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CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER CHALLENGES

The intention with the current book has been to study the regulation, translation, and transformation of quality assurance from a number of perspectives and by different approaches. By doing so we have underlined the multifaceted nature of quality assurance and the many interests associated with the concept.

Three common elements have, nevertheless, emerged from the different perspectives and approaches utilised to study and analyse quality assurance in higher education:

- judged by its effects and impacts, quality assurance is not yet optimal – better processes and/or mechanisms can lead to improvements;
- defining 'quality' remains a problem, although it did not stop this volume's contributors from analysing it;
- a plurality of critical analyses is required – there is no advocacy of certain quality assurance models or policies, there is a balanced analysis of different methods used for assuring quality, there is no forced consensus around certain approaches or perspectives but fortuitously much complementarity, and finally there is not the idea that 'one size fits all'.

This final chapter intends to further develop these common elements, by calling the reader's attention to some of the most interesting ideas expressed by the authors during the 2005 Douro Seminar and that underlie all chapters in this volume. It is also our intention to go through unresolved issues and challenging questions that constitute interesting issues surrounding quality and quality assurance in higher education. We will start by reviewing the contributions to the book.

1. BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The present volume is built around three parts that focus on the regulation, translation, and transformation issues surrounding higher education's quality assurance after the turn of the century.

In the first part of the book, regulatory issues concerning quality were at the centre of our attention. The chapters by Blackmur, Dill, and Westerheijden all discussed the issues: How are quality issues currently regulated? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current regulatory regimes? How could the regulatory approaches be improved? In all three chapters we are reminded that

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quality assurance is not an obscure, inconsequential issue in higher education, but rather the prime issue in current higher education policy making around the world. Quality assurance is the policy instrument that deals most directly with the 'primary processes' in higher education: education and research.

In the chapter by Blackmur, it is emphasised that we are often too imprecise when talking about quality. As he rightly argues, public regulation is about regulating the *qualities* of higher education, not *quality* understood as a single and easily grasped entity. In a similar vein, Blackmur maintains that we perhaps should take one step back when starting to analyse what we perceive as quality problems, and that many states seem to overlook certain basic choices when dealing with them. What sort of problems should be solved by using public or private means? What is the proper role of governments in such issues?

The basic discussion offered by Blackmur is followed up by Dill and Westerheijden in Chapters 3 and 4 of Part I, respectively. Dill, focusing on the potential and problems associated with market approaches for regulating quality, shows how market competition has influenced higher education in the United Kingdom and the United States over the last decades. Reviewing available evidence, Dill points to the fact that market competition has some built-in side effects that do not necessarily support the quality of higher education. Not least, it is shown how market competition is increasing costs associated with higher education, and that this might even affect institutional teaching and learning activities in a very negative way. In this way, Dill develops a case for supporting some degree of public intervention when dealing with quality issues.

However, public intervention may be easier said than done. By linking quality issues to the ongoing Bologna process in Europe, Westerheijden shows how higher education issues currently are heavily intertwined with economic policy making and the challenges many states face when it comes to handling issues relating to the improvement of public sector performance and effectiveness. Within this perspective, quality issues are part of the new public management agenda invading every policy area in developed countries. The dangers associated with these links are that governments might turn their attention to certain administrative and organisational solutions without critically asking whether these measures actually address and solve the current policy challenges associated with the Bologna process. As Westerheijden concludes, it is not evident that the current European quality assurance initiatives will lead to a more harmonised and transparent higher education area.

Given the difficulties experienced concerning both market coordination and government regulation in the quality area, an obvious question is whether governments and researchers have managed to develop good enough analytical schemes for grasping the essence of the perceived quality problems in higher education, and, in particular, the translation involved when policies are to be implemented within the sector. In Part II of the book, Stensaker, Ewell, and Perellon each offer different theoretical and methodological approaches for analysing quality, hence they point to the many tools available to provide a more multifaceted understanding of quality.

In his proposal for a more sophisticated conceptual framework for analysing quality, Perellon in Part II of the book reminds us of some of the insights higher education research gained from policy implementation studies in the past two decades. By drawing on Premfors (1992) and Sabatier (1993), he structures his policy analysis approach around questions such as the objectives, control, areas, procedures, and uses related to quality assurance. This structure then enables him to identify some of the dynamic factors surrounding the current quality debate. The list of potential actors, processes, and characteristics of higher education then offered should be useful for analysing not only quality issues, but also a range of other policy problems and challenges in higher education. As Perellon points out in his conclusion, this framework should be especially useful for analysing issues concerning potential convergent or divergent developments within the sector.

Stensaker also offers us a highly structured approach for analysing how quality has been introduced to higher education. Inspired by current studies on the diffusion and translation of management ideas in organisational studies in general, attention is drawn to the symbolic aspects of quality assurance, and how fads and fashions should be taken into account when analysing translation processes within the sector. Stensaker also points out that the concept of translation provides us with a more realistic understanding of the processes taking place when ideas are put into practice in higher education than the term ‘implementation’ does. In this way, Stensaker emphasises that values, norms, and cultures are important factors to take into account when analysing the sector.

Through his detailed and rich analysis of the translation processes surrounding quality assurance in the United States, Ewell then develops a more historical approach to understanding how the concept of quality has evolved in that country during the last 30 years. This approach shows us the value of paying attention to history and the legacy of the past when new ideas and policies are developed. In many ways Ewell’s approach is a reminder of how small developments over time are aggregated until reaching a point when there is a need for breaks and new directions. But Ewell’s approach is also an example of how higher education researchers construct history and in this way make it more meaningful and easy to comprehend. By doing so, Ewell at the same time develops testable proposals for further increasing our knowledge on the effects of various design issues concerning quality assurance.

Finally, in Part III of the book, attention is directed to the transformational aspects of quality assurance. In the chapters by Rosa and Amaral, D’Andrea, and Harvey and Newton, we learn more about the effects of quality assurance in higher education and, not least, why we sometimes have difficulties in tracing concrete ‘transformations’ of all initiatives taken in this area. In the chapter by Rosa and Amaral, we are reminded that quality assurance has its origins outside higher education, and that external definitions and concepts concerning quality have infused this sector. Their study of an application of the EFQM Excellence Model at the institutional level also shows that such more standardised models can be relevant to higher education if implemented with consideration for the inherent characteristics of the sector. Not least, it is illustrated how important institutional leadership is when introducing external ideas and concepts into higher education institutions (similarly in Csizmadia 2006).

However, governmental and managerial attempts to adjust and customise quality assurance into higher education institutions have not always succeeded, as D'Andrea points out in her analysis. Through conceptualising quality assurance as a learning process, she shows how external quality reviews are not always in accordance with current theories on learning, and that there are several missing links between current macro-level quality review processes and micro-level attempts to improve teaching and learning. In her conclusion, D'Andrea especially points out that there is need for a more developed theoretical basis for external quality reviews.

The mismatch experienced between macro-level initiatives in quality assurance and micro-level experienced needs is further explored by Harvey and Newton. Noting the rather disappointing results of the many governmental initiatives concerning quality assurance, they argue that it is time to consider a different approach to quality assurance – an evidence-based one. At the core of their approach is the idea that accountability and improvement are not pure opposites, but may walk hand in hand as accountability indeed also can be reached through well-documented and research-informed improvement activities enabled through a meaningful dialogue between evaluators and those evaluated. Not least, it is proposed that evaluation activities should be more focused on reviewing plans for quality enhancement at the institutional level than examining the provision, as is often the practice today.

2. CENTRAL MESSAGES AND FINDINGS

As already stressed, despite the many approaches and perspectives utilised for studying and understanding quality assurance, there are common messages and findings that can be distilled from the book.

First, what all chapters in this book implicitly emphasise is that we should *broaden the analytical approaches* when analysing quality issues in higher education. Quality is not a secondary issue in the sector, but a concept that addresses some of the basic and classical questions in higher education: quality is essentially a question about the effectiveness and efficiency of the sector as a whole. Hence, as pointed out by Blackmur, Dill, and Westerheijden, regulatory issues should be a core theme when analysing quality. However, in practice, many studies linked to this field have only addressed the area of quality assurance understood rather narrowly as the design, implementation, and partially the effects of external evaluation schemes in higher education (see e.g. Westerheijden, Brennan, and Maassen 1994; Brennan and Shah 2000; Schwarz and Westerheijden 2004; Rosa, Tavares, and Amaral 2006). Even though the current book also deals with quality assurance issues, the authors in many of the previous chapters defined quality assurance in a broader way, including in their analyses the links between international and national contextual developments, translation issues, and institutional reactions and responses. This multi-level approach has allowed us to contextualise the design and organisation-focused debate usually surrounding quality assurance, and ask critical questions relating to when and why governments should intervene in this area, the processes involved in 'spreading the

gospel' about quality, or even asking whether or not the whole area of quality assurance should be transformed.

Second, as illustrated by a number of contributions in the book, the impact of different national contexts on the implementation of public policy in the quality area seem more recognisable than before. *Adapting the concept of 'translation'* instead of 'implementation' is perhaps the most noticeable indication of this. This in turn extends our understanding beyond the unfortunate dichotomy between homogenisation and diversification that is often linked to quality issues. Even though the contributions in this book identify many similarities surrounding quality assurance, emphasising *translation* reminds us that the starting point for addressing quality assurance is related to a particular (national) context (see e.g. Frazer 1997). Although socio-economic restructuring, internationalisation, and globalisation of education markets, together with the emergence of the knowledge-based society, have influenced higher education development, the fact is that higher education institutions operating within specific national frameworks have their own dynamics and address challenges based on their own positions (with their own strengths and weaknesses). Hence, even the Bologna process might not lead to the homogenisation and transparency intended in the quality area, as Westerheijden concludes in Chapter 4. Evidence from the United States reported in Chapter 6 by Ewell also shows significantly different approaches between the states of the United States when it comes to how quality assurance policies have been put into practice, and, as Rosa and Amaral point out in their contribution, there is evidence that significant translation processes are quite common phenomena also at the institutional level. A final point supporting the importance of the specific national context is the fact that policy action within the quality area differs significantly between states: where some were early innovators (see e.g. Ewell's chapter), others were latecomers in this field – so late, in fact, that we could not secure their contributions to this book.

A third finding throughout the book is the *significant lack of precision* when governments and other agencies address quality issues in their policy making. This lack of precision is related not only to decision makers' formulations of what they perceive as quality problems, but also to a lack of specific objectives within implemented initiatives. As shown in the chapters by Perellon, Ewell, Blackmur, and also Stensaker, decision makers have actually allowed for much of the confusion and debates in the quality area. In a more positive vein, not unusual in policy analysis, we can of course also argue that this lack of precision has led to a smoother translation process into the sector than would have been possible otherwise: ambiguity has its uses as a 'lubricant' in translation processes. In this way, the different actors have had the opportunity to influence locally how quality should be defined (explicitly or implicitly), and add meaning to the implemented measures. Still, within higher education research, trying to define quality during the last 20 years has been one of the longest-lasting activities – starting in the mid-1980s (Ball 1985) – without leading to a finer-grained conclusion than the agreement on the relative aspects of the concept (Harvey and Green 1993). With these arguments in mind, one could, of course, argue that both governments and higher education institutions had a strong interest in not defining quality too explicitly, and that this

might provide at least a partial explanation for the somewhat unclear understanding of the core concept. For both politicians and institutions within the sector, precise definitions also increased the chance of being held accountable for the results and effects of the measures taken. As illustrated by D'Andrea and Harvey and Newton we are currently left, therefore, with very little hard evidence of what all the bustle has been about for the last 20 years. A further consequence of the ambiguity may have been that with the ensuing problems related to what exactly to measure if definitions and goals remained vague, one may understand why methodological issues concerning how impact studies should be conducted have been one of the most problematic themes in evaluative research in higher education.

Even though governments as a rule have been vague in formulating their expectations, this has not stood in the way of the development of relatively uniform organisational solutions as to how quality assurance should be implemented. A fourth finding is therefore supporting early observations of a 'general model' for quality assurance in higher education (Van Vught and Westerheijden 1994). However, given the many policy instruments (legal, economical, informational, or organisational) available to policy makers, what this book shows is that it is first and foremost the *organisational approach* that can be associated with quality assurance initiatives in higher education. We could therefore argue that the 'general model' is not so much about the content or the aims of the procedures associated with evaluation (how to perform self-assessments, external assessments, etc.) as it is about understanding it as a description of the dominant place 'organisation' has had as a governmental tool during the last 20 years (see also Neave 1988). Whether we talk about evaluations (either in the form of audits or accreditations), intermediate bodies, or new quality assurance systems at the institutional level, we still end up with organisational solutions. As Blackmur reminds us, there are other instruments and approaches that could have had a more prominent role. Our knowledge as to why this has happened is still far from satisfactory, but this book has pointed to some factors that seem important: fashion and policy copying (see e.g. the chapters by Stensaker, Ewell, and Perellon) undoubtedly play a role, but equally the links between general new public management reforms and the field of quality assurance should not be underestimated (as shown by the chapters of Westerheijden, Harvey and Newton, Rosa and Amaral or Dill).

A fifth and recurrent finding in the book is the recognition of the problems associated with *quality assurance and its relationship to institutional learning and institutional behaviour* in higher education. As especially highlighted by Harvey and Newton, D'Andrea, and also Dill in their respective chapters, there is much evidence of a mismatch between intended effects and implemented measures at the institutional level. An interesting aspect here is that this mismatch goes for both public and private initiatives in quality assurance. In the public sphere, quality assurance has focused on the performance dimensions of higher education (see Blackmur), with accountability as an underlying factor (see Westerheijden), while in the private sphere, and especially related to publicised ranking systems, there is a tendency to emphasise academic reputation where this construct is often taken as a substitute measurement for quality (see Dill). Harvey and Newton and also D'Andrea substantiate how such schemes have led to ritualism and tokenism at the

institutional level. This leads them to question the usefulness of such external quality assurance from an institutional perspective, and to their pleading for a transformation of the mode related to how quality should be regulated. This argument has been quite broadly supported over the years by other studies advocating a stronger focus on institutional characteristics and functioning when designing quality assurance schemes in higher education (see e.g. Harvey and Knight 1996; Dill 2000; Stensaker 2003).

3. UNRESOLVED ISSUES AND CHALLENGING QUESTIONS

Even though many themes and national settings have been examined in the current book, we are still far from answering all questions surrounding quality and quality assurance in higher education. As such, we – as many before us – end up with numerous questions and further challenging research problems concerning future analysis. A selection of these issues is presented below in random order.

First, does it matter if regulation of quality is public or private? If so, which option is most effective? We know that both forms of regulatory frameworks are associated with problems concerning either government or market 'failure', but what is, at the end of the day, the relative advantage or disadvantage of going for either public or private solutions in this area? While Blackmur in Chapter 2 argues for utilising a public choice perspective in such situations, both Dill and Westerheijden (Chapters 3 and 4) question the ability of regulators to arrive at rational and objective solutions. A particular problem here is, not least, grasping the complexity of institutional behaviour and the often intricate problems concerning cross-subsidisation between education and research and lack of information (Dill and Soo 2004).

Second and related to the above, questions concerning the costs associated with quality assurance have not really been addressed properly. This goes not only for the direct costs associated with evaluation activities per se, but also studies related to the relative benefits of quality assurance compared to other ways to secure and improve quality. The few studies available (see e.g. Alkin and Stecher 1983; PA Consulting 2000) suggest that the resources related to these activities are considerable both in the United States and United Kingdom. And given the new public management agenda of increasing public sector efficiency as well as its effectiveness, we need not be very 'clairvoyant' to expect an increasing focus on this issue in the years to come.

Third, another spin-off question concerning the fundamental choices related to how best to regulate, control, or improve quality would be to study the impact of the different tools available. As noted earlier, organisation has been a preferred instrument in many national quality assurance schemes in the past, but there are indications that this view might change. The emergence of qualification frameworks in higher education could, on the one hand, be said to be yet another instrument linked to the organisation instrument, but it could, on the other hand, be interpreted as representing a shift towards more legally oriented instruments in the sector. As Brunsson et al. (2000) have argued, such standardisation of higher education's

outputs by putting them into the terms of qualification frameworks, may be an alternative instrument for controlling and coordinating complex relationships and situations characterised by mutual dependence between various actors. A question for subsequent study is whether the emergence of qualification frameworks is a sign of the steering models in (European) states turning back to a (renewed) model of state control – do we witness the rise of the 'neo-Weberian' state here (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004), with its reaffirmation of the state's role and its rule through (administrative) law, but shifting its focus to meeting citizens' needs and wishes? Alternatively, we can point to the 'Model of State Interference' (Kraak 2001) to explain this new form of control by the state. Being unable to adequately steer autonomous institutions when implementing market approaches for competition, "the State resorts sporadically to extraordinary measures that attempt to force reality to conform to its wishes when the institutional framework model does not produce the results desired by political actors" (Teixeira, Rosa, and Amaral 2004: 306).

Of special interest for higher education is the question of whether increased standardisation of quality assurance would affect the use and role of expert knowledge when reviewing quality. Even though the peer review mechanism, in one form or another, is part of most quality assurance schemes at present (Van Vught and Westerheijden 1994), this should not be taken for granted. Standardisation towards a large-scale scheme – possibly a European-wide accreditation scheme – may turn peers (respected colleagues with whom evaluated academics may discuss their education) into administrators or even inspectors (who from a position of power come to check compliance with standards and criteria). In a sense, this change takes us back to the question of the lack of trust in higher education and its institutions: academics may no longer be trusted sufficiently by external stakeholders – the neo-Weberian state in particular – to judge the quality of teaching programmes. On the other hand, just labelling something a 'standard' does not necessarily mean a similar outcome or effect (Prøitz, Stensaker, and Harvey 2004; Stensaker and Harvey 2006).

In the fourth place, we need to question what exactly we study when analysing quality assurance. As emphasised in a number of chapters in the book, quality assurance has been poorly defined by politicians, but also rather under-analysed from a theoretical perspective. In sum, this has led to considerable methodological challenges when analysing the concept which is probably the main reason for the current paucity of methodologically sound impact studies in this area. The conclusion that quality assurance is 'translated' into higher education, recognising the ability and skills higher education institutions often demonstrate when adapting to public policy making in the sector, can of course also contribute to overlooking the possibility that organisational change can be caused by factors not controlled for in the analysis. As Rosa and Amaral argue in their analysis of the application of the EFQM model, we should not overlook the possibility that a reason for the relatively successful adaptation that they found, is that the 'rough edges' related to this model have been 'sanded down'. But how much change in a concept can be allowed before we are actually analysing something else? Only a theory – which as we said is still lacking – can say when 'the same' is 'really different' (Lieshout 1983). Of particular interest here is to further investigate what individual teachers experience as

implemented quality assurance mechanisms, and how they perceive the changes experienced (see also Newton 1999; Westerheijden, Hulpiau, and Waeytens 2006).

In the fifth place, related to the previous point, we also need to know more about how quality assurance as an idea and concept is spread internationally. As shown in this book, there are obvious political and economic (cf. the chapters by Westerheijden and Perellon), and cultural and global (cf. the chapters by Stensaker, and Rosa and Amaral) forces driving the process. But what are the interrelationships between these forces? Do these drivers reinforce each other towards a single solution, or do they open the policy design space up for more diversity in approaches, and also for possibilities for national and institutional translations? Two subthemes are of special interest here. First, there is a need to more thoroughly analyse the reasons for the spread of particular measures within quality assurance. Do we witness policy copying on a large scale (as e.g. with accreditation schemes or through the use of the open method of coordination in the EU, which is based on benchmarks and indicators), symbolic adaptation or specific national agendas underlying the process (Schwarz and Westerheijden 2004)? Second, as addressed in this volume by Perellon, how do quality issues relate to other pressing issues on the higher education agenda such as internationalisation, and the interplay between higher education and the surrounding society, etc.?

Finally, relating to other higher education research, what are the relevant methods and approaches for instigating change in higher education? What are the levers that stimulate improvements in teaching and learning? As Stensaker (2003: 152) puts it, there is a "need for a critical review of what the impact of external quality monitoring is on higher education". So far most impact studies have concentrated on the effectiveness of quality systems rather than on "the impact that the process has had on, for example, the learning experience, pedagogic development, or the nature of research outcomes" (Harvey and Newton 2004: 154). In this book, Harvey and Newton, Rosa and Amaral, and also D'Andrea emphasised the need for more studies on the micro-level examining various perspectives and designs for improving teaching and learning (see also Westerheijden, Hulpiau, and Waeytens 2006). But finding evidence on the impact of quality assessment processes is made difficult by several factors, including methodological problems such as the difficulty to isolate the effects of assessment from those of other processes impinging on higher education (Stensaker 2003; Harvey and Newton 2004; Carr, Hamilton, and Meade 2005), the task being further complicated by, for example, the complex nature of higher education institutions (Weusthof 1995; Askling 1997; Brennan 1997; Stensaker 2003). Over the years, many studies on quality assurance have been remarkably decoupled from more traditional studies within pedagogy, learning theory and more anthropological approaches to grasp the essence of higher education. Recent developments within the sector, for example the creation of the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom, and an increasing interest to link structure and action – or, to be more specific, organisation and learning – are therefore interesting as future areas for research (see e.g. D'Andrea and Gosling 2005).

4. QUALITY, QUO VADIS?

New functions have emerged for quality assurance. The old, one might almost say, eternal, questions of regulation, accountability versus improvement, or the quest for the ultimate definition of the quality concept remain. Yet in the changing context characterised by increasing internationalisation and globalisation, and by shifting costs from states to individuals (e.g. the introduction or substantial increase of tuition fees), quality assurance is acquiring a new balance of functions: communicating information about qualities to prospective students is maybe the most important direction of change. Quality assurance acquires new 'neighbours' as policy instruments in that process; particularly now that much attention is placed on the relationship between quality assurance and ranking.[1] The body of literature on report cards of higher education institutions and of study programmes is rapidly increasing. The previous attitude of sceptical dismissal that seemed to dominate the higher education community (Bowden 2000; Clarke 2002; Schatz 1993; Yorke 1998) is giving way to making use of rankings and 'report cards' to inform and attract prospective students – still sceptical due to the shaky methodology of most report cards (Duffy and Cary 1999; Gottlieb 1999; Van Raan 2005). Quality information is part of some report cards (Dill and Soo 2005; Van Dyke 2005). Both quality assurance and report cards are becoming associated with institutional marketing – an emerging area for most higher education institutions. Quality assurance in that perspective becomes an instrument in 'branding' of higher education institutions (Bélanger, Syed, and Mount 2006; Usher and Savino 2006).

In many Western states, the student market is changing from a sellers' market with sheer unlimited demand from growing cohorts of youngsters, growing proportions of whom were attracted to higher education, to a buyers' market with shrinking cohorts of whom almost all with sufficient talent are already in higher education. Three responses seem to dominate reactions in these states.

First, higher education institutions search for new 'pools' of students. Beyond the traditional, young adults who study on campus, full time, the numbers of mature learners are increasing. They are often persons who did not enter higher education immediately after secondary school ('second chance' learners – a temporary 'pool' given the increasing participation rates) or who return to higher education for additional training after some years of gaining work experience ('lifelong learners'). Delivery of study programmes to these mature learners typically is more varied in methods and timing; as a consequence, part-time studies with 'blended' modes of learning (including distance education through online means but also face-to-face teaching) are becoming more prominent in many more higher education institutions than before. Mature learners may often act more like 'informed consumers' than young students, so that communicating a study programme's qualities to these prospective learners is becoming more relevant from the institutional perspective. This development represents a challenge in that many of the quality assurance schemes operating today have a focus on the traditional ways of providing higher education, in which students are assumed to be young (ca. 18–24 years of age), studying full time, and on campus. There is a need to develop more flexible and

adaptable information systems on quality (report cards based on suitably adapted quality assurance schemes?) to cater for this increased diversity.

Second, higher education institutions in states with shrinking traditional demand for higher education try to increase their market share, both among traditional and new 'pools' of students, in competition with other higher education institutions nationally. In brief, the competition in the student market is growing. As we mentioned, this is likely to create a strong link between quality assurance and institutional branding efforts, which may also create new challenges for the accountability function of quality assurance. In a more competitive market, trust and legitimacy may become more important as a means to stand out from the rest: credibility is probably the prime message that a brand carries. How quality assurance schemes can fulfil a function in this new game of trust and legitimacy, while maintaining their traditional balance of trust between states and higher education institutions which remains necessary for their acceptance as a steering instrument in public policy, will become a major challenge.

And third, higher education institutions are transgressing national borders much more consciously than previously. Internationalisation is no longer an academic hobby horse, but has become a dire necessity to attract students from abroad. This is another 'pool' of students, and in many cases an especially attractive one, as foreign students often pay (substantially) higher tuition fees than national ones – or in the European Union, higher than EU citizens. This tendency increased or perhaps even created the competition among higher education institutions globally. This development will most likely raise questions about the cultural sensitivity of quality assurance and also create new tensions as national objectives related to higher education are confronted with emerging international conceptions about quality standards.

These three reactions have been stimulated by many states' governments, for – as far as we can see – mainly three reasons. One has to do with states stimulating the development of the knowledge economy, implying amongst other things that a higher proportion of the labour force trained at the higher education level is seen as a national need. Another reason for governments stimulating competition among higher education institutions is that in current political discourses this supposedly contributes to the improvement of quality of education. In the eyes of politicians, a probably not unimportant side effect of stimulating higher education institutions to enter the marketplace is that through higher education institutions earning additional income on the market, the claims of higher education on the state budget may be reduced. In this way, the second reason blurs into the third, namely, that states see in higher education an option for benefits in international trade competition. Potential benefits may seem large at this moment for Western countries with well-developed higher education systems in the face of fast-growing demand for higher education in emerging countries, especially in South and South-East Asia. But with those countries building up their own higher education capacities just as they have built up their industrial capacities (growth rates of higher education in countries like China are as unmatched as those of the Chinese economy as a whole), this is bound to be a temporary 'solution' for maintaining higher education capacity in the Western

world; the more so, as countries such as China, India, Malaysia, and other Asian nations are the market for South-South higher education trade.

Higher education institutions in many countries, in sum, have many reasons to communicate their quality in a much more emphatic way than before to all their prospective students. And, equally, as competition in markets and quasi-markets for research contracts, service teaching, etc. is increasing too, higher education institutions have ever more reasons to include other stakeholders and clients in their communication efforts. It looks likely, therefore, that quality, report cards and branding are becoming another 'unholy trinity'.

Experiences with quality assurance both in Europe and the United States would seem to indicate that the increased marketisation of higher education does not mean a decrease in regulation. Perhaps the contrary: while the amount of bureaucratic ex ante control may have been reduced, the regulation of the quality assurance schemes – defining at the higher education system level what to evaluate, how and with what consequences, which results in regulation by higher education institutions with respect to by-laws, quality protocols etc. – has led to substantial re-regulation. As the three contributions in Part I show, the introduction of quality assurance has not solved the power questions underlying relations in higher education systems – though it did change the powers and possibilities of the actors involved. Yet it remains difficult to assess who are the winners or losers in the power game. It is debatable whether quality assurance leads to increased 'professionalisation' of higher education, or whether this is yet another process involved in the perceived '(re-)bureaucratisation' of the sector. Related to this, there is also a debate over how quality assurance changes the administrative–academic interface in higher education, blurring the former boundaries between these actors with respect to responsibilities and authority over education and research. As pointed out by Amaral, Fulton, and Larsen (2003), managers today see themselves as essential contributors to the successful functioning of the contemporary university, while a decade ago they were "very much expected to operate in a subservient supportive role to the academic community" (Amaral, Fulton, and Larsen 2003: 286) and even resented being called 'managers' (Westerheijden 1997). What is clear, however, especially from the chapters in Part III, is that it proved very difficult to use quality assurance to empower the teaching and research staff at the work-floor level, or the students. Much of quality assurance is a game between policy makers, quality assurance agencies, institutional managers, and quality professionals. It seems that the institutional consequences of quality assessment have not yet contributed much to actual improvements in teaching and learning or to transforming the student learning experience (Harvey and Newton 2004; Rosa, Tavares, and Amaral 2006).

If the previous paragraph has validity, the question becomes whether the quality assurance game affects the work-floor level of higher education. Is there truth in what we would like to call the 'inner life thesis', that is, the thesis that there is a disparity between the policy world (of policy makers, quality assurance agencies, institutional managers and quality professionals) and the 'chalk-face' world of teaching and research staff in higher education institutions with a very limited 'trickle down' of policy concepts into the still highly autonomous 'inner life' of academe with regard to teaching and research? In brief, does quality assurance help

quality improvement? The answers given to this question in the chapters by Rosa and Amaral, D'Andrea, and Harvey and Newton seem to indicate that there is an impact on the 'inner life', but at the same time that there is much room for improvement – to use a quality assurance cliché self-referentially.

This room for improvement leads to the final question we want to raise here: What does this book mean for the further development of quality assurance in higher education? It was hinted above that new routes may have been opened in recent years and that they set new challenges for quality assurance schemes. Where these will lead is yet unknown. New translations and transformations will be required, which in turn will uncover new problems, but also new vistas. Maybe three main directions can be distinguished, in theoretical terms, some of which are inspired by casting a glance at patterns in biological evolution.

One option is that we see an 'arms race' develop. With higher education institutions becoming ever more ingenious in (outwardly) complying with quality assurance exigencies while shielding their 'inner life' to an increasing extent, external quality assurance schemes need to become ever 'tougher' or 'sharper' to remain effective; further spread of accreditation, and of ever more inquisitive approaches to it, are logical next steps in this 'arms race' scenario.

Another option is that the development is not linear, but results in a 'random walk'. Starting from the same premise that higher education institutions become ever more ingenious in (outwardly) complying with any existing quality assurance scheme while increasingly shielding their 'inner life', external quality assurance schemes need to change regularly but in a random fashion to avoid or minimise such undesirable strategic behaviour, without necessarily becoming 'tougher'. Changes of indicators due to methodological considerations by the quality assessment agencies, or as a result of political priorities, may be enough to keep quality management in higher education institutions 'on its toes', never getting the chance to become a routine that can be left to quality professionals. At a different level, when looking into the history of quality assurance there are also indications that 'random walk' is a relevant metaphor for the ideological shifts in quality assurance often resulting from new governments coming into office. As long as governments keep changing, the possibility remains that such effects are also likely in the future.

Finally, and more optimistically, there is the scenario of the 'next generation': endogenous developments in a benign situation are hypothesised to lead to closure (i.e. to the 'solving') of increasingly sophisticated problems, demanding increasingly sophisticated quality assessment schemes. This is the thesis behind Jeliazkova and Westerheijden's (2002) work, but to date it lacks independent corroboration, because the political drivers seemed to always override such inherent developments. Harvey and Newton (Chapter 10) plead for a better focus of external quality assurance schemes on certain goals, enabling 'slimmer', 'lighter touch' arrangements. The return, in the United Kingdom, to institutional audits after the 2001 revolt of the Russell Group universities, may have been an early effort in this direction. Switzerland recently moved in the same direction and current discussions in some European countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, to move towards varieties of institutional accreditation to reduce the burden of the current programme accreditation

schemes, seem to indicate that a tendency may be developing at least in Europe along this third scenario.

A factor not considered in these three theoretical scenarios, which take the borders of the higher education system as a given, is the internationalisation or globalisation of higher education. Cross-border provision of higher education – though to a large extent not directly affected by the free trade principles of the WTO and GATS (Vlk 2006), if only because it also includes, for example, joint degrees by public higher education institutions – requires quality assurance arrangements that transcend the borders of higher education systems. Forums are discussing these issues; quality assurance agencies especially in Europe are experimenting with options for them. But for definitive answers it is yet too early.

'Quo vadis?' – where goest thou? – was the question addressed in this last section. Obviously, we do not know the answer to which route quality assurance is taking. We just know that the road is still under construction.

NOTES

1 As Cremonini, Westerheijden, and Enders (2006) emphasised, "The term 'Report Card' is preferable to 'ranking', because … what is needed to inform (prospective) students is an overview of elements that help them make a reasoned choice, which is multi-dimensional and subjective. [A report card] pretends to do no more than that – give information about a number of elements or dimensions. 'Ranking' on the other hand is inherently a uni-dimensional and often 'objective' (in the sense of: same for all) list of higher education institutions or study programmes ordered from 'best' to 'worst'".

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