

Internationalization Processes and National Contexts for Quality Assurance

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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.

As a 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. 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.
- 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.
- 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). 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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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.

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.

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.