

A Short History of Quality

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The CAA Quality Series comprises occasional publications, about two or three per year, on topics of interest to practitioners of quality assurance in higher education.

Specifically, the intent of the CAA Quality Series is:

To contribute to the enhancement of quality practices in higher education in the UAE and more widely;

To provide a means for sharing insights, research and analysis that is responsive to identified or emerging needs of those with responsibility for quality in higher education;

To stimulate discussion and reflection on directions, evolution and progress in quality improvement relevant to UAE higher education;

To provide contributions to the literature on quality assurance in UAE higher education that would otherwise not be available to a wide audience;

To enhance public knowledge of QA, for agencies, for institutions and for the general public.

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Contributions, in Arabic or English, are invited from higher education quality assurance practitioners and educational leaders. The publications are expected to be scholarly and make a worthwhile contribution to thinking on or understanding of quality, addressing or responding to specific short-term policy issues as well as those of more general and longer-term relevance. They may be discussion papers, argue a particular case, or report the results of experiments or experiences. An indicative minimum word-length is 5000 words.

Anyone interested in contributing may contact the series editor, David Woodhouse, on david.woodhouse@mohe.gov.ae.

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Introduction

The word 'quality' is now much used in higher education. Doubtless conscientious academics have always sought to carry out their teaching and other tasks well, but the frequent use of statements about 'the need to maintain and enhance quality' is a recent phenomenon. In this essay we look at some aspects of this, and of the growth in number of 'quality agencies' that have the task of 'quality assurance'. Hard on the heels of 'quality' has come growing concerns for 'standards' and how they can be achieved and compared. Several approaches to this are described, including the role of professional bodies. The significant impact of cross-border education, and the consequent international links between quality agencies, is outlined. Finally, after some decades of rapid growth in their number, the value and effect of quality agencies has been increasingly questioned, and this essay concludes with evidence for their beneficial effects.

I “Come, give us a taste of your quality”

I.1 How can we ensure that education is good?

In all fields of human activity, it is accepted that beginners learn from the sages. Except for a small number of prodigies, we are not born innately knowing how to craft silver or write music. Hence the apprentice becomes a tradesman and eventually, with practice and diligence, a master. In higher education, however, a different attitude may often be seen, as many people who have been through schooling think they know how to teach, even though they have not learned the teaching trade, but merely observed and experienced it. Particularly at the higher levels, people have come together to establish a college or university, assuming that because they know about physics or law they know how to teach physics or law. It is surprising therefore, that higher level education has been as good as it has, and unsurprising that external intervention is occasionally needed to rectify problems or ensure that the students are being well taught.

A century or more ago, some significant, and ultimately very influential, such interventions took place in the USA. About that time, higher education (HE) institutions in the USA confronted two challenges to quality. One challenge, caused by the large size of the country, was how to be confident of the adequacy of the education provided by other, possibly unknown, institutions, a great distance away. This triggered the creation of general accrediting agencies, which were thus the earliest bodies, outside the educational institutions themselves, with specific responsibility for independent validation of the quality of education. A second and similar challenge was noted by professional groups (most notably in medicine) that became concerned about the capabilities of graduates in their professional area. Again, the response was to create external accreditation agencies, but concentrating

in a particular specialised or professional field, to certify the competence of practitioners in – now – very many disciplines. (Woodhouse, 2009b; see section 5)

Until the mid-1960s, these were the only instances of what has now come to be generally labelled 'external quality assurance' – i.e. processes and systems external to the institution itself, but with a mandate to assist or enforce the quality of the institution's operations. In the mid-60s, external quality agencies were established in Ireland and the UK. There was little further change until the late 1980s, but in the subsequent few decades there has been an explosion of quality agencies. Some common causes are often postulated for this explosion, most notably a great increase in the number of students, with a consequent increase in costs (regardless of who is paying); and government desires for the resulting graduates to contribute to national prosperity.

This explosion has not been uniform, in the sense that many governments or groups of institutions have seen potential benefits of some sort of external quality body, but not the same benefits. Some have wanted to have a quality agency for more control over the institutions, but others to free the government from the task of micro-managing; some have wanted to strengthen the internal management of the institutions while others have wanted to empower the consumers.

So, in a sense, a movement began without people being completely clear what the movement was about, and they looked around for ideas and models. External quality agencies (EQAs) looked to the US accreditation approach as their starting point, while HE institutions looked to the models then in use by non-educational organisations. The 1980s saw the rise of the 'quality movement' of Deming, Crosby, Juran et al., and hence the word 'quality' found its way into use in academia. (Woodhouse, 2011a)

1.2 External Quality Systems (Woodhouse, 2009a)

As organisations, generically referred to as 'quality agencies' were set up, whether by governments, institutions or private entities, they needed an 'organising principle'. The two most common, though known by a variety of names, are **accreditation** and **audit**.

Accreditation stresses the 'gatekeeper' role of an external quality agency (EQA), holding HE institutions (HEIs) to **threshold** requirements. **Audit** permits greater diversity among institutions, but therefore usually presupposes that the institution has already exceeded some known threshold. Conventionally, accreditation has become associated with **accountability** of the institution (to someone, for something); and audit is associated with (further) **improvement** of the institution above the threshold. However, an accreditation approach by the EQA can lead to suggestions for improvement; while an audit can focus on holding the institution accountable for achieving its stated published goals.

Accreditation denotes the process or outcome of evaluating whether something – eg an institution or program – qualifies for a certain status. The status may have

implications for the institution itself (e.g. permission to operate) and/or its students (eg. eligibility for grants) and/or its graduates (e.g. qualified for certain employment). In theory, the output of an accreditation is a yes/no or pass/fail decision, but gradations are possible, usually in the context of a transitional phase (towards or away from 'pass'). Accreditation is also called licensing or registration.

In some cases, there is no intention to implement the gatekeeper role of accreditation, but merely to assess how well the organisation is performing. In this case, the term **assessment** is sometimes used for an evaluation that results in a grade, whether numeric (e.g. %, 1-4), literal (e.g. A-F) or descriptive (excellent, good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory). Thus, assessment and accreditation can both result in one of several scores on a linear scale. There may or may not be a pass/fail boundary somewhere along the grade spectrum.

Accreditation presupposes external measures or standards against which the institution or department or program is being judged, but there is an argument that this does not allow for the range of higher education institutions and the scope of their purposes. This argument takes us naturally towards **quality audit**, which is a check on an organisation's claims about itself. When an institution states objectives, it is implicitly claiming that this is what it will do, and a quality audit checks the extent to which the institution is achieving its own objectives. ISO defines **quality audit** as a three-part process, checking the **suitability** of the planned quality procedures in relation to the stated objectives; the **conformity** of the actual quality activities with the plans; and the **effectiveness** of the activities in achieving the stated objectives. This 'quality loop' is often referred to using the initials OADRI, for Objectives, Approach (ie plans), Deployment (ie the actual activities), Results (the consequences of all this planning and activity) and Improvement. Improvement refers to what is done if the loop is not closed (ie adjust the objectives or plans or deployment) or if it is closed (perhaps set more ambitious objectives). OADRI is another name for the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle of the industrial quality movement.

As these various terms multiplied, a generic term was needed and was found in the phrase 'quality assurance' (QA), which denotes the policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced – though not all agree on this. Some see QA as being synonymous with the threshold check of accreditation, and some conversely see it as synonymous with improvement **above** the threshold. This disagreement over meanings extends even to the word 'quality' itself.

1.3 But what IS quality?

As the academic world started to look to the business world for ideas on quality, it started to struggle with what is meant by quality in higher education.

We should first note that there is a tendency to lump all quality agencies together, as if all have the same purposes. An example of this is the very common usage of the term 'accreditor' to denote all quality agencies, as if accreditation is the universal EQA

role, although it is not. While we have identified two main approaches by an EQA to its institutions, categorised above as accreditation and audit, if we look in more detail at the different tasks that EQAs carry out, one can detect at least 20 (Woodhouse, 2001). They include:

- Checking that institutions are operating above defined threshold standards, and/or preventing or closing inadequate institutions (a gatekeeper role, often associated with a proliferation of foreign and/or small private institutions, and often implemented by means of **accreditation** or licensing);
- Helping institutions improve (capacity-building, e.g. through sharing good practice, providing training, giving advice);
- Holding institutions accountable (e.g. for achieving their mission, often implemented by means of **quality audit**);
- Holding institutions accountable for their use of funds, and providing value for money (often achieved through **accreditation**);
- 'Measuring' institutional performance (often through some **assessment** mechanisms);
- Providing planning and other advice to the government;
- Ensuring that programs satisfy national specifications; and
- Establishing international relations.

After the development of intelligence tests, when their validity came to be questioned, people started asking 'what is this thing called intelligence that the tests are supposed to measure?' The only answer that held water was 'intelligence is what intelligence tests measure'. In other words, the tests themselves defined the field. Analogously, with the many different purposes for which external agencies were being created, and all of them tagged with the word 'quality', one could have been reduced to saying that 'quality is what external quality agencies measure'. In the early 1990s, there was much debate over the meaning of the word 'quality', particularly as it applies to higher education, and several lists of alternatives were produced. Some protagonists attempted to argue for a single meaning, while others preferred to use a group of meanings. It is perhaps a sign of the newness of the field of QA that many speakers and writers still begin by saying 'there is no agreement on the meaning of quality', and quote a list of five meanings from 20 years ago (Harvey & Green, 1993). Even worse, for years we have been assailed with a quote from 40 years ago, namely 'What the hell is quality?' (Pirsig, 1974).

It is time we moved on and recognized that a proposal from 1985 (Ball, 1985) holds the key, namely that quality is 'fitness for purpose' (FFP) (Woodhouse, 2011d). This definition covers all the other contenders, because all of them imply a specific characteristic or goal (ie purpose) that should be achieved. It aligns with the quality audit approach, and provides an 'organising principle' for approaches to the achievement and checking of quality. It is, furthermore, a principle that acknowledges the difficulties inherent in defining and achieving quality in complex systems and addressing these in an appropriate way. Also, despite frequent comment to the contrary, it also includes the concept of 'fitness **of** purpose' (because how can you determine whether a purpose itself is fit unless you are ascertaining what it is fit **for**).

Having set the context for the burgeoning use of the word 'quality' in HE, and some of the definitional issues generated, we turn to some consequent historical developments.

2 The Growth in Quality Assurance Systems

2.1 More Students, More EQAs

As mentioned, the first 'quality agencies', called accreditors, were founded in the USA at the behest of institutions and professional associations, and independent of government. This absence of government involvement is noteworthy, as almost all quality agencies now in existence were established by government or at the behest of government. The US general accreditors continue to be unusual (though not unique) in this respect, probably as a consequence of the (historically) negative national attitude towards government control or oversight. The relatively large number of private HE institutions would also incline the sector towards institutional self-monitoring. (Neubauer, 2008)

In contrast, the next identifiable external quality agencies (EQAs), e.g. UK, Ireland in the 1960s, were created by governments. Also, they were not created to address perceived problems but to actively guide and direct growing and diverse higher education (HE) sectors.

The 'third wave' of creation of EQAs has lasted now for 20 years, and seen the number of EQAs world-wide grow exponentially. As mentioned above, although the phenomenon is the same world-wide, the rationale varies enormously: some EQAs are a consequence of a government desire for greater control, some result from an attempt to reduce government control, some are focused on financial and accountability matters, and so on. In all cases, however, governments play a role, whether direct or indirect, and even the independent US accreditors have become gatekeepers for government funds. EQAs may be government owned or initiated, or created by institutions to forestall or offset government intervention. In Chile, and perhaps soon in India, the government has legislated to permit multiple private EQAs, but the rather predictable problems of lack of rigour due to lack of resources due to need to make a profit, are surfacing.

Another common feature is the changing shape of HE: the rapid growth in student numbers, and hence the cost of the sector; increasing diversity with corresponding difficulty in speaking of comparability; greater international interaction ('globalisation') and mobility, with increased complexity of maintaining and assuring quality across national borders. These are challenges for both the HE institutions and the EQAs, whose heritage is from a simpler age. (Woodhouse, 2009b)

The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) was formed in Hong Kong in 1991 by a dozen QA agencies (see next

section). Now, after over 20 years, it has about 230 member organisations, about 150 of them quality agencies, in over 80 countries. It is evident that over the last 14 years very many countries have established quality agencies.

Reasons for this rapid growth in QA agencies include:

- increased numbers of students, leading to a change in the nature of tertiary education and a feeling that it is necessary to check explicitly that institutional QA procedures are keeping pace with the change, as it is more difficult to do things well for large groups than for small select groups
- increased numbers of students, so more money, both public and private, is being spent on HE, leading to an increased desire on the part of all those who are paying to ensure that the money is being well spent
- increased public funding for HE, leading to governments wanting to hold HEIs explicitly accountable for the spending of the money
- increased government attention to national needs for graduates, leading to governments wanting to hold HEIs explicitly accountable for the nature of the graduates they produce. HE institutions have long expected the public to trust them to do a good job, but have sometimes failed this trust, and the public is now insisting on a higher level of external checking
- increasing demand for HE, leading to increasing numbers of private providers, some of dubious provenance, leading to a demand for stringent external checks on them
- in some countries, decreasing micro-management by governments of HEIs in return for the introduction of an external QA process
- globalisation, leading to transnational mobility of students and educational export, which in turn leads to a need to have a national QA process that is visible to other countries (for educational export, this is akin to export quality processes in other industries).

(Woodhouse & Kristoffersen, 2006)

2.2 Europe and Bologna

These factors have affected different countries to different extents, and each country had reacted in its own way: perhaps drawing on the experiences of others, perhaps through the networks (section 3.2) and/or regional counterparts. The region that has made the most co-ordinated 'attack' on quality is Europe, through the Bologna process (although there was initial co-ordination of quality work, continent wide, in the mid-90s).

The Bologna Process, initiated in 1999 and adopted by 47 European Nations, aims to reform higher education in Europe by creating a European Higher Education Area in which students can choose from a wide and transparent range of high quality courses and benefit from smooth recognition procedures. The development of a pan-European Quality Assurance system for higher education will be the driver which monitors and promotes the implementation of the Bologna reforms (Ryan, 2010).

Originally planned to be completed by 2010, it was clear in that year that much more was still to be done, but also that great progress had been made, and the undertaking was worthwhile. Europe has now therefore embarked on 'the second decade of Bologna', stressing student mobility.

The European Universities Association has been critical of the manner of this growth (at least in Europe): "The 'quality movement' in Europe started, as it were, from the wrong end, with the rush of establishing external quality procedures rather than building them internally. ... It is hoped that with time the optimal balance between accountability and autonomy will be based on HE institutions' central responsibility for internal quality while external accountability would review how this responsibility is carried out. In other words, successful and widespread implementation of such action plans as developed by each institution in this project will ensure that **future accountability procedures could take the form of an institutional audit** that would evaluate the robustness and the embedding of internal quality monitoring processes." (EUA, 2005, pp37) This is in line with the quality audit, fitness for purpose, approach.

The Bologna project has been noted world-wide, with talk of 'Bologna for Latin-America' and 'Bologna for Asia', and 'Bologna for the USA'.

With its long history of EQA (accreditation), the USA did not need the increase in volume of EQA experienced by the rest of the world in the last two decades. Its challenge during this period, and still continuing, is to answer criticism that accreditation is ineffective (see section 7) and too 'cosy' with the institutions. Its second challenge is to try to resist increasing government intrusion and prescription of the criteria the EQAs should impose on institutions (Ewell, 2008, Eaton, 2011).

Further growth has also taken place at the 'next level', namely the formation of networks of agencies. This, and other aspects of internationalisation and its impact on EQAs, are considered in the next section.

3 Internationalisation

3.1 National authority and international scope

From the above, it is clear that most quality agencies have been set up within a country, with a scope and responsibility that is confined within that country. This model served the USA well for decades, with students only moving within the US itself, or having short periods of study abroad. Concurrently with the most recent wave of expansion in QA, however, has come a vastly increased global mobility. The term 'globalisation' has been coined to refer to the movement across national boundaries of people, goods, services and ideas. This includes education, where the educators, the students and the material itself are decreasingly constrained by national boundaries. It was quickly recognised that any QA systems for HE (whether

the system is internal or external to the educational institution) should cover the institutions' international activities. However, quality agencies, whose authority is given by a particular jurisdiction, have trouble coping with educational operations that emanate from or expand into other countries.

For internal quality assurance, internationalising the curriculum requires corresponding attention to the procedures for program development, implementation and monitoring. Increasing the number of foreign students entails providing relevant support for them. While both these aspects may simply be extensions of the institution's existing quality assurance processes, moving from domestic to foreign provision of teaching is likely to be a novelty, and hence needs very careful attention.

External quality assurance must in turn be able to validate the institutions' quality assurance of their international activities. Just as for the institutions themselves, internationalising the curriculum and taking in foreign students do not pose any inherently new issues, whereas courses abroad, whether on-line or face-to-face programs, do.

Extending quality assurance procedures to cover international aspects may be called 'quality assurance of internationalisation' (Woodhouse, 2004a).

In 1999, van de Wende (van der Wende, 1999) contrasted this with the 'internationalisation of quality assurance'. This is extending the concept of internationalisation beyond internationalisation of education to internationalisation of another area of activity, namely the QA of HE. To address this, one could adapt Knight's definition of internationalisation of education (Knight, 2003) as follows:

"Internationalisation of QA in HE is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or implementation of QA systems and processes."

Whereas the QA of internationalisation is about the scope of the QA activities, the internationalisation of QA relates more to the methods. The internationalisation of QA can be thought of as 'cross-border QA'. Just as cross-border education is the responsibility of the institutions and QA agencies, so cross-border QA is the responsibility of the quality agencies and also of networks of quality agencies.

3.2 Quality Networks

In 1991, the first international conference of the emerging QA agencies was held in Hong Kong, and after the conference the agencies agreed that there would be value in associating together in a network for mutual support and assistance. Thus was formed the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). INQAAHE was intended to be supportive and inclusive, to stress collegial interaction, and to enable mutual support, and to be a forum for sharing ideas and good practices. Consistently with this, its central aim is information-sharing between agencies, with the other objectives listed as aspirational.

Since then, many more networks of agencies (and in some cases including other stakeholders with a role in the quality of HE) have been created, in every continent, primarily based on geographic regions, but with overlapping geographical areas and scopes. Overlapping networks exist for the Asia Pacific region (APQN), Latin America and Spain (RIACES), Africa (AfriQAN), the Arab region (ANQAHE), Europe (ENQA), Central Europe (CEENQA), and many more, including the Islamic countries. Many agencies are members of two or more networks.

The reason for the growth in regional QA agency groupings varies. In all cases there is a desire to share good practice between QA agencies, and it also leads to the international visibility mentioned above. In at least two cases (Europe and South America) cross-border trade is also a major factor. When INQAAHE was founded, its core aim was information-sharing, with the purpose of achieving a number of operational goals. With the growth of regional networks concentrating on practical matters, INQAAHE's focus is turning more towards policy development, relations with other world agencies (such as UNESCO, OECD, World Bank), and the evaluation of quality agencies.

Whatever the core reason for their formation, all these networks enable their member agencies to progress in their confidence and ability in internationalisation by successively fuller and closer interaction. From simply acknowledging each other, agencies then talk to each other, then they share information about their institutions, then about each other. Then they interact through observation of review events, and this strengthens their ability to carry out QA of internationalisation. It can also lead to the high level of trust necessary to permit mutual recognition between the agencies of their respective QA judgements.

Networks also contribute to the improvement of QA agencies themselves through capacity-building and by identifying 'good practices', ie practices expected to lead to good and improving performance of EQAs. INQAAHE has published a 'Guidelines of Good Practice, and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) the European Standards and Guidelines.

3.3 International Reach of National Agencies

Higher education is a national matter and national governments plan for, provide for, allow for and exert some control over higher education and HEIs. Setting up national quality agencies is part of this national activity. However, there are few aspects of higher education that are specific to one country. (Woodhouse, 2004b)

- there are many aspects that arise independently in so many different countries that they are effectively global; and
- there are aspects that occur at the supra-national or international level, so that international systems and structures are needed to address them satisfactorily.

Some of the issues related to higher education that concern many national governments are:

- 1 The meaning and purpose of higher education.
- 2 Funding, including sources of increased funds; accountability for the funds; value-for-money.
- 3 National development – economic and social – and the role of teaching and research.
- 4 Credit transfer, including student mobility and recognition, both during and after study.
- 5 Standards and ranking of institutions and programs. (Woodhouse, 2006):

Issues in the second category are multi-nationally-oriented and/or multi-nationally determined, and include:

- 1 Import of education: Is imported foreign HE culturally or academically appropriate for our society? If it is electronic, do we even know it is coming, unbidden and unmonitored, into our country?
- 2 Export of education: What considerations are relevant to the sale of higher education abroad? Education as trade: what are the implications of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)?
- 3 Borderless or transnational education: Who is responsible for education that crosses national borders – provider, receiver, both, neither?
- 4 Cross-border recognition of qualifications for work and study: Mobility before or after graduation; for study or employment.
- 5 Bogus institutions and agencies (degree / accreditation mills) and trivial programs: how can we police and deal with these to protect people from being deceived?

A few organisations or structures have been deliberately established to carry out a QA function internationally. These include the management audits of the European Universities Association (EUA), the Internationalisation Quality Reviews developed by the OECD, the European system for accreditation of management and business administration (EQUIS), the former Global Alliance for Transnational Education, and CCA (the Central American accreditation council which accredits QA agencies in the region). We might also mention the Commonwealth HE Management Service's longstanding benchmarking project, and the Commonwealth of Learning. Neither of these is primarily a QA network but both contribute enormously to the global quality of HE.

However, as almost all EQAs have been created for national operation and with national authority, and there is resistance to the notion of having **only** a single global EQA, multi-national QA networks are a prime mechanism for enabling the national EQA agency to operate effectively in the international sphere, and to have some international authority. In a word, **networks** provide the best of the two worlds – national EQAs acting jointly. Quality networks have brought national quality agencies out of their national shells (Woodhouse, 2011b).

4 Standards

4.1 Quality and Standards

Thus far in this account of quality assurance, we have barely mentioned the word 'standards'. Yet, in the public mind, these are the same thing. What is good quality? It is achieving high standards.

The external stakeholder – including the student, who is on her/his way to being an external stakeholder as a graduate – is interested only in output standards: how good are the graduates, how good is the research? Institutions often act as if they are interested only in input standards: how good are the incoming students, how well-qualified are the staff, how much research money does it get? Quality agencies are – or should be interested in both of these and process standards as well. If the output standards are good, is it by chance or through good inputs alone, or are the process standards good so they produced the good outputs? If the output standards are bad, can the process standards be improved to cause better outputs?

But wait: what are good output standards? Are we speaking of absolute standards or relative standards? It could be either, but we should be clear which it is. Are the output standards good in relation to the input, or are they only what could be expected in relation to that input? An institution can be judged to be better if it produces better output from the same input. Is the institution aiming for Olympic standard among the elite, or for general fitness among a wider population?

The word 'standard' itself is not standardised. It has many meanings, which leads to a good deal of confusion.

- One meaning is a threshold: this is the level of performance that must be achieved, for some reason, e.g. to be accredited, to be accepted for military service, etc.
- A second meaning refers to a higher level: if we speak of 'standard performance' we do not usually mean the minimum but the norm – ie the middle of the bell curve, not the cut-off towards the left hand end.
- A third use is for an area of attention. This is how it is used by many quality agencies, which list the standards to which an institution must pay attention

EQAs have been created with a variety of different purposes and powers. At one end of the spectrum one could place EQAs that only audit at institutional level. The implication is that the institutions are well-trusted to set their own objectives, and to evaluate their own programs, and the accountability emphasis is low. At the other end of the spectrum are agencies that own and enforce a national qualifications framework and accredit institutions and their programs, with evaluations related to funding. The implication is that external detailed control and oversight is essential to the achievement of quality in the HE system, and the accountability emphasis is high. The last decade has seen a general increase world-wide in the accountability emphasis.

Hence there is increasing talk of and attention to:

- Graduate attributes, including discipline-specific and generic; and the consequent
- Learning outcomes; which may be
- Defined in qualification frameworks; and to
- Standards, ie the level at which the above have been achieved.

Not only are there many meanings of 'standard', but even in the restricted meaning of 'student academic achievement standards', there is a blurring of the distinction between

- Setting standards at threshold levels
- Setting standards at other levels
- Measuring standards achieved
- Ensuring standards are the same

These can all be seen in an academic context, such as general intellectual development or readiness for further study, including whether a graduate has achieved an adequate level to enter doctoral study. However, more frequently, learning outcomes and standards are related to job-readiness and employability. This is one reason for the new thinking needed about quality and QA. (Woodhouse, 2010).

4.2 Comparability of Standards: UK example

In 1994, the British Secretary of State for Education said, in effect, that the then HEQC might be doing a good job on quality, but asked whether it knew what standards the institutions were achieving. This gave rise to the Graduate Standards Program that took two and a half years and cost 2.5m pounds to reach the conclusion that standards are not immutable over time or place but "are ultimately a matter of judgement residing in the minds of those concerned with teaching, learning and assessment" (Brown 1997). Or again, it is "disciplinary communities who are the real guardians of academic standards" (Finch, 1997). In consequence, the HEQC and its successor the QAA convened discipline-based panels to create 'subject benchmark statements'.

A **subject benchmark statement** describes what can be expected of a graduate in terms of abilities, skills, understanding and competence in the subject. The UK also has a comprehensive system of external examiners which (despite defects) provides inter-institutional calibration.

This system gets close to an evaluation of comparative standards. Indeed, it was enough to deceive the writers of an Australian government discussion paper (Australian Government, 2008, p73) who remarked that the UK was already assessing and reporting standards. However, the then head of the QAA stated that the "QAA does not have standard learning outcomes for each course, but seeks broad comparability. There are no absolute standards, as this would be counter to diversity

which is desired.” (Williams, 2007). The QAA was criticised for this gap in a 2009 British parliamentary review, which recommended strengthening the powers of the QAA to address it.

4.3 Comparability of Standards: Australia example

Australia became concerned about the variability of degree outcomes across the country late in the 1980s. The AVCC created discipline-based Academic Standards Panels to review the honours (final year) undergraduate program in the discipline in all 19 universities. These had good effect but the practice was aborted in the early 1990s when the increase in the number of universities made the approach impracticable. Concerns continued to be expressed in Australia that institutions do not really know what standards their students are achieving. “There is no Australian university with any systematic means for knowing about its standards and how they might be changing” (Anderson, 2001) (cf. Carey, 2008, above). “There are presently few objective reference points for knowing the intellectual standards of Australian degrees” (James et al., 2002).

AUQA was created in 2000 to carry out quality audits. AUQA, aware of the UK experience, also began to ask institutions about standards, e.g.:

- How are standards determined and updated?
- What processes are in place to assure consistent implementation of the standards?
- How are outcomes monitored?
- How are standards compared nationally and internationally?
- What is the result of these comparisons of outcomes or content?

Few universities could answer this well. Common answers were:

- Examiners’ meetings check grade distributions (i.e. they check internal consistency)
- Most of our courses have professional accreditation (i.e. we relinquish our responsibility for checking standards to external bodies)
- We are just starting on benchmarking (but with little to show for it)
- We have sample cross-marking by other institutions (only a couple of institutions were able to give this good answer)

Hence, the government again turned its attention to standards, and in 2010 embarked on the creation of threshold statements of academic achievement in a number of disciplines (not unlike the UK’s subject benchmark statements, but intended to be precise enough to permit comparative judgements). These statements were then passed to a new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) (note the word ‘standards’ in the title) which took over from AUQA and nine other smaller accreditation bodies in 2011. However, “the difficulty is defining academic standards precisely enough to protect students and the community against unacceptable lapses in standards, but not so tightly [as to] to suppress innovative and diverse ways of

teaching and assessing students. ... The only reliable way of ensuring that graduates have the necessary skills is to ensure that they follow the curriculum supported by the resources that are known to produce competent graduates. Without understanding the learning-teaching process fully it is not possible to define it only by its outputs." (Moodie, 2010)

4.4 Comparability of Standards: USA example

In the USA, we can observe the rise of the 'assessment movement' in the mid-1980s. This was and is aimed at gathering systematic evidence on student learning outcomes and collating it to provide information that will enable institutions to improve instruction (ie not merely to calibrate the individual student).

Following movement from both states and accreditors, in 1989, the US Department of Education required accreditors to examine the quality of student learning. The accrediting agencies in turn required institutions to document how they intended to establish learning goals, create an associated assessment process, and provide the resulting evidence of student academic achievement.

Nonetheless, progress has been slow and uneven. Carey (2008) reported that, 10 years after the above requirement, i.e. in 2000: "Students and taxpayers were spending hundreds of billions of dollars every year to educate the next generation of citizens and scholars. Yet one could find little evidence of how much those students were learning. No state could produce reliable comparable data to indicate where college learning was good, bad or somewhere in between".

And, another 10 years on many current institutional self-study and external accreditation reports still make similar remarks to 20 years ago, namely that the documents provided by institutions are weak in evidence of institutional quality as reflected in the achievement of students. (Ewell 2008)

4.5 Learning Outcomes

With this emphasis on standards of student achievement has come attention to learning outcomes. The traditional way of designing programs was to start from the content of the course. Teachers decided on the content that they intended to teach, planned how to teach this content and then assessed how well students had assimilated that content. International trends in education show a shift from this 'teacher centred' approach to a 'student centred' approach, which focuses on what the students are expected to be able to do at the end of the program (Kennedy et al., 2006). An emphasis on what a student can do goes rather naturally with an emphasis on how well s/he can do it.

The terminology surrounding the term 'learning outcome' is still in a state of flux. Most authors agree that an outcome denotes three things, most commonly 'what a student knows, understand and can do' but with no clear distinction between

knowledge and understanding. Another trio is 'a student's knowledge, skills and abilities' – but then the question is how to distinguish between skills and abilities. A genuinely different trio is postulated in the recently published Qualifications Framework for the United Arab Emirates (QFE), namely 'knowledge, skill and aspects of competence, where there are three aspects of competence, namely autonomy & responsibility, role in context and self-development (National Qualifications Authority, 2012).

A related term is 'competence'. Some people use the term competences synonymously with LOs, while others say LOs are the teacher's intentions and competences are the student's achievements (ie intended v achieved LOs).

In 2006, the ministers of education of the OECD countries discussed the desirability of a higher education equivalent of the widely accepted PISA test. The Program for International Student Assessment began in the year 2000. It aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students in participating countries / economies. This discussion led to the creation of the AHELO project – Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes.

AHELO is intended to test what students in higher education know and can do upon graduation through a direct evaluation of student performance. It will evaluate both generic and discipline-specific skills, and provide contextual information within which the results can be interpreted. The test aims to be global and valid across diverse cultures, languages and different types of institutions. A feasibility study is under way in which the disciplines are economics and engineering. The results are due at the end of 2012 (see OECD website).

http://www.oecd.org/document/22/0,3746,en_2649_35961291_40624662_1_1_1_1,00.html

4.6 Requirements

Necessary requirements for an effective national structure for measuring, monitoring and reporting on the standards of academic achievement include the definition of: national statements of desired academic achievement, at least at threshold, and possibly also at other, levels; exemplars which show how these are to be interpreted, used and applied; and discipline groups to carry out the evaluations and make the judgements. (Woodhouse & Stella, 2009)

Such national statements of desired learning outcomes would, in effect, be the sector's formal definition of academic standards. Such standards would provide a basis for review, audit, monitoring and enhancement, and they would derive much of their value from being independently and externally defined. Making these standards explicit is therefore an essential initial step in judging achievement and providing for inter-institutional comparison.

However, establishment and implementation of such a scheme will be expensive. It is important to weigh the costs against the benefits, rather than simply to assume that 'more information' is always better, no matter what it costs.

5 Contribution of the Professions

(Woodhouse, 2010)

5.1 Early Promise

Professional accreditors also have a role in measuring and monitoring standards. Indeed, in the early 1990s, it was often stated that the professional accreditors would be in the forefront of global developments in accreditation. The two reasons advanced were, firstly, that graduates were becoming increasingly internationally mobile, and the professional accreditors would therefore have a strong incentive to recognise each others' judgements (across borders); and secondly, that the desired graduate achievements or learning outcomes are the same in any country (engineering materials have the same strength, accounting numbers add to the same sum). The signing of the Washington Accord in engineering in 1989 gave impetus to this expectation.

5.2 The Washington Accord

The Washington Accord is an international agreement among bodies responsible for accrediting engineering degree program in each of the signatory countries. It recognizes the substantial equivalency of programs accredited by those bodies, and recommends that graduates of accredited programs in any of the signatory countries be recognized by the other countries as having met the academic requirements for entry to the practice of engineering. The original six signatories were associations in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, UK and USA. Subsequently, Hong Kong, South Africa, Japan and Singapore have joined. India and Malaysia are working towards recognition. The process for licensing or registration of professional engineers differs among countries, in particular, it differs among the Washington Accord signatory countries. Hence registration or licensure is not covered directly or in full by the Washington Accord (although it does cover the academic requirements which are part of licensing /regulation requirements).

Learning outcomes are particularly significant (or should be) in professional accreditation or licensure because the emphasis in these checks is on actual graduate knowledge and ability to practice the specific profession. If such professional recognition operates internationally, it can provide information on comparative standards between countries.

However, progress in international recognition in professional disciplines has slowed down, This is probably because it is possible to get discipline experts to agree, but impossible to get governments to take a step that they see as resigning their sovereignty. The most impressive progress has been made in recent years by ECA in Europe with mutual recognition between **general** accreditors. Some professional areas moving towards a global comparability are as follows.

5.3 International Union of Architects (UIA)

The UNESCO-UIA Validation System, which was created in 2002, recognised the Japanese System (under the Japan Accreditation Board for Engineering Education – JABEE) and the Korean system (KAAB – see above) in May 2009 for five-year periods. A Kazakh study program was validated for only three years with qualifications. The UNESCO-UIA Charter for Architectural Education, the UNESCO-UIA Validation System for Architectural Education is currently being revised for agreement by the UIA Assembly at its next meeting in Tokyo, Japan in September 2011 (Cox, 2010).

In 2006, the UIA together with the American Institute of Architects (AIA) convened a meeting in Washington of representatives from countries that had a well established accreditation system for architecture at the professional level. There was sufficient interest and commonality to advance the idea of an international accord that recognises architectural qualifications. A year later, a meeting in Ottawa reviewed in detail the policies, criteria and procedures for accreditation across all participating jurisdictions. There was seen to be substantial equivalence, so, at a further meeting (in Canberra in 2008), an accord was signed (the 'Canberra Accord'). This echoes the Washington Accord for Engineering (Holden, 2010). All systems within the Canberra Accord are to be reviewed for compliance every six years, starting in 2010 with the systems in Mexico and Korea (Henderson, 2010).

5.4 International Federation of Nurse Anesthetists (IFNA)

Education, practice and ethical standards were adopted by IFNA in the early 1990s, but remained as guidelines for 10 years. A few years ago, this was developed into an accreditation process which was tested on some pilot programs in 2008 and 2009. The international accreditation process was launched in 2010 in The Netherlands. There is also a lot of work in other health areas.

5.5 International Registry of Counsellor Education Programs (IRCEP)

IRCEP was created in 2009 by the US Counselling association (CACREP) in response to the growing number of enquiries to CACREP about the recognition and/or accreditation of programs outside the USA. CACREP decides to facilitate a registration process, rather than accreditation, as there is such variety world-wide. Making any global specifications with adequate rigour would have made them of limited utility.

IRCEP will therefore develop standards relating to the scope of the counselling curriculum, approve programs that meet those standards, and promote excellence through networks of counsellor educators.

5.6 AACSB/ ABET/ EQUIS

AACSB and ABET are not themselves international networks or consortia, but do carry out accreditation in many countries. They are therefore mechanisms for international consistency and comparison.

AACSB accreditation requires the specification of learning goals and demonstration of their achievement for key general, management-specific, and/or appropriate discipline-specific knowledge and skills that its students achieve in each undergraduate degree program. At the course level, faculty members normally have very detailed learning goals. AACSB standards are not so detailed, but directed at program-level learning goals of a more general nature, and still tend towards an input emphasis.

5.7 INQAAHE Working Group

In 2008, INQAAHE established a working group on professional accreditation to provide focused support to INQAAHE members who are professional accreditors. Its aim is to help professional and specialised accreditors with the challenges they are facing in globalising or in other international efforts. Challenges identified by participants in meetings held by the working group include:

- Global standards and how standards are influenced by cultural differences
- Balancing local and national autonomy with international expectations.
- High costs of an effective international evaluation system
- Language issues
- Why institutions or programs want accreditation from another country
- Relations between accreditors from different countries.
- International governance issues

This serves as a good summary of the issues relating to learning outcomes in the professional fields. Mutual recognition in general QA need only testify to the proper achievement of a level of academic ability. In a professional discipline, the specific curriculum and student achievement of specific competencies is essential. This is easier in less culturally dependent subjects, but the continued monitoring is likely to be expensive in any subject.

5.8 Multi-national Employers

Multi-national employers employ graduates from different countries for the same (or analogous) jobs, and this gives them an excellent perspective for comparing the level of graduates in different countries. There is potential for quality agencies to work more closely with such employers to achieve and monitor consistency and comparability.

6 Alternatives to Professional Accreditation

While professional accreditors are common in the USA and some countries of the British Commonwealth, this system is absent from many countries. In Latin America, for example, the focus within universities themselves has historically been on professional training, not general education. Students graduating from a professional program could therefore move straight into professional practice. This approach was supported by the elite and selective nature of the small university system: with few universities, only the most highly qualified students were admitted. In this situation, achievement of a degree at an appropriate standard sufficed to certify readiness to take up the profession.

Over recent decades, however, in common with the rest of the world, student numbers have increased. Now 40-50% of the cohort go on to higher education, and so they bring with them no common culture and no general skills that can be assumed by the HE education institutions.

Into this undergraduate system, built along the French model (the Napoleonic university, focused on the professions), there began to be introduced master's programs, based on the US model. Since in the US model, professional training is provided at the masters' level, graduates did the same thing twice: professional training as undergraduates, and professional training again at the masters' level. This approach was therefore not a solution to the need for professional validation.

The HE system is therefore confronting three problems:

- Remediation ...
- ... but without weakening the essential professional training, and
- Separate certification of professional skills, e.g. through supervised professional practice.

The last of these begins to move the system closer to that which exists in countries that have been accustomed for many years to having associations in professional disciplines such as law, engineering and medicine.

Most EQAs in Latin America therefore focus on program accreditation, with a strong emphasis on Expected learning outcomes (ELOs) and a definition of basic contents. Reviewers in many cases involve not only academics but also representatives from professional associations. Hence EQAs are looking at:

- Expected learning outcomes
- Content
- Internships
- Graduation requirements

7 Impact of QA?

7.1 Identifying Cause and Effect

Rather as the growth in student numbers has increased the concern for the quality of the education they receive and led to the creation of EQAs to address this concern, so the corresponding growth in number of EQAs has increased the concern that they should be useful and cost-effective.

EQAs are asked 'what use are you?', 'what effect do you have?' These are not easy questions to answer. Some changes are plausibly consequences of EQAs and their actions, but there are so many other forces at work in HE that it is often difficult to separate the effects of each. Furthermore, there is commonly an asymmetry in reactions to observed changes in HE. While the difficult in unequivocally identifying the cause of the positive changes is acknowledged, there is a widespread tendency to blame EQAs for any negative changes.

A case study of 29 HE institutions in 14 countries was carried out in the late 1990s under the auspices of the OECD. Although this is now very old in the context of QA development, the summary is still largely applicable today: "In the lives of the institutions in this study, external quality assessment and the agencies which support it were essentially noises 'off stage': occasionally a nuisance, sometimes threatening, now and then quite useful, but on the whole just a 'fact of life' in an increasingly complex environment. This is not to imply that external quality assessment has failed to make an impact on HE institutions. Far from it. Virtually all of the case study institutions were able to report changes which had occurred, at least indirectly, as a result of quality assessment. It was just that there were large external forces acting on HE. In different contexts, quality assessment could act as an agent of these large forces or as a source of resistance to them" (Brennan & Shah, 1999)

This general view is endorsed a decade later by a survey of 120 senior managers in Australian universities. On a 5-point Likert scale, the statement 'I believe that AUQA audits, together with the internal and external operating environment have played a key role in improving quality assurance in my university' scored 4.09, with an explicit satisfaction rating of 89%. However, when respondents were requested to pick, of five options, which factors had had the greatest impact on the institution in the previous five years, funding was first and government policies second. Audit was only fifth (Shah, 2010; see also Woodhouse, 2011c).

7.2 Internal and External QA

EQAs are generally established with good intent, and should create systems that are consistent with that intent. EQAs should avoid creating time-consuming procedures and unproductive demands on institutions. However, even if the EQA avoids these pitfalls, it is very relevant how university management takes up the EQA requirements and 'imposes' them internally. Academics don't take kindly to being 'managed' and

will dislike anything that appears to increase the amount or intrusion of management. In this vein, there is a tendency (perhaps most evident in the UK) to claim that EQA has caused a sharp increase in bureaucratic internal quality management. Moon (1999) went so far as to depict internal quality management processes as undesirable, while the external ones are positive in triggering alternative views and providing independent comment on problems and deficiencies.

Dubois claims that strong university government looks for evaluation and is strengthened by it (Dubois, 1998). This suggests that the emphasis of QA should be on IQA, and a major role of EQA is to ensure that IQA exists and to validate its effects. The UAE Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) places great emphasis on institutions having a strong IQA ('institutional effectiveness') system (Commission for Academic Accreditation, 2011).

But if institutional management intrusion and control has increased, EQA is only one plausible cause. There is in addition a global tendency to a management style generally called 'new public management', and HE institutions are much bigger and more complex than previously and hence need more active management. The days of the gentleman-scholar vice-chancellor are long gone, and this is not the fault of EQA. It is true, however, that some institution managements take the opportunity of the advent of greater external quality checks or oversight to add a good many more of their own, and represent the totality as being what 'they' require.

7.3 Links to Funding

It has often been stated that EQA activities should not be linked to funding. The main rationale for this is that it encourages compliance – as if compliance were an undesirable phenomenon. Yet, if the compliance is with the funding body's intent, it is clearly good and successful. (Whether the funding body's intent is good is clearly a valid – but prior – question. We take that as the starting point.) When compliance is depicted as undesirable, it is being equated with 'superficial compliance'. This denotes acting so as to achieve the indicators, even if the underlying intent of the indicators is not achieved; or even if it is to the detriment of other areas or activities not currently being measured. Another argument against a funding link to EQA is the dilemma of whether to fund to reward the good or to fund to improve the bad.

Despite these problems, allowing quality checks to have **some** impact on funding makes a lot of sense because it is both a strong and a flexible incentive. Rigid funding formulae encourage indicator compliance and should be avoided. But it is highly beneficial and effective if the EQA, or related funding body, has the flexibility to either provide resources to rectify problems or choose to develop a promising area.

In Australia, for example, there were annual audits of the universities in the period 1993-95, as a result of which the universities were graded into bands (six bands in the first year, a bit different in the next two years). Institutions in the top band got a 3% bonus on their government funding, down to 0.5% in the bottom band. The benefit of this was that **everyone** got something, and that something was at least enough to

cover the institution's costs of the exercise. The most notable other beneficial effect of the three-year operation was to elevate the status of teaching and to encourage people to talk about teaching and how to improve it.

As another example, from Hong Kong, the University Grants Committee refused to allocate funds to one university for more research students until it corrected some defects identified by a UGC review in its oversight and support of research students (Massy & French, 1999).

7.4 Reviewing Programs and Institutions

Program review is often seen as having direct program-level impact – for good or ill. Academics enjoy interacting with discipline colleagues, although they do not necessarily agree with the instructions or advice. It is possible for the EQA to demand such extensive and documented evidence that the academics feel the time spent on this activity is a waste. However, many institutions (and their students) have suffered from an absence of the sort of systems demanded by EQAs. A balance is necessary.

Institution review on the other hand can be remote from the real education and research activities that are the purpose of the institution. Institution level review is more suited to the mature institution that has good practices in place, with the review checking that they work. Nonetheless, this check should include sampling at the lowest levels to ascertain whether the processes work (unless for some reason it is specifically a management review). This neatly combines the benefits of institutional and program review. All programs need to keep up to scratch, if it is not known in advance which will be selected for detailed scrutiny. The IQA should ensure, for example, that comprehensive and thorough program review is occurring systematically and regularly, and the external review can validate (or otherwise) this – again, the EQA supporting the IQA.

7.5 Positives and Negatives

The following is a brief roundup of some reported or observed positive or negative effects at system or institution level. (In addition to references quoted above, see Torre & Zapata (2012) for the Latin-American examples.)

System positives

- Removing poor quality operators / institutions (Chile, Romania, Timor Leste, UAE)
- Increased HE funding (Israel)
- 'Valuable to society' (CHEA survey of USA university presidents)
- Better data available (Latin-America)
- More information publicly available (Australia)
- More foreign students in the system (Australia)
- Publication of good models to copy and pitfalls to avoid (Australia etc)

- The stigma attached to new forms of education (such as on-line learning) can be dissipated through the EQA's external independent objective validation of outcomes and quality, and situating the new form within the current context. (India)

Institution positives

- Improved attention to teaching (Hong Kong, Latin-America, UK)
- Greater recognition of teaching (Australia, Latin-America, UK)
- Institutions live up to the criteria set by the EQA (Sweden, UAE)
- Improved data systems (Latin-America, USA)
- Improved planning (Australia, USA)
- Proactive use of external EQA attention to focus on internal needs (Australia)
- Staff removed (Australia, UAE)
- Strengthening of overseas education (Australia)
- Attention to learning outcomes, assessment and qualifications frameworks to deal with a larger and more diverse student population (Europe and globally)
- Strengthened internal QA mechanisms (Pakistan, UAE)

Institution negatives

- Increased management, administration, bureaucracy (UK)
- Increased paperwork (widespread)
- Opportunity cost (Widespread)
- Managing to the audit (Australia, New Zealand)
- Deterring innovation (UK and elsewhere)

System negatives

Very few negative effects are reported at system level. The criticisms at system level have rather been of the absence of effects, i.e. inadequacy or lack of impact. That is, not 'you are having a bad effect' but 'you are not having an effect'. Current criticisms of general accreditation in the USA are along the lines of 'you are the door-keeper for federal funds to students, but look how many fail and how many default'. Related to this, some EQAs are criticised for not having carried out their activities very well.

8 The Future

Despite the great number of EQAs, existing in many different cultural contexts, many agencies have similar features. INQAAHE and ENQA, among others, have contributed to this by identifying 'good practices' (the Guidelines of Good Practice and the European Standards and Guidelines, respectively, mentioned earlier, section 3.2).

However, higher education is throwing up many challenges, including different types of education, different types of institutions, different objectives for education – and different types of students. It is a matter of lively and vital current debate whether

models of EQA can remain unchanged or evolve, or whether radically new models are needed. Maybe we are about to see a 'fourth wave' of QA (see section 2.1)?

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