

**Reflection from the higher education institutions' point of view:
Accreditation and quality culture**

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“If we all think alike, we are not thinking”. This quote, from a very unlikely source – none other than General Patton – will provide the theme for my intervention.

Most of the time, evaluation procedures are presented as promoting either accountability or improvement or both. While these two purposes are important, I would like to focus attention on the steering aspect of quality assurance. As we know, quality assurance mechanisms can be used by governments to put pressure on institutions to take account of political priorities. Similarly, quality assurance mechanisms can be used by universities themselves to steer internally the institution.

If we agree with the steering function for quality assurance, then the key question becomes steering toward what? Do we have a clear idea of the kind of university we want for the 21st century and are quality assurance mechanisms adapted to that goal?

None of us has a crystal ball that would allow us to peer into the future but we do know that, considering the long history of higher education, disciplinarity has been an organising feature of universities for only a relatively short time (mostly in the 19th and 20th centuries). We also know that intellectual creativity requires a certain degree of interdisciplinarity and that this trend is increasing.

What kind of evaluation procedure would promote intellectual creativity and take into account the fact that universities are complex institutions that at the same time produce and disseminate knowledge?

To answer this question it is important to raise first two key questions: Who are our students? What kinds of graduates do we want for the future?

Our students today come from a variety of backgrounds and have a variety of learning needs. They differ in terms of social class, educational attainment, age and goals for their education. This diversity needs to be embraced by institutions, across the whole of national systems and the European higher education area. Teachers need to be sensitive to the intellectual starting point of their students and build from there. We need a variety of teaching methods and teaching material. We need to match the variety of learners with a corresponding variety of teachers. This diversity has been recognised by national quality assurance agencies in Europe that have adopted, by and large, a fitness for purpose approach.

Increased Europeanisation and internationalisation, however, could lead, if we are not careful, to standardisation in the name of transparency. I shall return to the challenge of Europeanisation and internationalisation later on. For now, I would like to stress that if we want a democratic system of higher education that ensures access for the greatest numbers, then whatever quality assurance system we develop for the future will need to be flexible and embrace this diversity. This does not mean “dumbing down” but accepting that institutions will cater for different learners and will need to be judged on the basis of learning outcomes and the value-added dimension of education in the context of their specific student population.

We need, however, to approach the evaluation of teaching and learning with a certain degree of humility. In a seminal article, Professor Martin Trow, who has devoted his long and distinguished academic life to studying higher education policies, demonstrated the difficulties in assessing teaching and learning in higher education. He concluded that: “The real and substantial effects of the experience of higher education extend over the whole lifetime of graduates, and are inextricably entwined with other forces and experiences beyond the walls and the reach of universities” (Trow 1996). Trow suggests that we focus instead on the capacity for institutions to change: “How an institution responds to change points to deep-seated qualities of the unit which must also show up in its research and teaching.” (Trow 1994)

Second, what kind of graduates do we want? We want them to have the flexibility to adapt, to learn in formal and non-formal situations – at work and in the classrooms – to be good problem solvers and to think creatively and imaginatively. A knowledge base, grounded in a discipline, is important to develop these capacities but it is not sufficient. Above all, our graduates need to learn how to think. This is how employers ultimately will judge them. “If we all think alike, we are not thinking” but we all need to think well.

None of this is new to any of us. How often, however, does the quality assurance debate focus on these fundamental considerations? The quality assurance debate, as John Brennan noted, is really about power. It is a question of how quality is defined and by whom. The question of purposes beyond considerations of accountability and improvement is rarely taken into account. Because it is about power, quality assurance procedures can induce distortions that are not necessarily in the best interests of students, graduates, employers or society at large.

If we want, as I hope we do, to promote a higher education system that is characterised by three V’s – vibrancy, vitality, variety – are programme evaluations and subject reviews the best or only way forward?

My answer will not surprise you. For me, methods organised along disciplinary lines are indicative that we are evaluating the university of the past rather than that of the future; that – by focusing on its constituent parts – we are not promoting the institution of the 21st century.

An institution is not an aggregate of departments. It is really more than the sum of its parts. The best universities succeed because they provide students, teachers and researchers with an environment – an intellectual community – that promotes debate and critical thinking. In addition, these institutions consider the experience of students as a whole – inside and outside the classroom – and consider globally the professional roles of academic staff rather than focus on this or that aspect.

If we want vibrancy, vitality and variety in our institutions, should we not take steps to ensure that our quality evaluation procedures match these aims? Should we not allow for a certain degree of chaos and interdisciplinarity to promote creativity and innovation?

If we want vibrancy, vitality and variety among our teachers should we not consider their role globally in terms of its teaching, research and service dimensions rather than evaluate separately each aspect?

If we want vibrancy and vitality for our diverse student population, should we not take account of their global experience and evaluate institutions as a whole rather than their constituent parts?

The Tuning project, along with similar exercises, is important in allowing academics to take stock of recent developments in their field, compare what they are doing and fine-tune their teaching. The Tuning project is also considering learning outcomes in terms of the question I raised at the start: What kind of graduates do we want? There is, however, a temptation that I would urge governments to resist: that the results of such discussions end up as a blueprint for evaluations. The attending risk is to prevent change in the name of standards and that, once these are codified, they will lag hopelessly behind state of the art knowledge.

Similarly, it is important to create a common structure for degrees and to define level indicators for the BA/MA but in a way that will not stifle learning, learners and teachers. Again, “If we all think alike, we are not thinking”. I would argue that we need to create a “constructive ambiguity” or, to quote Peter Williams, provide us with a map rather than a route.

I would also submit that we need to pause every now and then to examine the unintended consequences of our policies. For instance, is ECTS achieving the goal of increasing student mobility? It appears that in some circumstances it achieves the opposite result. If the combination of ECTS and the new BA/MA structure is applied too rigidly, it can actually block rather than promote students’ exchange. It is the same with quality procedures.

The recent UK developments have shown the limitations of an approach that was perceived as too intrusive. A quality assurance system that is perceived as creating work instead of creating quality will not yield the anticipated results. It induces compliance and window dressing. One of the parting shots in the UK battle around quality assurance was an article that appeared in the *Guardian*, written by economists from Warwick

University, who exposed frankly and clearly how they played around the evaluation procedures to get a perfect score. Ultimately, their compliance serves no one: not the students, not governments, and not the institutions themselves.

In addition, the analysis of the impact of quality assurance demonstrates that a subject or programme focus will generally reinforce power at the basic unit level – e.g., a highly evaluated department can use these results to consolidate its power within the institution in a way that could prevent a cohesive institutional strategy from developing. An institutional focus of evaluation, however, will tend to strengthen power at the institutional level, encourage institutions to develop an internal quality culture and meet better the goal of having a dynamic higher education sector (Brennan and Shah 2000).

A key condition for achieving a “constructive ambiguity” lies in preserving the autonomy of institutions. Simply put, for intellectual reasons, it would be best if we did not try to regulate all aspects of knowledge whether in its production or dissemination phase. Universities need to be responsible for what goes on inside their walls. They need to assure internally the quality of their activities and then be accountable for the mechanisms they have put in place to ensure that quality. In other words, institutional audits are the reasonable way in which we can assure reasonable accountability while maintaining reasonable institutional autonomy.

Subject and programme reviews reach deeply into the institutions, and, in addition, can be extremely costly – especially for large countries and for countries in economic difficulties. It is the university's responsibility to ensure that all of its core activities, all of its faculties, departments and programmes are of quality. This can be done rigorously and objectively with the help of external reviewers.

For institutional audits to be meaningful, however, universities must be encouraged to take responsibility for their quality. EUA will launch this year, with generous funding support from the European Commission, a project to introduce and develop a quality culture in institutions. The project will result in benchmarks of good practice in the area of internal quality.

The issue of quality is foremost on our agenda as evidenced by the fact that it constituted the topic of the first policy position of the new association and will be the topic of our first general assembly in April. We firmly believe that without internal quality processes, quality assurance can turn into a game of window dressing. Universities must take ownership of this process. It is only when they will, that the important role played by external quality agencies would be fulfilled. It is only then, that accountability can play fully its function.

I would like to return now to the issue of Europeanisation and internationalisation, which can constitute a challenge to quality assurance as we know it. The internationalisation issue was put forward in Europe by the then-CRE which presented a year ago the result of an exploratory project on accreditation as a way to deal with the internationalisation of higher education. Many of you know that the project outcomes were challenged by a

diversity of actors. One of the arguments that are often presented by both the academic and the quality assurance communities is that the effect of internationalisation is so weak at the moment that it does not require us to do anything new or different in quality assurance. Be this as it may, we are still left with an important driver for change – the Bologna process and the likely impact it will have on national quality assurance frameworks.

The message from Prague was clear: we need to find a solution to increase transparency, to facilitate the mobility of students, staff and professionals, and to promote the competitiveness of Europe. There are only 16 months left to find a solution – one that will be suitable to over thirty countries and a multiplicity of actors – a very short time for a very challenging problem; a challenging problem from both an academic as well as a policy point of view.

Several solutions are being explored at the moment. We hope to continue to contribute to these discussions and it is in that spirit that I have given here an academic point of view.

Namely, because quality assurance has a steering effect at both system and institutional levels, we must carefully consider our options: institutional audits or subject/programme reviews? So far, this question was posed nationally. Now we must pose it in the context of the European higher education area. As I stated earlier, we believe that an institutional audit approach is the preferred course of action for five reasons:

- (i) for intellectual reasons,
- (ii) to respect the autonomy of institutions,
- (iii) to promote a dynamic higher education sector,
- (iv) to allow for greater efficiencies, and
- (v) to adopt a comprehensive point of view that takes into account the whole of the institution, the global experience of students and the full role of academic staff.

We realise fully well that, for governments, students and their parents, subject or programme reviews seem more concrete. What I wanted to do, however, is to present an option that would be less costly, more efficient and more respectful of the academic endeavour and the academic community.

I would like to conclude with Martin Trow's recommendation that we need to re-establish trust and confidence among us all, and shall end with his cautionary words, written seven years ago but still ringing true today:

“A stress on trust as a key element in the relation of society to higher education in no way implies turning a blind eye on the shortcomings of academics and their institutions; it does center our attention on the question of who is responsible for what. There are of course in every country many pathologies of academic life... But this is a problem for a department or a university to deal with, monitored by

external audits of its internal reviews... Trying to reach it from the outside may cause more problems than it cures.” (Trow 1996)

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