

The social dimension and quality: Why and how the social dimension should be integrated into quality assurance in higher education

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Introduction

The aim of this presentation is to facilitate a discussion. It will be partly political, polemical and provocative, but hopefully also concrete and able to provide some food for thought. I have chosen the title “Why and how the social dimension should be integrated into quality assurance in higher education”.

To start off with I will provide a draft working definition of the social dimension, before making the argument about the crucial link between the social dimension and quality of higher education. Thereafter I will attempt to identify the role of the social dimension in the process of quality assurance and accreditation, portraying this process basically being built on three main steps. To conclude, I will try to provide some ideas on how to integrate the social dimension in this process.

Working definition of the social dimension

The social dimension might be defined as all obstacles to access, progress and completion in higher education – with the strongest emphasis on obstacles to *access* to higher education. It is important to notice that the social dimension is a wide concept, encompassing several factors. The obstacle to access created by tuition fees is a well-known example, although this obstacle might be balanced by the existence of scholarship programmes, similar to the system in the United States. It is however clear that all forms of tuition fees – to a lesser or greater extent – create obstacles to access to higher education.

Another element of the social dimension is the structural discrimination towards specific groups underrepresented in higher education, whether they are based on socio-economic factors, cultural or ethnic background, or physical disabilities. Grants and loans provided for subsistence costs are another aspect of the social dimension. In a European context the portability of grants and loans should also be considered, as this is often a prerequisite for student mobility. Health services and housing are other examples, together with counselling services provided for students – academic, legal and social – which are often vital for the progress and completion of higher education.

The link between the social dimension and quality

What is actually the link between the social dimension and quality of higher education? My approach is built on two basic principles: Firstly, there is no connection between e.g. the size of the wallet and the academic potential of a prospective student; i.e. there is no significant correlation between economic status and academic capacity. Secondly, social obstacles to access, progress and completion in higher education continue to exist across the European Higher Education Area; the present situation is not in line with the principle of equal opportunities. Therefore, ensuring equal opportunities in higher education is not only a question of social justice, but also all about improving and strengthening the quality of higher education. Allow me to use a metaphor from the world of athletics: Imagine your country is participating in the Olympic 4x100 m relay, and you are in charge of selecting the team of runners. You would not care about the economic status of the athletes, in order for them to be

able to pay their travels and their equipment themselves; you would focus solely on their capacity as runners in order to create the strongest team possible. This same logic should be applied in higher education.

QA&A – three main steps + the role of the social dimension

How should we then apply these principles in the context of quality assurance and accreditation process? I would like to portray this process as essentially built on three steps: firstly, the development of quality criteria and standards; secondly, the internal accreditation or self-evaluation – either on programme or institutional level; and thirdly, the external accreditation by an accreditation body – again either on programme or institutional level. In my perspective the social dimension should primarily be integrated in the first step of the process: whether an institution is fighting social obstacles should simply be added to the list of quality criteria. Having said this, it is obviously important that the social dimension remains integrated throughout the quality assurance and accreditation process, and that it is not forgotten after the first step of the process.

How to integrate the social dimension in QA&A

In practical terms this would simply mean that when a quality audit is conducted, questions about the social inclusion policies of an institution should be added to the checklist of the auditors, and integrated and emphasised in their report. Challenges and questions on how to practically integrate the social dimension in quality assurance and accreditation do however remain. One obvious problem is the different levels of competencies: while it is clear that a developed grants and loans system significantly contributes to fighting social obstacles, this is generally a responsibility of national governments and not individual higher education institutions.

Conclusion

This presentation has hopefully provided a thought-provoking introduction to the discussion on the relationship between the social dimension and quality assurance. The social dimension has been defined as all obstacles to access, progress and completion in higher education, and the argument for the link between the social dimension and quality has been made, essentially showing that ensuring equal opportunities is also ensuring the quality of higher education. A suggestion on how to integrate the social dimension in the process of quality assurance and accreditation has been made, by integrating the social dimension in the process of identifying quality standards and indicator. We are however faced with several challenges on how to practically integrate the social dimension in quality assurance – and I hope that debate will flourish around this and related issues.