Quality Assurance Alignment

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Abstract:

Constructive alignment has been put forward by John Biggs in the realm of teaching and learning. The main concept is that learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and student assessment have to be aligned to be effective. The main argument is that students organize their learning activities to maximise their results in assessment. The constructive alignment will lead to the learning outcomes being attained.

This reasoning may be transposed to quality assurance, by assimilating learning outcomes with institutional missions or purposes, teaching and learning with organisation and procedures, and student assessment with evaluation and reward system. And the analogy may be taken even further.

For creativity to be part of the institutional purposes and promoted by quality assurance, there are implications for the evaluation criteria and procedures. Furthermore, the role of rankings is questioned in this context.

1. Introduction

The paper addresses the issue of the evaluation criteria and procedures, as part of a quality assurance system, and the associated reward system, and how they may contribute to fulfil institutional missions with quality. It is assumed that institutions are to be creative, developing knowledge and finding new ways and approaches to complex issues and problems. If quality assurance systems are to promote creative Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), then the evaluation process has to be aligned with the institutional missions and reward creativity and diversity.

John Biggs [Biggs 2003] has coined the term Constructive Alignment, applied to the teaching and learning process. The analogy between this process and quality assurance is explored, in terms of the characteristics of the evaluation process and of HEIs' approach towards this process and its consequences. Rankings are a form of evaluation that disregards the fact that institutions have different missions and goals, implying that alignment between ranking criteria and institutional mission will not exist, unless HEIs adopt the goal of fulfilling those criteria, abdicating of the autonomous definition of their missions.

2. Creativity and diversity

The EUA report of the Creativity Project [EUA 2007] reflects upon the difficulty of defining creativity. It opts to identify its dimensions and characteristics, using its limits, or what it is not, to clarify the concept. The importance of understanding creativity stems from the fact that progress depends on it being exercised and that it is an essential part of the mission of higher education.

There is a common understanding of the purposes of higher education in the Bologna Process, as expressed in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area [BWGQF 2005], somewhat reformulated in the London Communiqué [Bologna Communiqué 2007]:preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for

their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base; and stimulating research and innovation. These purposes imply knowledge advancement and the development of new, better, solutions to new and old problems, including that of educating learners with diverse backgrounds and personal goals. This requires creativity and, as contexts and learners are diverse, diversity. As a consequence, quality, as adequate responses to the problems at hand, requires creativity and diversity.

3. Constructive alignment

John Biggs [Biggs 2003] coined the term constructive alignment to designate the coherence among learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment of students. The starting point is that students learn as a result of their activities. And what each student does depends on his/her motivation. Students may have intrinsic motivation to learn, but are often driven by what he/she is required to do in order to pass or get a good mark and, in the end, the diploma.

A good mark is the result of performing well at assessment. If the assessment is not aligned with the learning outcomes, then it does not motivate the student to learn what is necessary to achieve the defined outcomes, but rather those implicit in the assessment. In conclusion, learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and student assessment must be aligned if the outcomes are to be attained.

Not all forms of assessment are adequate to specific learning outcomes. Decontextualised forms of assessment, such as sitting in exams, may be adequate to assess declarative knowledge, but are inadequate to assess performance and the capacity to apply knowledge in the solution of problems involving complex contexts.

Three ideas are to be retained for the analogy in the next section: good learning results require constructive alignment among learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and student assessment; students may have intrinsic motivation to learn, but in general plan their activities on the basis of the assessment; and decontextualised assessment is inadequate to assess student performance.

4. Quality assurance analogy

An analogy may be drawn between the education of students and quality assurance. The goal of the students' education is that they achieve the defined learning outcomes. In the quality assurance process, the goal is to ensure that institutions fulfil their missions and objectives. The analogy is, therefore, between missions, and their translation as objectives, and learning outcomes. These outcomes are diverse, depending on the programme attended by the student, as diverse are missions and objectives, depending on the institution type or context.

The teaching and learning activities are what has to take place for student to learn. As organisation and procedures are what leads to institutional results. Both teaching and learning and institutional organisation and procedures may be more or less adequate to achieve the goal, the learning outcomes or the institutional missions.

Finally, evaluation is the analogous of student assessment, the processes used to check the results of student learning or of institutional activity. As students may pass or fail, have better or worse marks, institutions may be accredited or not, or be the object of an evaluation report indicating strong and weak points, as well as recommendations. Two types of student assessment are usually considered: formative and summative. The first is used for learning, as an instrument to identify strong and weak points in student learning, and may be associated with evaluation processes leading to reports with recommendations, but no consequences in terms of accreditation, funding or other forms of reward. In both cases, these are important for the subject of the evaluation, the student or the institution. On the other hand, summative assessment implies a reward in the form of a mark, a

pass/fail decision or an award, the analogy being an accreditation process or any type of evaluation associated with some form of reward.

The advantage of using analogies is that reasoning on some issues is easier in one domain than another and this induces a cross questioning that is enlightening, in spite of its limits, as some issues of one domain may not have correspondence in the other.

The motivation of students has an analogous in the institutions. Highly motivated students, those that want to learn rather than just get a diploma, would hardly need assessment, at least summative assessment, as they would only be satisfied whenever they would have achieved the specified learning outcomes. These are students that usually obtain good marks. On the other hand, the nature of assessment is essential for those students whose prime aim is just to get a degree, and that are driven by the reward system, a pass or a mark. Their learning depends on the knowledge, competences and capacities required to perform well at assessment.

There is a clear analogy with quality assurance, be it of an institution or a programme. There are institutions, usually reference setting, that define their own goals and standards, and those that are concerned with what is required to have a positive evaluation report and benefit from its reward system, be it material or just recognition.

5. Missions, objectives and reward systems

As the student assessment has to be aligned with the learning outcomes to effectively ensure that students achieve these outcomes, the evaluation and reward system has to be aligned with whatever is the notion of quality of an HEI. This raises the issue of defining or identifying quality and, as several authors have concluded [Newton 2007], the concept of quality is elusive or slippery. Newton [2007] argues for "the relative nature of quality: relative to stakeholders, context, and to the particular quality assurance mechanisms (...)". In any case, evaluation must be based on some sort of criteria, be it objective or subjective.

In the analogy, the learning outcomes were equated with institutional missions and objectives. If achieving them implies alignment with the evaluation criteria, the issue to be addressed is by whom or how are missions and objectives defined. They may not be defined just by institutions themselves, as it would lend to the definition of what is achievable and allow for institutions below acceptable standards. But they may not be defined only externally and be the same for all HEIs, as this would tend to hamper creativity and diversity, as well as the capacity to adapt to specific contexts and situations. If evaluation has to accommodate for each institution's specificities, then criteria cannot include just fixed and quantitative indicators. As decontextualised assessment is only adequate to assess declarative knowledge, not the performance in complex contexts, institution or programmes' evaluation must take into consideration the context, including socio-economic environment and the student population.

However important may be the evaluation for internal purposes, as self improvement, it is also important for society in general, for candidates, for partners, etc., and it is usually associated with a reward system. The reward may be accreditation or a statements of quality by credible entities, contributing to public or peer recognition, or even prestige, but may also imply the capacity to get funds for its activities. This puts an obvious pressure on most institutions to comply and excel in those aspects that carry more weight on the results of the evaluation procedure, eventually sacrificing others.

If a balanced result is to be achieved and all missions of the institutions are to be valued, they must have correspondence in the evaluation and reward processes. As in the assessment of students, if part of the syllabus is not assessed or does not count for the final mark, it will be put aside by most students. This implies that not only the evaluation process, the criteria and procedures, are important, but also how its results are used.

6. Rankings

Rankings may be analysed in the light of last section. They are based upon a limited number of criteria or indicators, as these must exist for a large number of institutions. Criteria are defined by some entity external to the HEIs. The process may classified as an evaluation, but, due to the limited and fixed set of indicators, it supposes a schematic and caricatural type of HEI and does not have any room to consider the missions and objectives of each concrete HEI.

An official ranking, produced by a government agency or equivalent, may carry more weight than one produced by a private organisation. In this latter case, the reward is essentially related to the acceptance the ranking receives from public and peers. And this acceptance is associated both with who promotes the ranking and on producing plausible results. That is, a ranking that would relegate reference setting universities to low places and put in the first places little known HEIs, would certainly not be recognised as credible. In short, it has to be correlated with prestige to be accepted and reinforces that prestige, producing a positive feedback loop.

To go up the ranking, an institution has to improve on those criteria that have contributed to place prestigious HEIs in the first places. At first reading, this suggests emulating good HEIs (in the sense that they have wide prestige) and seems to be positive. There are, however, two snags: the indicators are limited and one would be emulating a caricature that does not ensure that all aspects would be to the same standard as the reference institutions; and it tends to produce similar HEIs and higher education systems require diverse institutions, in order to respond to diverse publics and contexts.

7. Conclusion

The final report of the QAHECA Project [EUA 2009] puts forward, as a first recommendation, that "quality assurance must be context sensitive", taking "into account disciplinary characteristics, various organisational cultures, the historical position of the institution as well as the national context". The second one is that "quality assurance processes (…) should aim at enhancing the institutions' capacity to change in order to reach the strategic goals of each institution better". This implies taking into consideration the diversity of contexts in which institutions operate and value the adequacy and creativity of the responses that institutions give.

On the other hand, rankings, as are based upon limited, widely available, criteria and indicators, tend to define, as a reference, a standardised and caricatural type of HEI. Furthermore, to be widely accepted, they must produced results that are consistent with preconceived ordering of HEIs quality. As a consequence, they tend to hamper creativity and diversity.

Institutional missions and objectives must be diverse to respond to higher education purposes and to accommodate diverse publics and contexts. If creativity of HEI is to be fostered, the evaluation process and the associated rewards must value creative processes and adapt to diversity. For each HEI to pursue its own specific missions and objectives, its organisation and procedures and the evaluation and reward systems should both be aligned with them.

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Issues for discussion:

- *Do reward systems, associated with external evaluation, influence HEIs missions and objectives? To what extent?*

- *May rankings hamper creativity and diversity of HEIs?*

- *Are the conclusions drawn from the analogy with the education of students, relevant? (See table)*

Topic	*Education of students*	*Quality Assurance*	*Consequences for QA processes*
Goal	*Learning outcomes*	*Institutional missions and objectives*	*Different institutions have diverse missions and objectives*
Means	*Teaching and learning*	*Organisation and procedures*	*Diverse missions and objectives require different forms of organisation and different procedures*
Evaluation	*Student Assessment (formative or summative)*	*Evaluation (without or with reward)*	*Evaluation must be consistent with the diverse missions and objectives*
Reward	*Mark, pass, fail, diploma*	*Reward system (e.g. accreditation)*	*Rewards must be designed to direct institutions towards fulfilling their missions*
Motivation	*Personal and/or assessment driven*	*Institutional and/or reward driven*	*Reward systems must induce or reinforce motivation to achieve missions and objectives*
Type of evaluation	*Decontextualised assessment*	*Indicators*	*Standardised indicators alone, do not give information on adequacy of institutional responses*
	Performance assessment	*Evaluation in context*	