Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Review of Literature

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present a general view and a brief literature review of the main aspects related to quality assurance in global higher education. It provides an overview of accreditation as a mechanism to ensure quality in higher education, examines models of QA, and explores the concept of quality. In addition, this paper provides a review of research on the effectiveness of quality assurance practices, with a particular focus on student involvement with quality assurance. In reviewing the concept of quality assurance itself, the author noted there is a need for a common framework for a quality assurance model; however, there is no agreement as to a QA definition or a QA model. Furthermore, although quality is the utmost significant concern for accrediting bodies, accreditation structures are decentralized and complex at both the regional and international level. Another challenge identified revolves around the concerns of faculty members and other stakeholders, such as students, about the QA process. Given that students are at the center of higher education, and invest time and money in the system, the author concludes involving them could improve QA processes.

Introduction

"What is important in knowledge is not quantity, but quality. It is important to know what is significant, what is less so, and what is trivial. –Leo Tolstoy

By 2025, the projected global demand for higher education could reach 263 million students, which is an increase from a little less than 100 million students in 2000 (Karaim, 2011, p. 551). This could represent an increase of 163 million students in 25 years (Karaim, 2011). As the demand for quality education increases, there is a growing demand for quality assurance (QA) for international universities where there is increased mobility of students, faculty, programs, and higher education institutions in global networks (Hou, 2012; Varonism, 2014). Quality assurance can be a driver for institutions to achieve excellence in higher education. However, ensuring that the quality of educational programs meets local and international standards simultaneously has become a great challenge in many countries (OECD & World Bank, 2007). Hence, a need emerges for cooperation of quality assurance agencies and acceptance of quality assurance review decisions.

In order to address this emerging need, a common framework for a quality assurance model would provide consistent assessment of learning design, content, and pedagogy (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2008). As shown in Figure 1, a conceptual model of quality assurance (QA)

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in higher education comprises several areas. As such, the aim of this paper is to examine the literature surrounding quality assurance in global higher education. It provides an overview of accreditation as a mechanism to ensure quality in higher education, examines models of QA, and explores the concept of quality. In addition, this paper provides a review of research on the effectiveness of quality assurance practices, with a particular focus on student involvement with quality assurance.
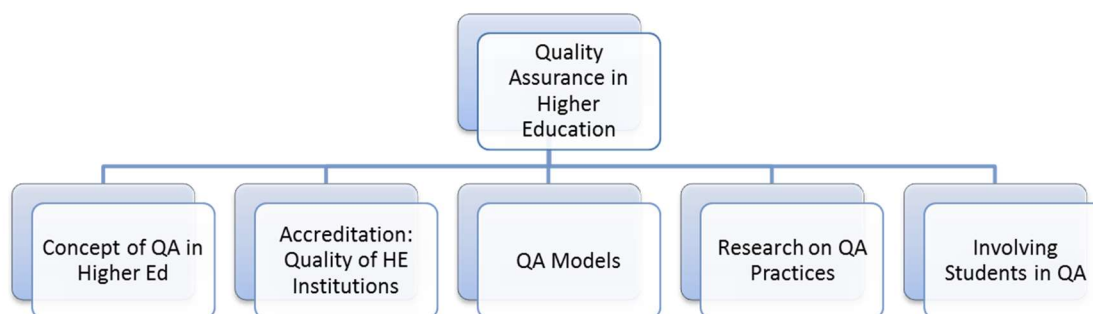

Figure 1. Quality assurance in higher education conceptual model.

The Concept of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Internationalization in higher education has resulted in "a growing demand for accountability and transparency . . . [which has] in turn led to a need to develop a quality culture, while addressing the challenges of globalized higher education" (Smidt, 2015, p. 626). In a practical sense, quality assurance reviews provide external, third party, independent, objective insights. Such reviews offer observations about partner institutions, products, programs, services, and processes, and they provide recommendations for improvement. Nonetheless, "the perception of quality assurance is very multi-dimensional and contextual and a gap exists in the view between professionals in quality assurance and academic staff and students" (Smidt, 2015, p. 626). Several key dimensions of quality in higher education include excellence, value, consistency, and meeting needs and expectations; yet no one quality assurance framework can address all aspects of quality, so choices are made about what kinds of quality are assessed (Harvey, 2014; Wilger, 1997).

A common framework for a quality assurance model would provide consistent assessment of learning design, content, and pedagogy (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2008). However, there are many disparate ways to characterize quality in education. According to Barnett (1992), there are two conceptions of quality in higher education. The first is tacit conceptions of value and intellectual property in academia. It is the character and quality of the contributions of higher education's members that are at issue rather than any outcomes. The other conception of quality is the performance conception, in which higher education is seen as a product with inputs and outputs. In this view, the quality of higher education is measured in terms of performance as captured in performance indicators. Another conception of quality in higher education is of faculty-student interaction (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Vincent, 1987).

The literature contains many different definitions of quality assurance in higher education. In examining definitions of quality, Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, and Crawford (2015) noted two main strategies for formulating definitions in the literature (p. 4-5). Some authors "construct a broad definition that targets one central goal or outcome" (Schindler et al, 2015; referencing Bogue, 1998; Harvey & Green, 1993). On the other hand, other definitions "identify specific indicators that reflect desired inputs (e.g., responsive faculty and staff) and outputs (e.g.,

employment of graduates)" (Schindler et al., 2015; referencing Barker, 2002; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi, & Leitner, 2004; Oldfield & Baron, 2000; Scott, 2008; Tam, 2010; Vlăsceanu et al., 2007).

Although Schindler et al. (2015) identified four broad conceptualizations of quality in higher education (quality as purposeful, transformative, exceptional, and accountable), there is no agreement on a definition of quality (p. 8). Probably, the main obstacle in developing a common framework is how different regions address the matter, since "accreditation and quality assurance are no longer purely national undertakings" (Green, Marmolejo, & Egron-Polak, 2012, p. 452), and different jurisdictions take different approaches to quality assurance and program accreditation. For instance, while some accrediting bodies in different jurisdictions establish mutual recognition of their standards through private agreements, there are other instances where such recognition depends on a governmental or nongovernmental body or agency that provides standing to the accrediting agencies in their respective jurisdictions (2012, p. 451-452).

Accreditation: Quality Assurance of Higher Education Institutions

According to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, 2007), three factors influence the quality assurance trends in international higher education. First, quality assurance is more competitive and rigorous than ever before. Second, quality assurance is becoming recognized regionally. Third, there is a need for an international quality assurance framework with acknowledgement and reciprocity across countries. Program offerings across international boundaries require students to enroll in multiple jurisdictions as part of their degree programs. These innovative approaches to higher education demand greater awareness of the attributes and requirements of quality assurance organizations worldwide. Wong (2012) expressed the importance for institutions to demonstrate value and performance and states that higher education organizations apply principles for private industry to assess quality initiatives.

"Accreditation is a review of the quality of higher education institutions and programs" (CHEA, 2014, para.1). An institution or program is granted accreditation for meeting minimum standards of quality. One common accreditation theme is quality assurance assessment and continuous improvement. Accrediting agencies have developed standards and procedures to guide institutions in the process of voluntary commitment to continuous improvement, by way of application for accreditation. These standards are used by review committees as the basis for judgment and to make recommendations and decisions.

Regional accreditation is comprehensive and indicates that an institution has achieved quality standards in areas such as faculty, administration, curriculum, student services, and overall financial well-being (Eaton, 2011). Regional accreditors require compliance with quality standards and criteria. In the United States, regional accreditation is conducted and granted by seven accrediting bodies in six regions. The accrediting bodies are Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Commission on Colleges (COC), Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU).

Quality is the utmost significant concern for all regional accrediting agencies in the United States. Evidence of the significant emphasis on quality is found in every U.S. regional accrediting agency's goals statement.

The WASC Senior Colleges and Universities Commission (WSCUC) is a regional accrediting agency. Two of WSCUC's strategic goals emphasize quality. One goal states WSCUC will "ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of peer review as the foundation of quality assurance." Another goal states WSCUC will "create internal research capacity that supports institutional and Commission efforts and provides information to the public related to the quality of higher education in the region" (WSCUC, 2014, 2014–15 Strategic Priorities, paras. 1.a. and 1.c.).

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges' (SACS COC) mission statement focuses on quality: "The mission of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges is to assure the educational quality and improve the effectiveness of its member institution" (SACS COC, 2014, Mission Statement, para.1).

The Mid-Atlantic Region Commission on Higher Education (2014) states in its mission, "the Middle States Commission on Higher Education is a voluntary, non-governmental, membership association that is dedicated to quality assurance and improvement through accreditation via peer evaluation" (para.1). NEASC Commission on Institutions of Higher Education's (CIHE) mission endorses quality in education: "through its process of assessment, the Commission encourages and assists in the improvement, effectiveness and excellence of affiliated educational institutions" (CIHE, 2014, p.1).

HLC has issued the following statement: "The federal government has a distinct interest in the role of accreditation in assuring quality in higher education for the students who benefit from federal financial aid programs. As a recognized gatekeeper agency by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE), HLC, 'the Commission' agrees to fulfill specific federally defined responsibilities within the accreditation processes" (HLC, 2014, para. 2).

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU; 2014) is an "independent, non-profit membership organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as the regional authority on educational quality and institutional effectiveness of higher education institutions in the seven-state Northwest region." (para.2).

Regardless of how central quality assurance is among these accrediting bodies, "the U.S. accreditation structure is decentralized and complex, mirroring the decentralization and complexity of American higher education (Eaton, 2012). Recognizing international study programs and programs "offered by nondomestic institutions or providers involves a new level of complexity (Knight, 2005). Indeed, "quality assurance has become an international endeavor and a key component of higher education policies in nearly every country, especially given that students and scholars move across national and regional boundaries at unprecedented rates (Blanco-Ramirez, 2014; citing Altbach et al., 2010; Harvey, 2004).

Models of Quality Assurance

The applications of quality assurance processes in higher education are discussed in the literature, yet skepticism prevails on the effectiveness of any one QA model (Asif, Raouf, & Searcy, 2012). One of the reasons for this skepticism could be attributed to the fact that the types of services and the quality frameworks the agencies use vary from one QA organization to another. For example, the Baldrige Program is an affiliate of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and it is dedicated to performance excellence. Baldrige administers the Malcom Baldrige National Quality Award. Award recipients must demonstrate achievements and improvements that meet seven categories of the criteria for performance excellence. There are

three versions of the criteria: (1) business/nonprofit, (2) education, (3) health care organizations. Baldrige aims to strengthen U.S. competitiveness and serve as a model for national excellence and award programs around the world (Asif et al., 2012; Baldrige 2014a; Baldrige, 2014b). The Baldrige education criteria for performance excellence are a powerful mechanism to assess performance excellence, but the criteria lack a theoretical foundation (Asif et al., 2012, p. 3109). Furthermore, the Baldrige criteria for performance excellence are too vague and do not address the requirements from an academic standpoint (Asif et al., 2012, p. 3110).

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), in collaboration with the higher education sector, developed and maintains the UK Quality Code for Higher Education to assure quality standards for higher education institutions in the United Kingdom (QAA, 2014).

Quality Matters (QM) is a leader in quality assurance for online education and has received national recognition for its peer-based approach and continuous improvement in online education and student learning. QM subscribers include community and technical colleges, colleges and universities, K–12 schools and systems, and other academic institutions (Varonism, 2014).

Quality Matters is also a leading provider of tools and processes used to evaluate quality in course design (Quality Matters, 2014a). The Quality Matters Rubric is a widely used set of standards for the design of online and blended courses at the college level (Quality Matters, 2014; Varonism, 2014). More than 700 colleges and universities subscribe to the nonprofit QM program (Quality Matters, 2014a). The QM process for continuous improvement is the framework for quality assurance efforts in online learning and provides effective professional development for faculty making the transition into distance education. The Quality Matters Rubric is a set of eight general standards and 41 specific standards used to evaluate the design of online and blended courses. The QM Rubric is complete with annotations that explain the application of the standards and the relationships among them. A scoring system and set of online tools facilitate the evaluation by a team of peer reviewers (Pollacia & Terrie, 2009; Quality Matters, 2014b; Varonism, 2014). As online programs proliferate in international higher education, many constituents have concerns about quality. Quality assurance is becoming more significant. While the QM program offers a systematic quality assurance process for the design of online programs, it lacks criteria to determine the quality of delivery and instructor and faculty engagement. Therefore, QM is not a total solution (Pollacia & Terrie, 2009; Quality Matters, 2014b).

Aside from the differences in types of services and quality frameworks developed and used by different agencies, another difficulty identified in the literature is a lack of cultural sensitivity (Gift, Leo-Rhynie, & Moniquette, 2006; Hodson & Thomas, 2010; Smith, 2010). Furthermore, Stella and Woodhouse (2011) argued higher education institutions in developing countries could be at a disadvantage in transnational education and the establishment of a set of minimum standards because of their capacity "to participate effectively in the global trading system" (p. 12).

Research on Effectiveness of QA Practices

Higher education gleaned the concept of quality from commercial settings and private industry (Newton, 2002). Methods of quality assurance were introduced in England in the 1980s as part of the Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA). TQA provided a third party review and assessment at the institutional level and peer reviewers conducted the TQA review (Cheng, 2010). Then, TQA was replaced with subject reviews during the period of 1995–2001. Subject review was replaced by the institutional audit by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for higher education in England (Cheng, 2010).

Cheng (2010) conducted a study using theoretical sampling to select academics from seven institutions in England. The study examined how quality and audit affect the work of academics through capturing their perceptions and experiences of quality audits. The study examined eight criteria for quality assurance mechanisms. Four were internally devised and implemented (peer observation, student course evaluation, annual program review, and the approval system for new and revised programs and units). The other four mechanisms were externally developed: England's QAA institutional audit, two external examining systems, and regulatory bodies. Cheng analyzed the perceived effects of the eight mechanisms on the following aspects of academic work: teaching practices, curriculum development, power relations between faculty and students, and faculty workload (Cheng, 2010). The results of Cheng's study showed that quality audits remain a source of controversy. Two thirds of the respondents felt the quality audit was futile and bureaucratic because their work focuses on research and teaching. This finding, Cheng said, indicated that academics want to maintain autonomy. The academics exhibited resistance to the quality audit which produced "game-playing" attitudes to quality assurance mechanisms (Cheng, 2010, p. 269). Issues of power and control surfaced and suggest a relationship exists between the university and the QAA because of a need to have a quality assurance mechanism in place to meet the requirements of the QAA. Academics viewed the university's relationship with QAA as distant from their own work and did not feel "ownership of and responsibility for" the quality audit process (Cheng, 2010, p. 269).

Grifoll, et al. (2012) presented a collection of characteristics of good practice in external quality assurance and highlight connections between the QA practices and the potential benefits for institutions of higher education. According to the authors' survey research, 43% of respondents follow processes that link QA reviews with qualifications frameworks in Europe, but only seven agencies reported they are successful in doing so (Grifoll et al., 2012). The paper identified practices that quality assurance agencies are expected to implement, as well as areas where progress was needed, thus proposing a vision for the future of quality assurance reviews. The article reported the following examples of good QA practices:

- Practices regarding external QA procedures
- Practices which enhance stakeholders' involvement in QA of higher education
- Practices aiming at improving the infrastructure and resources of agencies

However, there is a limitation to this survey research. The survey does not provide adequate information on how different agencies include quality of online education in their QA strategic plan for program or institutional QA review (Grifoll et al., 2012, p. 25).

Since 1992, the Online Learning Consortium (OLC, formerly Sloan-C) has served as a clearinghouse for research with the aim to help institutions create high-quality educational experiences in the U.S. and international field of online education. The OLC Quality Scorecard, first developed in 2010 (and launched in 2011), was the result of a research study conducted in 2009. The research study used the Delphi methodology. The Delphi method gains consensus from subject matter experts on a given topic because "it replaces direct confrontation and debate by a carefully planned, anonymous, orderly program of sequential individual interrogations usually conducted by questionnaires" (Brown, Cochran, & Dalkey, 1969, p. 1). The release of the new OLC Quality Scorecard is the result of three years of research involving user study and feedback. In addition to serving as an evaluation instrument, the Quality Scorecard can be used as an instructive tool for developing quality online learning programs (OLC, 2014).

Success and Challenges in QA Review Practices

In the past 10 years, heightened interest has been directed toward quality assurance in international higher education (OECD & World Bank, 2007). Historically, quality assurance agencies have not focused their attention on assessing imported or exported academic programs, with some exceptions. Now, however, an increase in cross-border education has introduced a new challenge in the field of quality assurance. The QA models mentioned in this paper (QM, Baldrige, OLC) are examples of QA systems, but the higher education sector has mixed views on the appropriateness of quality standards (OECD & World Bank, 2007). For example, there is a range of opinions about the value of international criteria for quality assurance of higher education because such standardization may jeopardize the integrity of the countries' higher education systems and may not necessarily improve the quality of the academic programs (OECD & World Bank, 2007, p. 38–39).

One challenge of quality assurance reviews is faculty members and other stakeholders' concerns about the QA process. Altman, Schwegler, and Bunkowski (2014) investigated faculty beliefs and their plans to participate in the peer quality assurance reviews using the Quality Matters Rubric. The researchers use a qualitative approach to examine faculty members' perceptions of completing the QA peer review. Although faculty were skeptical before participating in the QA process, the results indicate that many of the concerns and criticisms of the peer review process did not validate earlier assumptions. The study examined faculty beliefs, instead of rumors, to identify specific faculty concerns that could be directly addressed. The results, though limited due to small sample size, stated online course quality is an important goal, and, with plans for expansion, an established standard (such as the QM rubric) requires scientific inquiry for appropriate and improved application of the standard (Altman, Schwegler, & Bunkowski, 2014). This research can be used to guide changes in QA processes and to increase participation in QA reviews with the goal of improving the online course design quality with a greater number of institutions (Altman, Schwegler, & Bunkowski, 2014, p. 109).

Concerns about the QA process reflect another challenge in itself: creating a quality culture. All stakeholders within an institution need to share a vision as to what quality is and choose a management model to improve overall quality and maintain continuous improvement (Lomas, 2003).

Certainly, another major challenge in quality assurance revolves around digital learning and the integration of technology. According to Stella and Gnanam (2004), with the increasing amount of digital educational offerings, consumers "expect the quality assurance agencies to provide more information about the quality of those educational services to make intelligent choices (p. 148). In turn, "this raises issues of quality assurance controls by the exporting and importing countries and whether quality assurance should discriminate between in-country providers and the transnational providers" (2004, p. 148).

Involving Students in QA Processes

Involving students in QA processes is an important topic and educational leaders are considering how best to include students in their QA systems. Student involvement in evaluating and enhancing the quality of their higher education institution is carried out though specific activities, such as responding to focus group interviews and questionnaires, participating in QA-related working groups, and involving themselves in QA processes (Elassy, 2013, p. 166).

The quality of educational services provided by a university is a crucial aspect of strategic plans in the student-centered education context. Students' evaluation of the academic programs is a significant assessment instrument used for stimulating quality enhancement in a university (Stukalina, 2014). Carmichael, Palermo, Reeve & Vallence (2001) argue that the perspective of the individual learner should be placed at the core of quality in all areas of education, and, consequently, learners are an essential component of quality assurance programs and processes.

Introducing students to quality assurance processes and allowing them to participate in external evaluation panels provide good experiences for students. In the role of student representative, the student has the ability to see the situation from the learner's perspective, which others may not be able to take into account. Furthermore, the students are stakeholders in higher education, with time and money investments in the system. As such, they have a special interest in the quality of the academic program (Alaniska et al., 2006). Yet, according to the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), some agencies face challenges in finding qualified students to participate in QA processes (2006). For instance, students who do not participate in faculty or institutional boards may lack the necessary tacit competencies to participate in quality assurance evaluations. In addition, language and cultural issues present challenges to the involvement of students in QA initiatives (Alaniska et al., 2006).

Irrespective of the challenges, the benefits for involving students in QA processes can be grouped into two categories: benefit to the student and benefit to the QA process. Benefits for the student include development of communication, analytical reasoning, and leadership skills (Elassy, 2013). The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the United Kingdom reports that student participation is "an opportunity for students to develop their ability to analyse the quality of their programmes, creating a sense of ownership of these programs" (QAA, 2009, p. 2).

Students have a multifaceted understanding of quality in higher education. Another benefit of involving students in quality assurance initiatives is transparency, meaning all participants see the outcomes and subsequent changes. Student participation in QA activities influences the quality of higher education (Palomares, 2014). Including students is key in the QA process because they provide an important lens for quality assurance in higher education.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an overview and a brief literature review of the main aspects related to quality assurance in higher education. In reviewing the concept of quality assurance itself, it can be said there is a need for a common framework for a quality assurance model; however, there is no agreement as to a QA definition or a QA model. Furthermore, although quality is the utmost significant concern for accrediting bodies, accreditation structures are decentralized and complex at both the regional and international level. The difficulties and skepticism in choosing one QA model or another can be seen in the various types of services and the quality frameworks the agencies use, which vary from one QA organization to another, and from one jurisdiction to another. Another challenge revolves around the concerns of faculty members and other stakeholders, such as students, about the QA process. Given that students are at the center of higher education, and invest time and money in the system, involving them could improve QA processes.

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