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Dr Manja Klemenčič, Harvard University
manjaklemencic@fas.harvard.edu
http://scholar.harvard.edu/manja_klemencic

A QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACCREDITATION BODIES BUILDING EVIDENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS AND INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY

I Emergence and strengthening of external quality assurance and independent accreditation bodies in higher education systems across the world

Most obvious global trend in QA across the world has been that external QA and independent accreditation bodies have been emerging or strengthening in most higher education systems across the world. In some regions, such as the European Area of Higher Education, the national QA and accreditation bodies created supranational platforms, such as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), which promotes cooperation in quality assurance and sharing of expertise, and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) in which national agencies which comply with the common standards are registered.

II Quality assurance and accreditation bodies changing the authority of state actors as “rule-setters” in higher education

As a consequence, we see re-ordering of the traditional forms of governance of higher education systems. These stronger and in some systems new quality assurance and accreditation bodies are developing new rules and monitoring activities in higher education systems, and that independently from the traditional regulatory frameworks of the state actors. Effectively, quality assurance and accreditation agencies are challenging the role of the state actors who have for long held monopoly for “rule-setting” in higher education. A new system of authority – as legitimate power – to decide on rules that shape higher education are emerging. Higher education is increasingly shaped by a combination of market forces and policy networks, which include state actors, stakeholder associations and quality assurance and accreditation bodies.

III Quality assurance and accreditation bodies have direct and significant influence on educational practices within higher education institutions

Quality assurance and accreditation bodies constitute a core force in the regulatory regimes in which accreditation is a crucial legitimacy device. They set the standards and guidelines for quality assurance and accreditation in higher education. Quality assurance bodies work with higher education institutions helping them implement the standards. Accreditation agencies certify compliance of degree-granting higher education institutions with the standards. In other words, accreditation agencies accredit higher education providers who award academic degrees, i.e. qualifications on successful completion of a course of study in higher education, including those offered on-line and those institutions offering various types of professional and vocational certificates. Quality assurance and accreditation bodies

thus have direct and significant effect on higher education practices at higher education institutions; in many ways they shape key operations at higher education institutions in a much more significant and uniform way than these are influenced by any state actor or by market forces. Again, as an example, the European Standards and Guidelines for Higher education and Europe have influenced the practices in higher education institutions with unprecedented speed and depth of reforms. For example, within a decade from when the first Standards and Guidelines were adopted, all accredited higher education institutions in Europe have some form of internal quality assurance structures and procedures.

IV More power and responsibility of quality assurance and accreditation bodies – but do they have capacity to effectively perform accountability function, to conduct public relations and to influence public policy?

In the US with long tradition in accreditation as well as in countries where independent accreditation bodies are only emerging these are gaining more power and more responsibility for ensuring quality of higher education. While their responsibilities are growing, the question emerges whether these bodies are also developing more capacity to deal with ever more complex accreditation and quality assurance tasks. On-line higher education requires different set of technical skills and competences for defining the standards and evaluating these as higher education provision in “brick and mortar” higher education institutions. There has been rapid growth of alternative and emerging higher education providers which also calls for reexamining the standards and evaluation procedures. A pending question is whether accreditation bodies will also accredit and certify education providers which offer various forms of certificates and badges rather than only degree-granting institutions. Equally, qualification frameworks are being reconsidered and new questions open up how to recognize various qualifications. These rapid and complex developments in higher education pose the question *whether quality assurance and accrediting bodies have sufficient capacity – human resources, research and development capabilities, and capabilities for knowledge mobilization and dissemination – to perform accountability function effectively.*

Furthermore, they have been continuous calls to accreditation bodies to more effectively communicate with the public. In particular, accreditation bodies were called to communicate better their work so as to offset the influence that ranking agencies and league tables have on public opinion regarding quality of higher education institutions. Again, do quality assurance and accreditation bodies *sufficient capacity to effectively perform public relations?*

Finally, quality assurance and accreditation bodies have unique expertise on higher education institutions under their jurisdiction, be that a specific region within a large country (such as New England in the US) or entire national higher education systems or global regions, such as the European Higher Education Area. Do they have *sufficient capacity to influence public policy?*

V National accrediting and quality assurance bodies should serve as repositories of all key data, information and research on their respective higher education systems – complementing or supplementing data repositories available from government offices

In my consultative work I often conduct reviews of performance and capabilities of national higher education systems. The first step in such a review is to gather all basic indicators and statistical data on

the respective national higher education systems. Unfortunately, such data is not always readily available within government offices. Sometimes it proves to be exceedingly difficult even to find out how many higher education institutions exist at a given point within the system. Such data should be openly and easily available at national accrediting bodies. Even if government departments responsible for higher education are efficient in gathering and publicizing all core data on higher education institutions and higher education system data, including statistics, key (up-to-date) legal and regulatory documents and studies, national accrediting bodies should still have such data in their repositories. In my experience, only some governments provide open access to such data on their government pages. More often than not, such information is not regularly updated, not even the lists of accredited higher education institutions (and study programs). More often than not it takes a lot of time for an interested party to gather such information from various sources – from national statistical offices to reports prepared by international organizations and donor agencies, such as UNESCO, OECD, World Bank.

VI National quality assurance and accreditation bodies should drive research and development on higher education in their regions and countries – build national R&D to support higher education policy-making and legislation

Many countries rely on international higher education consultants (and I am one of them) to assist them in developing higher education reform policies and new higher education legislation. Donor agencies are paying foreign research centers to conduct studies and analysis of higher education in some countries. I find it of utmost importance *to build indigenous – national - capacity in research and development into higher education, especially in developing countries where such is less frequent already*. In my experience, it is difficult to erect new research units within government departments responsible for higher education. Some countries have research centers on higher education within universities. These can be contracted by governments to conduct studies relevant for policy making. If such research centers exist, my advice would be that quality assurance and accreditation bodies partner with them and create operational “communities of practice”. Such partnerships could be responsible not only for conducting joint research, but also for development – for offer training and executive education to higher education practitioners. If such centers do not exist, then *quality assurance and accreditation bodies are perfectly placed to create research units within their own structures* and reach to the higher education institutions and national and international consultants, think tanks, research centers to help them build capacity. Pooling of resources and cooperative arrangements within several neighboring countries might alleviate the start-up challenges in this regard.

In sum, national quality assurance and accreditation bodies should not only perform the accountability function, but also build capacity for public relations and to feed evidence and shape public policy on higher education. To do so they have to create and make public repositories of all key data and information on higher education systems they serve: legal and regulatory texts, statistical data, accreditation results. They are also perfectly placed to develop indigenous research and development on higher education. They can and should also offer training and executive education to higher education professionals. They can and should develop communities of practice on various topics in higher education by bringing together all the different stakeholders in higher education. They can and should develop evidence and feed it into public policy processes.

B STRENGTHENING STUDENT VOICE IN QUALITY AND ACCREDITATION

Student voice movement over the past 15 years has argued that students have unique insights into higher education and that they should be given opportunities to shape their higher education. A global development in quality assurance worldwide has been to give student voice on quality of their higher education institution and to actively involve them in quality assurance. While practices differ greatly between countries and institutions, we see some universal trends. Students are involved in quality almost everywhere as source of data on student experience. Student surveys are a widespread instrument of quality assurance and a foremost tool for data collection on student experience in higher education. In recent years we see a visible shift in focus of these surveys from student satisfaction to student engagement which measures student behavior inside and outside the classroom.

European countries have gone much further in giving students a voice and active role in quality assurance and accreditation. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Europe, the key regulatory instrument in the European Higher Education Area, explicitly mention that students as internal stakeholders are jointly responsible for internal QA (standard 1.1), that they and other stakeholders should be involved in designing and continuous improvement of QA methodologies (ESG, 2015, Part 2), and that quality assurance agencies and accreditation bodies need to ensure involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work (ESG, 2015, Part 3).

Such level of formal rights and actual opportunities for students to participate in quality assurance is virtually unprecedented. Student representatives that are elected into student government and are considered legitimate representatives of student interests are best placed to voice student perspective in quality assurance. One necessary, however not sufficient condition, for this comes from the highly developed and professional student representative associations in European higher education institutions. Student governments have to follow principles of good governance, be autonomous – free from interference from political parties, governments, university officials, and seen as legitimate in the eyes of the student body. Furthermore, student leaders have to access to full information on higher education operations to be able to contribute fully to deliberations. If at all possible training on how to serve in quality assurance and accreditation bodies should be made available to student representatives either by student governments themselves or in cooperation with quality assurance and accreditation practitioners. Furthermore, student governments have to capture and address interests of various student groups (e.g. minority students, international students, first generation students, students with disabilities, etc.). Otherwise voices of these diverse groups of students need to be captured directly in the quality assurance and accreditation processes either through surveys, focal group meetings, student involvement in various relevant internal governing structures and processes.

Students can serve in many different ways in quality and accreditation: responding to student surveys and participating in focal group meetings or town hall discussions is only one way. Including students into committees, task forces or other ad hoc and permanent bodies responsible for internal quality assurance and accreditation is another way. Having student leaders involved in self-study (self-evaluation) as part of accreditation process should no longer be an option, but an imperative. Internal quality assurance bodies (or offices for institutional research) can invite students to participate in or conduct independent research on various issues concerning quality of their higher education

institutions. My students in the course SOCIOL 104 – Higher Education: institutions, inequalities and controversies have conducted research projects on various questions concerning studentship at Harvard as part of their course work. Their research findings are then distributed to various relevant university offices. Quality assurance and accreditation bodies should consider ways of involving student leaders in their evaluation panels and in governing structures.

Student contribution to quality and accreditation processes generates knowledge for more effective decisions concerning higher education policy and planning. Furthermore, giving students a visible role in quality and accreditation strengthens signals to them that their views matter to universities, that they are important members of decision processes, which raises their sense of responsibility to be involved. It prompts students to enact “university citizenship”. With more and different ways of involvement with and in their institutions, students strengthen their sense of belonging to the institution, their psychological ownership of the institution, both of which are critical for individual and collective student wellbeing.

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