Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Comparison of Eight Systems

Key Messages

- **Quality in higher education is difficult to measure. Incentives to improve (or not) are often different for public and private institutions, and approaches to quality assurance have to be adapted to different situations.**

- **Poland is reforming its higher education institutional framework and the World Bank conducted a review, comparing strategies followed by (largely) OECD countries with regard to quality assessment, to help the country assess educational services at its higher education institutions.**

- **Based on the research, some of the most comprehensive quality assessment frameworks for public universities were found in the Irish, Scottish and Hong Kong educational systems; for private universities, the Austrian and Swiss systems present interesting examples.**

Introduction

The Government of Poland (GoP) is currently engaged in reforming its higher educational institutional framework and sought World Bank assistance in assessing the quality of educational services at its higher education institutions (HEIs), specifically post-graduate courses and training. The World Bank prepared a study describing and comparing strategies followed by (largely) OECD countries in regard to quality assessment, with the purpose of identifying best

practices in evaluating, teaching and learning in all types of HEIs, private and public, vocational and research-oriented, and for traditional students as well as for second-chance or lifelong learners.

Issues in and Approaches to Quality Assessment in Higher Education

Quality in higher education is inherently difficult to measure. Unlike the manufacturing sector, the production function in education is much more complex and results are often not readily discernible in a timely, objective or useful manner. The field of quality assurance in higher education is still in a state of adolescence, with varying and shifting approaches and confusion in both objectives and terminology. Incentive structures for improving (or not improving) quality also generally differ between public and private institutions.

Common approaches to quality assurance in higher education are generally classified as **summative** (that is, entail a judgment regarding whether an institution is meeting certain criteria) or **formative** (that is, encourage an institution to identify its own strengths and deficiencies and develop plans to address the latter). Approaches currently in use include: a) minimum standard accreditation; b) accreditation of excellence; c) supportive evaluation; d) audits of internal quality assurance processes; e) comparative evaluation of the state of a discipline; f) benchmarking between institutions; and g) rankings, such as those established by the Center for World-Class Universities and the Institute of Higher Education of Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

While **summative** approaches such as accreditation are both common and popular, they are often tricky to apply well at reasonable cost. Decisions must be made whether to accredit an institution and/or a program, with differing criteria and levels of expertise needed for each choice. Criteria chosen are often proxies for quality, and since accreditation implies either a reward or sanction, institutions are encouraged to "put on their best face," rather than be up front about weaknesses and plans to address them.

The traditional criticism of **formative** approaches is that they do not entail clear penalties and are only marginally based on objective criteria of quality. This criticism is mitigated by the fact that it is difficult to identify objective criteria for **both** summative or formative evaluations and that in practice, penalties under summative approaches tend to be infrequently applied. Formative approaches are also clearly superior at promoting improvement. Considering the relative advantages and disadvantages of both approaches, it appears that no single or rigid approach is best. Rather, the methodology employed should be adapted to different types of institutions and situations.

Overall, a good quality assurance system should do three things:

- Ensure that HEIs and programs satisfy at least a minimum level of quality in order to protect students.
- Contribute to the improvement of all institutions and programs, whatever their level, and encourage HEIs to develop their own internal quality culture.
- Fulfill both of the objectives above at a reasonable cost, which should not exceed the estimated benefits of the quality improvements.

A further issue in designing quality assessment systems is the question of who does the assessments - the HEIs themselves, external agencies, or governments? It is widely agreed that quality assurance and quality improvement are a shared responsibility between HEIs and quality assurance agencies (and in many cases governments), although there are widely diverging views regarding who should have the leading role. The chosen solution depends on the degree of trust governments have in their HEIs to guarantee at least a minimum level of quality or to make permanent efforts to improve. The perceived independence of quality assurance agencies from influence, both from governments and HEIs, also affects their credibility.

Comparison of Seven Countries and one Cross-Country System

In order to systematically analyze a range of country quality assurance systems, four criteria were drawn from the methodologies outlined above. They were:

- The object and nature (formative or summative) of evaluation.
- The relative role of HEIs, agencies and governments.
- The consequences and impact of decisions and/or recommendations.
- The costs of HEI quality assurance systems in relation to the expected benefits.

A sample of HEI quality assurance systems from different countries was then selected. The systems described range from institution-centered and/or formative systems to others that are agency-driven and often require certification of some kind. This sample was chosen as representative of the possibilities - not all systems are necessarily good or even sustainable. A summary of findings for each of the systems examined is presented below.

The **Swiss system** is a hybrid. It requires a strict accreditation procedure for private institutions eligible for federal support, based on predefined criteria. The system is relatively flexible, however, in that it encourages public universities to develop their own rigorous internal quality improvement culture.

Historically, the **German system** has endeavored to accredit all programs of study - a gigantic task that is also questionable from a scientific and didactic perspective. Moreover, the system is very agency-centered and, therefore, does not sufficiently encourage HEIs to make improvements on their own. Recent reforms have moved the system toward a less agency-driven and more formative approach.

The **French system** is comprehensive - it looks at the governance, management and quality assurance systems of institutions; covers the performance of research units (departments, institutes, laboratories); and examines the quality of all teaching and learning programs. The institutional framework has a weakness, however, in that it is mainly agency-driven and does not sufficiently encourage quality improvement. Institutions and units are under pressure to receive good marks and, therefore, do not openly acknowledge weaknesses or take advantage of external support to work towards improvements.

The **Irish system** is probably the most comprehensive within the sample and is largely institution-driven. The law makes it compulsory for institutions to develop rigorous internal systems of evaluation and improvement of teaching and learning, research, outreach at the level of departments, as well as the efficacy of university services. The law, however, also requires evaluations of these internal quality assurance measures on a regular basis by an external agency. Overall, the Irish system presents an interesting and efficient division of responsibilities for quality assurance, making institutions responsible for the quality of all their services but also making sure that they take their responsibilities seriously.

The **Scottish system** is based on the same principles as the Irish system, where the objective is to make institutions responsible for promoting improvements. The primary difference is that in Scotland, the main system is focused on teaching and learning, research being evaluated through other channels. The system is quite well developed, and for those interested mainly in improving teaching and learning at the Bachelors and Masters levels in public and private institutions, it is worth examining closely.

The **Austrian system** has in place a partial system of accreditation of universities. It contributes to creating more transparency in the private sector by determining which universities should be allowed to call themselves 'private universities'. The system is therefore clearly summative and agency-led. It contributes indirectly to improving quality by fixing the minimum quality standards for accreditation; however, the internal quality processes imposed as criteria for accreditation remain very superficial.

The **EUA institutional evaluation program** was set up to serve European University Association (EUA) members and help HEIs, on a voluntary basis, to measure where they are regarding governance, capacity for change and quality assurance. Universities write self-evaluation reports, including SWOT analyses. Visiting panels of five experts (including a student) then judge the self-evaluation reports and make recommendations. The impact of EUA evaluations nevertheless depends very much on the institutions, which are free to ignore the reports or actively follow-up on the experts' recommendations. The best aspect of the EUA system is that it is quite good in promoting a dynamic of change and quality improvement.

The **Hong Kong system** reflects influences from Australia, New Zealand and the United States, and emphasizes the responsibility of institutions in promoting quality in teaching and learning. It also emphasizes the supportive role of national agencies which, in the case of Hong Kong, is the Quality Assurance Council of the University Grants Committee. The approach to quality stems from the recognition that HEIs in Hong Kong have distinct and varied missions. Therefore, the system does not attempt to straitjacket institutions through a single set of quality standards or objectives, but recognizes that each institution has its own objectives appropriate to its mission.
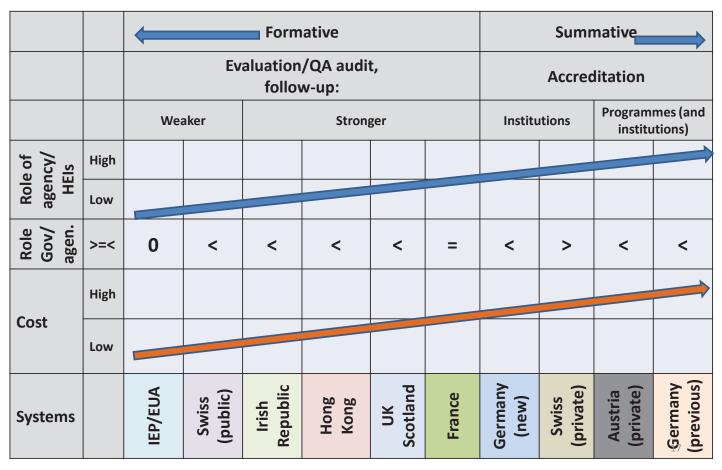
Conclusion

A number of "best practice" lessons can be garnered from this review of different national quality assurance systems for HEIs.

- First, a robust quality assessment system should examine the strategies followed by an HEI in the light of the HEI's intended purposes.

- Second, quality assessment should focus on quality assurance processes more than on pre-defined criteria.

- Third, the system should be as much institution-driven as agency-driven, which means that internal quality assurance procedures are an important element of quality assurance.

- Fourth, the system should be as light as possible - it should push the concerned HEI to do a great part of the work.

- Finally, the system should be adapted to the types of HEIs in the country. The higher the standard of an institution - as measured by the quality of its research performance, staff and students - the more advisable it is that quality assurance be conducted internally by the institution itself.

The systems which seem to satisfy the above-mentioned conditions are the Irish, Scottish and Hong Kong systems, at least for public universities. For private universities, the Austrian and Swiss systems are worth examining with respect to accreditation.

Summary of System Types

		Formative ←					Summative →			
		Evaluation/QA audit, follow-up:					Accreditation			
		Weaker		Stronger				Institutions	Programmes (and institutions)	
Role of agency/ HEIs	High									
	Low									
Role Gov/ agen.	>=<	0	<	<	<	<	=	<	>	<	<
Cost	High										
	Low										
Systems		IEP/EUA	Swiss (public)	Irish Republic	Hong Kong	UK Scotland	France	Germany (new)	Swiss (private)	Austria (private)	Germany (previous)

Source: Powerpoint Presentation on Higher Education Quality Assurance by Dr. Luc Weber, Poland, May 2010.

About the Author
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