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## QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE LINK TO INTERNATIONALISATION (1)

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### Quality and internationalisation: a problem definition

Internationalisation of higher education seems to be strongly related to the aim to improve the quality of higher education. The idea that internationalisation should not be seen as an end in itself but as a means for quality enhancement has been the basis of many policy documents. In the 1980s publications of the OECD presented the quality perspective in particular in relation to the expected qualitative impact of the presence of foreign students on the teaching and learning process and on the institution's curriculum and services (Ebuchi, 1989). In the Maastricht Treaty (1992) the articles which provide the basis for Community action in higher education reflect the aim of improving the quality of education through co-operation between the member states of the European Union. Also national policies for internationalisation of higher education generally display the quality objective (Kalvermark & Van der Wende, 1997) and so do many institutional policy documents on internationalisation.

Statements on the relationship between internationalisation and quality are usually based on the assumption or expectation that international co-operation and the exchange of individual students, teachers or researchers add to the critical mass, allow for mutual learning, for a comparison and synthesis of best approaches and practices, for cross-cultural understanding, for foreign language acquisition, etc. It is at the individual, the project, the institutional and even the system level that this international co-operation and exchange is expected to contribute to the quality of processes and outcomes.

For most part it is indeed assumptions and expectations that we are talking about. Of course there is a lot of personal witnessing on both pro and contra examples of the impact of internationalisation on quality. However, one can often easily recognise the advocates of internationalisation in the positive and the sceptics in the negative examples. There is little evidence on what this relationship between internationalisation and quality means in reality. One reason for that is that empirical research in this area is scarce. Moreover, systematic monitoring or evaluation of internationalisation is in general quite weak and existing quality assurance systems in higher education often not adequately address internationalisation. Or in other words: although higher education is internationalising, it is still being assessed in the context of (almost strictly) nationally oriented quality assurance systems.

In the view of the above we can conclude that there is a paradox between the emphasis on quality as an important aim of internationalisation on the one hand and the lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation of the quality impact on the other. In addition, we should realise that besides the quality improvement aim, internationalisation of higher education may also have more or different aims. Increasingly, economic objectives play a role in the international activities of the higher education sector (Kalvermark & Van der Wende, 1997). These economic objectives may have a short term (increasing institutional fee income) or a long term (investment in international trade relationships) character. In the former case, we can talk about a higher education export perspective, which raises new questions with regard to quality. Is there for instance something like "export quality"?

### **Internationalisation processes and national contexts for quality assurance**

The fact that higher education is in general being assessed in the context of national systems, and that consequently little attention is being paid to its international dimension, is explained by various interrelated factors. The strong relationship between higher education and the nation state, the importance of public funding for the higher education sector and, related to that, the emphasis on accountability towards the public as an important function of quality assurance systems are such factors. However, these factors are changing rapidly, which is creating the tensions between internationalisation and quality assurance that we like to discuss in the section below.

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As a (logic) result of the internationalisation process, higher education is outgrowing its national context, including its quality assurance system as a part of that context. Related to the various ways in which internationalisation can be defined and understood, this process is taking place in various ways and to various extents, as will be described below.

- Internationalisation of higher education, in terms of the outcome of intended (governmental) policies aimed at making the nationally based system of higher education more international by integrating international elements into the teaching, research and service functions, introduces new elements into higher education such as co-operation, exchange and internationalised curricula. Besides bi-lateral cooperation and mobility schemes, multi-lateral initiatives, such as the programmes of the European Union (e.g. SOCRATES and LEONARDO, but also the EC-US, EC-Canada, EC-Japan programmes, etc.) also provide an important basis for the development of this type of international activities. It is important to note that these initiatives are based on agreements between countries, while fully respecting the national basis of the system and the sovereignty of the nation state in the governance of the higher education system.

International elements introduced by this type of internationalisation are in general expected to contribute to the quality and the competitiveness of the system and its outcomes at the various levels, as described above. Furthermore, these elements are becoming structural characteristics of the higher education system in many countries. However, quality assurance systems and procedures generally do not include or address these elements adequately and thus become incomplete or insufficient.

- De-nationalisation of higher education refers to a number of processes causing or facilitating the expansion of higher education systems across borders. First of all we should note the changing balance in the control of higher education systems. As introduced by Clark (1983) in his triangle of coordination in higher education, the forces of academic oligarchy, state authority and market demand interact with each other to give shape and direction to academic work in national systems of higher education. In many countries, governments have introduced deregulation policies and concepts like "steering at a distance" at the favour of more institutional autonomy and stronger market influences (Dill and Sporn 1995, Goedegebuure et al., 1994). Furthermore, increasing competition, globalisation and decreasing public funds for higher education make that higher education institutions are motivated to expand their activities across the borders of

the nation state. Examples of this type of internationally entrepreneurial universities can in particular be found in countries like the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. These universities do not only attract many fee paying foreign students, they also operate actively overseas through branch campuses, franchised programmes, etc. Finally, the role of information and communication technology (ICT) should be mentioned. ICT facilitates the transnational delivery through a new type of distance learning programmes and thus the export of higher education on a large scale and to a virtual and borderless world.

International strategies and activities resulting from the de-nationalisation of higher education usually exceed the restrictions of existing quality assurance systems. Consequently, a proper assessment of international programmes and overseas activities has to be organised in a separate way. Furthermore, these developments may influence the various functions of quality assurance systems (e.g. the accountability function in relation to new money flows from international income and funding) and raise questions about responsibility and other legal issues (e.g. in the case of virtual universities).

- Regionalisation of higher education, in terms of the cross-border cooperation between two or more neighboring states, as is for instance developed in the Nordic countries and between the Netherlands and adjacent countries i.e. Belgium (Flanders) and Germany (Bremen, Lower Saxony and Nordrhein Westfalen), introduces a new type of international co-operation. This type of regional cooperation has been labeled: "large scale sub-continental cooperation between economically comparable regions" (Race, 1997) (see Race, 1997 for other types and definitions of regional cooperation in higher education). Here the emphasis is not so much on exchange but on structural co-operation at the educational and administrative level, with the aim to make the systems on both sides of the border more responsive to the needs of the regional labour market and to enhance mutual access and complementarity. Joint programmes and degrees are being developed and the sharing of human resources, cross-border coordination of educational provisions and ultimately even mergers of institutions are not excluded in the future.

In this case, initiatives face different quality assurance systems, as they exist in the co-operating countries. These systems either have to be adjusted, a choice has to be made between them, or a mix of them of something completely new has to be developed.

The above presented examples demonstrate various (but certainly not all possible) ways in which current quality assurance systems are being challenged by internationalisation. It has occurred that although higher education may still be nationally based, it can no longer be considered as nationally bound. Consequently, systems for quality assurance which are nationally limited in reach and scope do no longer satisfy. In general the domestic process for quality assurance was historically not intended to serve an international purpose. But the internationalisation of higher education is forcing it at least to consider matters beyond its borders. Furthermore, as stressed by Peace Lenn (1994) and others, there tends to be little coordination between those bodies formally involved in assuring quality in higher education and those which promote internationalisation.

The question now is, how this disparity should be resolved. Should national quality assurance systems pay more and better attention to internationalisation, should quality assurance systems themselves be internationalised, or should they be replaced by completely different mechanisms? And who is to take the initiative and to have the responsibility? Is it the national or the supranational government, the institutions, independent organisations or "the market"?

### **Various dimension in the relationship between quality and internationalisation**

From the above it occurs that there are various dimensions in the relation between internationalisation and quality assurance. The first is the quality assurance of international activities and related to that the question whether this should at all be done by existing quality assurance systems or by adapted versions of them. The second refers to the internationalisation of quality assurance systems themselves. In many discussions and documents these two dimensions are being mixed or confused.

Additionally it is often argued that increasingly higher education institutions will have to respond to international standards and criteria for quality. This is again a different dimension, as it would not necessarily imply the internationalisation of programmes nor that of quality assurance systems themselves.

Finally, a very important dimension is that of the contribution of internationalisation to the quality of higher education. This issue is strongly related to the quality improvement aim of internationalisation as described in the first part of this article, and to the question whether this aim is better being achieved by internationalisation. However, it is probably the most difficult topic to assess and it should be considered rather as an object for research than for quality assurance. And then again many problems

would remain related to definitions (e.g. of quality) and methodology (difficulties of experimental design and attribution). Furthermore, it can be argued that internationalization can never contribute to the quality of higher education when the internationalization activities are not of good quality themselves.

### **Quality assurance of internationalization**

Over the past few years, the awareness of the importance of quality assurance of internationalization strategies and activities has emerged in a number of countries and various attempts to evaluate and assure this quality can be noted. It occurs that quite many of these initiatives have a "bottom up" character and have been undertaken by institutions or by groups of institutions. Although national governments and agencies may have concerns regarding the international activities of higher education institutions, it seems that their initiatives in this domain are in general quite limited, both in numbers and scope. This may well be related to the blurring effect of the internationalisation process on the role of national governments and agencies and their relationship with higher education institutions, and on the accountability function of quality assurance systems. At the same time, an enhanced emphasis on the transparency function of quality assurance systems can be observed, as employers and students need to be able to evaluate the quality of foreign courses and qualifications. This introduces the concept of consumer protection as an important new perspective and responsibility for governments regarding the quality of internationalised higher education.

### **Internationalisation of quality assurance**

Besides initiatives concerning the international cooperation and information sharing between associations, agencies and institutions responsible for quality assurance such as the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), a number of interesting projects have been undertaken in recent years. Besides one project initiated at the supranational level (the EU pilot project for evaluating quality in higher education), also here many "bottom up" initiatives have been identified. They originate from international networks of quality assurance agencies, and from international associations, consortia or networks of higher education institutions. Important is also the role of professional organisations in this context. Motivated by the increasing international mobility of professionals and facilitated by regional and global trade agreements which concern the international trade in professional services, they initiate far-reaching agreements on mutual recognition of professional qualifications and on international quality standards, and actively support the development

of international accreditation practices. Based on similarities between various quality assurance systems, it has been argued that multiple accreditation on a regional and eventually global accreditation will occur in the near future. However, from other perspectives and experiences it occurred that a number of problems related to differences in cultural and academic traditions have to be taken seriously into account. This may imply that in areas and disciplines with a strong influence from the professional field, developments towards internationalisation of quality assurance (e.g. international accreditation) may be more rapid and easy, than in more academically oriented disciplines which lack such an influence, and in which case cultural factors and different academic traditions and concepts of quality are probably less easy to overcome.

### **Future directions**

It is to be hoped that progress in the area of quality assurance of internationalisation and in that of internationalisation of quality assurance will converge at a point where both the scope and the methodology of quality assurance will be international. This would mean an approach to quality assurance that takes the international dimension and elements of higher education explicitly into account, that is internationally applicable, and of which the outcomes can be internationally recognised. In order to achieve this point, at least two important conditions have to be fulfilled. In the first place, and as stated by Scott (1996), institutions should make internationalisation explicit, and develop clear institutional strategies on it. This in order to internalise it and to create a sense of ownership. Only in this way a shared responsibility for quality assurance and improvement can be achieved. Secondly, the coordination between those organisations involved in quality assurance of higher education and those which promote internationalisation should be encouraged and enhanced.

### **The Internationalisation Quality Review Project**

In the light of these two conditions, the project on the Internationalisation Quality Review Process (IQRP) undertaken by the IMHE programme of the OECD and the Academic Cooperation Association is an interesting initiative and a major step forward. IQRP encourages institutions to make their internationalisation strategies explicit, to review them in their own right and to search for improvement. The process combines self evaluation and peer review. Obviously the composition of a review team is international. Furthermore, it is the first international level project which combines the perspectives of quality assurance of internationalisation and internationalisation of quality assurance. And finally it has

been undertaken by two organisations, which bring together extensive expertise in the fields of quality assurance and internationalisation of higher education.

More information on the IQRP project may be obtained from: The IMHE Secretariat, 2, Rue Andre Pascal, 75775 Paris Cedex 16, France, tel: 33-1-45249201, or fax: 33-1-42240211.

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**Biodata**

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1 - This paper is a synthesis of an article which will under the same title be published by the OECD in a publication with the title: "Quality and the International Dimension in Higher Education Institutions" (forthcoming).