunen, J. (2007). Integration of strategic management and quality assurance, Proceedings of the Conference: 11th Annual Convention of the Strategic Management Forum, Indian Institute of Technology, India. 8 – 10 May, 2008, Indian Institute of Technology.
- [13] Lemaitre, M. (2009). Quality assurance for private higher education. World Conference on Higher Education, pp. 91 -109.

- [14] Mason, G., Williams, G. and Cranmer, S. (2009). "Employability skills initiatives in higher education: what effects do they have on graduate labour market outcomes?" *Education Economics*. Vol. 17, Issue 1, pp. 1-30.
- [15] Middlehurst, R. and Woodhouse, D. (1995). "Coherent Systems for External Quality Assurance. *Quality in Higher Education*. Vol.1, No. 3.
- [16] OECD (2009). Analytical framework for the contextual dimension for the AHELO feasibility study, OECD Conference, April 2009, Paris: Meeting of experts on the AHELO Contextual dimension.
- [17]
- [18] Orphanides, A. (2012). "Challenges in European Higher Education". *Higher Learning Research Communications*. Vol. 2, No. 2, pp.3-7.
- [19] Stensaker, B. (1999). "External Quality Auditing in Sweden: Are Departments affected?" *Higher Education Quarterly*. Vol. 53, No. 4.
- [20] Stensaker, B. (2003). "Trance, Transparency and Transformation: the impact of external quality monitoring on higher education". *Quality in Higher Education*. Vol. 9, No. 2.
- [21] Szanto, T. (2008). *Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Europe: A Brief Overview*. International Seminar on Evaluation in Higher Education. 20-21 August, 2008.
- [22] Thune, C. (1996). "The Alliance of Accountability and Improvement: the Danish experience. *Quality in Higher Education*. Vol.2, No. 1.
- [23] Wilger, A. (1997). "Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Literature Review". National Centre for Postsecondary Improvement 508 CERAS, School of Education, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-3084.
- [24] Yelland, R. and Valle R. (2008). "Towards an international assessment of higher education learning outcomes: the OECD – led AHELO initiative", in *Rankings and Accountability in Higher Education Uses and misuses*. UNESCO Publishing.