

The realization of Bologna Process in Russia: the appearance of independent quality assurance system.

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Abstract

In the 21st century human capital increasingly occupies center stage. In present time the driving force of economics – competition – comes down to knowledge competition. In all universities the number of students increased annually. However the knowledge-based economy demands more to the quality of higher education. While linking higher education training to labor markets is a fundamental component of ensuring that educational inputs have the greatest possible payoffs for both societies and individuals, it might well be the case that even more than the composition of education, it's the quality that really matters. The question is what are the best evaluation mechanisms to ensure excellence and how should these mechanisms balance equity and diversity?

Introduction

In the 21st century human capital increasingly occupies center stage. Nowadays the knowledge production serves as a source of the economic growth in industrialized countries. About 90 percent of all scientists and engineers working for the whole history of mankind are our contemporaries. About 90 percent of knowledge has been produced for the last three decades. In present time the driving force of economics – competition – comes down to knowledge competition. In all universities the number of students increased annually. However the knowledge-based economy demands more to the quality of higher education.

While linking higher education training to labor markets is a fundamental component of ensuring that educational inputs have the greatest possible payoffs for both societies and individuals, it might well be the case that even more than the composition of education, it's the quality that really matters. Under such a system of priorities, university degrees become meaningless in the labor market, paper credentials with no signaling ability of skills or capabilities. Thus indicators like the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) or number of engineering graduates can be very misleading.

Nowadays the role of higher education, in both theoretical and policy terms lacks adequate empirical knowledge of what is happening *within* universities and to the students who spend a considerable part of their prime years in these institutions. While it is clear that there has been a substantial growth in higher education whether measured by the number of students or amounts spent, it is unclear just how meaningful this large growth is.

The multiple goals of higher education, and the uncertain links between these goals and social and individual benefits and inter-temporal trade-offs, all make the composition of higher education an exceedingly difficult quest.

While higher education holds much promise for industrialized and developing countries, some surveys reveal that the hype of a “knowledge economy” notwithstanding, we actually know very little about how or even whether it works, except in the most general sense. This is perhaps not surprising given the multiple goals and the uncertain links between these goals and social and individual benefits.

Indeed, what is striking about higher education is the weakness of the analytical frameworks on even the most fundamental questions: what is the purpose of higher education? To train people for a labor force or train a labor force that is in turn trainable by employers? To create a middle class? Is the goal of higher education to provide a ladder for social mobility or create national elites? To influence and mould the minds of young people? The answer, “all of the above”, merely shifts the analytical burden. How should resources be optimally allocated

across academic disciplines (between pure professional education and the so-called “liberal arts”), levels of higher education, and between suppliers and students? Who should pay for it and how much? Even within academic fields there are few yardsticks.

If the main role of higher education is to serve a screening and signaling function, the question is what are the best evaluation mechanisms to ensure excellence and how should these mechanisms balance equity and diversity?

The task of this article is to answer this question. The article comprises two parts: the first one is devoted to the higher education expansion and the problems and changes its phenomenon has. The second part deals with the Bologna process and quality assurance aspects: what peculiarities these issues have in Russian Higher Education Area. This part is dedicated to the quality assurance mechanisms which have been implemented in RF as the integral part of Bologna process's realization.

Expansion of higher education worldwide

Over the past half century or so, higher education has transformed in a global industry annually enrolling tens of millions of students. This growth has been especially rapid in the last decade. In 1991, the global higher education student population was 68 million. By 2004 it had nearly doubled to 132 million¹. Table 1 displays the rapid growth in higher education across the globe. In Russia the similar state of affairs can be observed. According to the State Service for Statistics the number of students has almost tripled since 1994 and comprised 7461 in 2008. (see table.2)

Table 1: Gross Enrollment Ratio (%), Higher Education

	1980	1997	2004
High Income countries	36.2	51.6	66.7
Less Developed Countries	1.8	3.2	8.7
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.7	3.9	5

¹ Comparing Education Statistics Across the World. – UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Arab States	9.6	14.9	22.6
Latin America and the Caribbean	13.7	19.4	28.6
East Asia and Oceania	3.8	10.8	19.6
South Asia	4.3	7.2	9.7

Source: World Bank Edustats

Table 2: Number of students in Russian Federation (thousands of people)

	1993/ 94	1995/ 96	2000/ 01	2002/ 03	2003/ 04	2004/ 05	2005/ 06	2006/ 07	2007/ 08
Total number of students	2613	2791	4741	5948	6456	6884	7064	7310	7461
Public Higher Education Institutions	2543	2655	4271	5229	5596	5860	5985	6133	6208
Private Higher Education Institutions	70	136	471	719	860	1024	1079	1177	1253

Source: Russian State Service for Statistics.

With public universities unable to absorb the growing number of students, numerous alternatives have emerged. Perhaps the most striking feature of higher education in the new millennium has been the explosion in private provision.

Russian political and economic changes in 90-ies have led to the boom of private higher education sector. Since that time the number of private higher education institutions has increased from 193 in 1995 to 474 in 2008 according to the Federal Statistics Service.

It goes without saying that private institutions are helping to meet the growing demand that the public sector cannot. Private institutions are less subject to political instabilities and day-to-day political pressures that often bedevil public universities. When educational provision is reliant upon the state, disturbances to the state apparatus, such as financial and political crises, can severely undermine educational provision. Yet despite these positives these institutions are of highly variable – and often dubious – quality.

Historically the very recognition of an institution as a “university” conferred on it the right (and obligation) to regulate and enforce quality. How it organized itself to discharge this function – departments, faculty, admissions, and

pedagogy – was its business. Its main incentive was the reputational value of its certification.

However with the explosion of higher education enrollment, quality assurance has become a pressing concern. Broadly speaking, quality assurance is the review of educational programs involving the creation and implementation of acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure. The increase in higher education provision – particularly by private providers – and the movement of people and educational institutions across national borders have led to a growing demand for quality assurance mechanisms. National governments and international bodies are hard pressed to find some internationally comparable standards by which to judge programs and degrees in order to assure quality education and increase the international recognition of credentials.

Researchers have found it exceedingly difficult to get a good grip on two critical output measures – how to measure quality in higher education and how to determine the value added by higher education over and beyond the student's innate abilities. It is entirely possible that even in systems which are of good quality; the credentialing aspects of higher education benefit the few who have access to it and crowd out from labor markets others with similar ability but who lack access – the more prevalent formal educational qualifications, the more pressure to educate oneself.

This push to systematize quality assurance is part of a larger trend to internationalize credentials, a movement also manifest in the creation of regional accreditation blocks. In June 1999, 29 European countries signed the Bologna Declaration which outlined a plan to increase the quality and competitiveness of the European higher education sector through the creation of a single European Higher Education Area by 2010 with open borders for academic staff and students as well as universal recognition of qualifications based on generic subject-level competencies.

The realization of Bologna declaration: Russian experience.

Russia has signed the Bologna declaration in 2003 and since that time the modernization of national education system has been taking place. The elaboration of federal educational standards on the base of competence approach aroused the problem of forming proper quality evaluation system of students' competences.

New educational standards suppose a greater choice of educational alternatives and independence of higher education institutions. But this freedom should comply with the demands of labor market and the whole society. The main criterion is the demand for graduates on the labor market.

The implementing of new standards based on competence approach in Russia contributes the compatibility of different higher education systems, contents and structures of the educational programs, etc.

The main goal is that Russia will become a country of knowledge with a strong intellectual cultural social and technical base in which higher education institutions would serve as leaders in the process of this development.

As it has already been stated the shift to new state educational standards has aroused the problem of proper quality evaluation in higher education area.

There are some reasons for the appearance of the independent quality assurance system. Though in Russia there already exists a Federal Service of Supervision in the sphere of education and science whose functions are to control and conduct accreditation procedures in higher education area, its approaches are based on the traditional view to higher education institutions. The other reason is the problem of educational standards: according to which Federal Service controls only the quality of the minimum of obligatory programs included in standards and all other programs which a HEI realizes are beyond the Federal Service's monitoring. That's why the outcomes of Federal Services' monitoring don't meet demands of all groups of stakeholders interested in qualitative higher education and don't comply the requirements of knowledge-based economy. Those facts explain the appearance of independence quality assurance system in Russia.

Russian higher education community has made a lot for the development of independent quality assurance system. Throughout the mechanisms of self-regulation in higher education community the independent quality assurance system evaluates a higher education institution more precisely taking into account demands of Russian modern society.

As a practical mechanism of independent quality assurance system's implementation the Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (AQA) has been established. AQA conducts audit procedures considering four main aspects:

- the HEIs' program contents and specifications;
- efficiency of the educational technologies used by the HEIs and the way the technologies influence the program quality;
- HEI management and administration, including the level and characteristics of the institutional management;
- the way the HEI organizes its operation, including the businesses where it is engaged.

Institutional audits are organized to serve the interests of students, the public, the employers, state bodies and other stakeholders. That is why the Agency is in contact with all the interested parties at all the audit process stages: when preparing the experts' visit, during the visit, when discussing the visit outcomes and when issuing recommendations in relation to the quality assurance in the program provision.

The information the Agency provides can be used by:

- the state bodies to ensure that the public is guaranteed to have constitutional access to educational services rendered at the appropriate level of quality
- which is ensured by the competences available at the institution that operates in a certain field of professional specialization;
- by the Russian citizens who want to have guarantees that they can get the knowledge, skills and professional competences in the field of study that can give them the competitive advantages after graduation;

- by the higher education institutions (HEIs) to maintain and enhance quality of educational services rendered;
- by the employers who can use the data to make judgments about the quality of teaching in the HEIs and the correspondence between the intended learning outcomes indicated by the HEIs and the actual level of graduates' competences when making decision about employing people.

The Agency takes into consideration the diversity of interests the HEIs have and offers different types of academic audit. The audit types and procedures were developed in such a way that the best practices of such overseas accreditation bodies as ENQA, QAA, INQAAHE, APQN, EFQUEL were taken into account. That is why the HEIs taking their own interests into account have a right to demand:

- that external audit be made of the quality of the educational services rendered by the HEI;
- that assistance be rendered to the HEI in conducting self evaluation procedures as per the requirements set by the state regulatory bodies and recommendations of the leading foreign accreditation agencies;
- that the Agency specialists offer consultation services related to the issues of the HEI accreditation criteria optimization;
- that the internal institutional quality assurance system be assessed and all the main operational criteria be evaluated;
- that the indicators showing the level of the institutional sustainability be analyzed and assessed and that recommendations be made for enhancing the level of the HEI competitiveness on the educational services market;
- that the HEI action plan for the time period following the latest audit be set by the state accreditation bodies;
- that testing be made of the graduates' level of knowledge and professional competences level upon graduation.

Academic audit procedures conducted by the Agency are aimed at ensuring that the programs and other educational services rendered by the HEI can compete

on the Russian and the international market. That is why the Agency uses the competences check-based approach in use in the international academic community when assessing the graduates' quality of training.

The process of institutional audit requires a high degree of openness, transparency and trust in the partnership between the Agency and each HEI. That is why the Agency guarantees that the audit process is open, unbiased and accurate and in its strategic planning and everyday operations is guided by the following general principles:

- the needs of all the interested parties are taken into consideration; they are involved into all the activities of the Agency;
- the Agency operational activity and methodology used is transparent which is the basis of trust and consensus in the relationships between all the interested parties; the public is informed of the Agency operations;
- all the Agency resources are effectively and efficiently used in order to achieve the stated goals;
- systematic, regular and timely actions are taken in regard to all the indicated procedures in order to get support of the decisions taken by the Agency and other interested parties;
- the Agency best practices and the best practices of other organizations are used;
- the information gathered by the Agency is easily assessable and understood and of use to all the interested parties.

The AQA's activities don't contradict with the activities of Federal Service of Supervision but make a greater contribution in the development of accreditation and quality assurance approaches. The place and interrelation of both systems: federal and independent are depicted on fig.1.

The changes and seeming contradictions of Russian higher education system are stipulating that fact that Russian higher education system is becoming a part of global educational system. The facilities of higher education institutions should meet the requirements of modern economic environment.

Conclusion

The landscape of higher education is changing. In which strategic direction does the future lie for universities? The trends in terms of actual student mobility are very variable with no clear pattern emerging. However the notion of virtual mobility is stronger than ever. Intellectually we roam the world. That being the case transparency between educational systems is important. Hence the Bologna process is important to the signatory states and beyond. Business is taking advantage of a mobile business culture in terms of acquisitions as well as individual mobility. Governments and universities recognize that research into scientific development will lead the knowledge-based economy. Those who have to buy intellectual property rather than those who develop it will be a disadvantage they will always play “catch up”.

Universities cannot ignore the Bologna meta-trends; it is a total package that embodies cultural and pedagogic shifts in order to embed learning outcomes, credit accumulation and transfer, qualifications frameworks at both national and supra-national levels. The Bologna Process also encompasses the social dimension including life learning access and widening participation and the role of higher education in the context of the broader society.

Questions for discussion:

1. Will education standards solve a quality problem of higher education?
The experience of Russian Federation.
2. How can general education standards be applied for the specialized higher education institutions (f.ex. for medical HEIs, technical HEIs, musical HEIs, etc)? Should special education standards be developed to such kind of HEIs?
3. The experts' preparation. How should the best practices be disseminated?

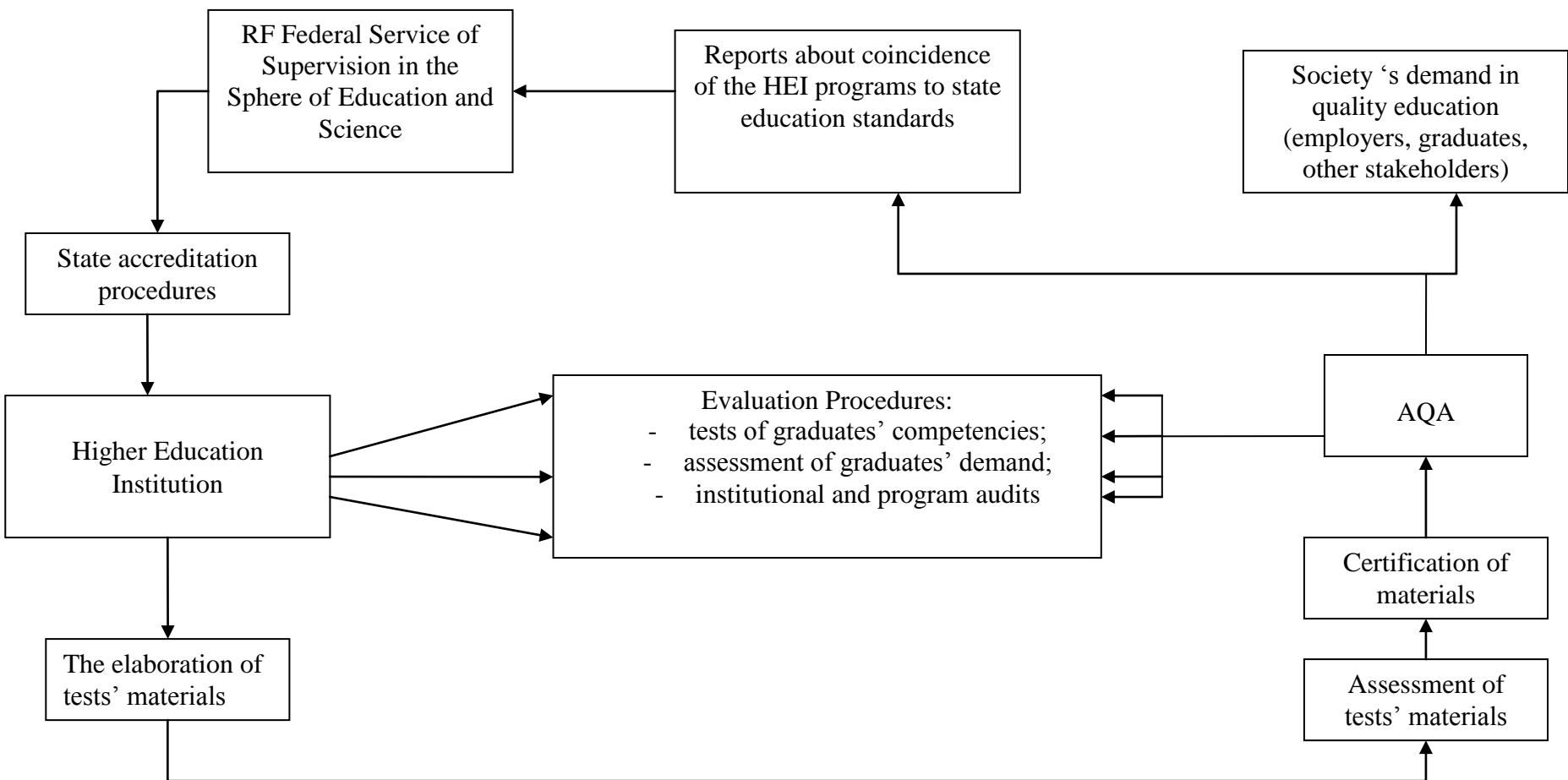


Fig. 1. AQA's place in the Russian Higher Education System