Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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MESSAGE BY

Dear colleagues,

The Education Sector is called to implement a significant and broad mandate, covering many challenging issues in education in a diverse and fast-changing world. More than ever, we need to better focus and ensure greater cohesion in implementing this mandate. This document is part of a series of Technical Notes that have been developed by colleagues in the Education Sector in order to facilitate programme delivery in thematic areas related to the work of the Sector. The Technical Notes are meant to serve as a quick reference tool for UNESCO staff, providing a brief overview including basic knowledge, key priorities for UNESCO and future directions as well as practical information on each topic. They will be available both in print and electronic versions, and they will be updated regularly.

I hope that the Technical Notes will be useful in your daily work.

Qian Tang,
Assistant Director-General for Education

At a glance

At the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education, UNESCO and its Member States were called upon to pursue capacity-building for quality assurance in higher education in Member States, particularly developing countries, and to put in place and strengthen appropriate quality assurance systems and regulatory frameworks with the involvement of all stakeholders. This call to action came on the heels of unprecedented growth in the rate of higher education participation worldwide – from 19% of the age cohort in 2000 to 26% in 2007. Globally, enrolments have increased fivefold in less than 40 years. Global enrolment in 2000 was 97 million; it is estimated that it will reach 263 million in 2025 (UIS, 2011).

This increase correlates with greater completion rates from primary and secondary school, and is driven by the global economy's need for highly-skilled labour. As a result, higher education has seen rapid expansion in the number and variety of providers (e.g. private institutions, open universities, cross-border providers and short-cycle providers) available to absorb such demand.

In this context, it is increasingly important to incorporate a culture of quality assurance (QA) into the day-to-day operations of higher education systems, institutions and programmes. QA refers to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating – assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving – the quality of higher education provided. Developing a culture of quality requires strong, committed stewardship from local and global leaders in higher education, as QA can only be effective when all stakeholders understand and embrace its challenges and benefits.

Defining the issue

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education is a systematic process of assessing and verifying inputs, outputs and outcomes against standardized benchmarks of quality, to maintain and enhance quality, ensure greater accountability and facilitate harmonization of standards across academic programmes, institutions and systems. QA can take many forms, ranging from simple self-assessment to more comprehensive inspection, accreditation, review or audit(s) supported by external, independent peer review. Building capacity for quality assurance that meets international standards requires significant investment in technical assistance, training, knowledge sharing, analysis and coordination, which are costly and time-consuming.
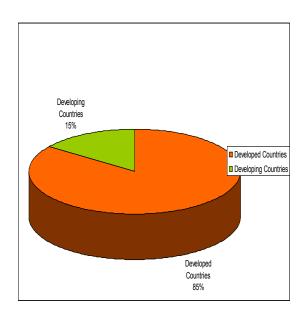
Context and trends

Since the 1990s, quality and quality assurance have become the key themes for higher education almost everywhere. Concerns have been raised about the production or output of higher education institutions – about whether societies are getting real value for their investments in higher education. Although circumstances vary from country to country, several broad trends have contributed to growing governmental interest in establishing policy mechanisms to ensure quality and accountability in higher education. Of particular significance is the trend towards mass higher education. At present, global enrolment in higher education is 165 million students worldwide (UIS, 2011). Within the last decade alone, many countries have seen a tremendous increase in this enrolment, and in some countries it has increased more than five times. With the development of mass higher education, a greater diversity of educational offerings has emerged. Different types of institutions have been established, proposing a variety of study programmes and modes of instructional delivery as ways to accommodate rapid enrolment expansion and increasing demand for higher education. Another response has been the rapid growth of a private sector in higher education; in certain countries it amounts to almost 30% of the students registered in higher education institutions (WCHE, 2009). The number of trans-border higher education and for-profit providers is growing in magnitude. The value of trade in higher education was estimated at about US$ 30 billion in 1999, accounting for 3% of the total service trade in OECD countries (Larsen, OECD, 2002), and US$ 40 billion in 2006 (Bubtana, 2007). By 2005, education spending on higher education in OECD countries, both private and public, had grown to around US$ 2.5 trillion. In 2006, the private higher education market was estimated to be worth US$ 400 billion globally. Another aspect of the cross-border revolution in education can be seen in the growth of virtual learning environments, on-line learning and e-universities.

With these increasingly diverse and continuously growing systems of higher education, quality and quality assurance are becoming a central concern. Within individual countries, there is a persistent debate about whether new forms of quality assurance for higher education are needed, and what approaches would be most effective. Internationally, a consensus is emerging, especially around the core elements of a quality assurance approach that is appropriate for higher education. These elements, particularly for developing countries, include: semi-autonomous QA agencies (buffer bodies); explicit standards and expectations; self-evaluation by academic institutions; professional bodies, written recommendations; public reporting; and attention to both process (i.e. capacity) and results (Babikir in GUNI, 2007).

UNESCO's work in the field of quality assessment, quality assurance and accreditation

Confronted with the pressing issues and concerns on quality assurance and accreditation and the need to eradicate problems that hamper the development of higher education, notably in developing countries, certain measures have been taken at national and regional levels. Great strides have been made with UNESCO's six Conventions on the Recognition of Qualifications, which are legally-binding instruments aimed at promoting and facilitating academic mobility via the recognition of qualifications from foreign higher education systems. The establishment of robust national quality assurance mechanisms for higher education is a key component of successful implement-ation of the Conventions, since they build international confidence in the rigour of a country's higher education institutions and qualifications, thereby significantly increasing recognition and inward and outward mobility of learners, learning and labour.

Private higher education market by development stats (%, 2009)

With globalization, and in particular with the General Agreement for Trade and Services (GATS), pressures have increased to establish measures and mechanisms for quality assurance in education in general and in higher education in particular. Further to the 1998 Recommendations of the World Conference on Higher Education, the Communiqué issued by the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education: The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development, specified six articles in the section for Access, Equity and Quality, which are also in conformity with the EFA goals. The Communiqué also made several recommendations including: mechanisms for quality assurance and evaluation; mechanisms for teaching staff and necessity for promotion of staff development; focusing priorities on development of curricula and mode of instructional delivery; required measurements to monitor and follow-up students during their studies; strengthening infrastructure; and the promotion of human resources and capacities to perform scientific research (Articles 12-21 Communiqué, 2009).

UNESCO key priorities and future directions

In conformity with its 2012-2013 programme and budget (36 C/5), UNESCO will intensify its response to Member States' call for technical support in building higher education systems that can effectively meet their development challenges. The Organization will thus work to strengthen Member States' capacity to assure the quality of diversified provision, including cross-border higher education. One of the key risks of expanding and diversifying higher education provision is a potential decline in quality. UNESCO will continue to support Member States' efforts to build higher education quality assurance systems based on a variety of accountability tools. UNESCO will use its clearinghouse function to share quality assurance and accountability approaches through policy advice, advocacy, and capacity building activities to enhance quality assurance standards in higher education at national level(s), such as the assessment of learning outcomes. Special attention will also be paid to national and regional higher education reforms.

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As the only UN Agency with a mandate in higher education, UNESCO works with ministries, international agencies and other implementing partners in 195 countries in an effort to provide leadership and support standard setting and capacity building in higher education. With initial funding provided by the World Bank, the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance and Capacity (GIQAC) was launched in 2007 and implemented by UNESCO. The initiative promotes quality assurance in higher education in developing countries and countries-in-transition by facilitating and advancing the efforts of its participating inter-regional and regional quality assurance networks. The project, which is ongoing and financed by the Republic of Korea, builds on UNESCO's work through the Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications and through the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education for the Caribbean region. Similar initiatives are underway for Africa and the Arab States regions.

These activities involve:

◗ **Situation analysis and documentation.** In order for QA to be effective, it is essential to have a clear picture of the situation of QA in higher education in different countries, particularly in developing countries. At the very least, this requires gathering existing information at the country and regional levels and, at a later stage, may involve actively seeking new information and ensuring significant data collection.

◗ **Advocacy.** UNESCO can play a significant role in advocating QA at different levels: policy-makers, both at national and regional levels; higher education systems and institutions; quality assurance entities; and the public in general. Various strategies can be used to attain advocacy objectives, including holding meetings and seminars to disseminate information on QA in higher education, taking advantage of contacts between existing QA network member organizations to discuss QA issues in different forums, gathering and disseminating information on issues related to the quality of higher education, and highlighting the ways in which QA can contribute to socio-economic development.

◗ **Capacity building.** This constitutes one of the core activities of the Education Sector. It can be carried out in different areas of QA and should be developed over time.

   i. *Capacity building for existing QA agencies*. The focus here could be on an analysis of the links between QA processes and the needs of specific higher education systems and institutions; and on ways to work with higher education institutions (HEIs), both to promote QA in general as well as internal QA processes. The end result of these activities would be to strengthen the main constituent members of QA agencies and thus engage them in advocacy of QA and the support of emerging QA mechanisms.

   ii. *Capacity building in Member States where there are no QA arrangements in place, or where these are being developed*. Actions in these cases will be focused on governmental agencies and HEIs. This is an especially significant area for collaboration between UNESCO and its Member States, most notably in Member States where QA mechanisms are lacking and need to be developed.

   iii. *Working with regional and sub-regional networks of quality assurance*. This will help develop a common language, share good practices, learn about possible ways of collaboration and be mutually-supportive of respective initiatives.

Priority Africa and Priority Gender Equality: The 2009 World Conference on Higher Education gave special focus to the revitalization of higher education in Africa, underscoring the critical need to confront emerging challenges relating to gender inequality, academic freedom, brain drain and graduates' lack of preparedness for the labour market. The same Conference underlined the urgency of developing new dynamics that work towards a comprehensive transformation of higher education systems in order to significantly enhance its relevance and responsiveness to socio-economic development, calling for UNESCO's support in setting up national, sub-regional and regional quality assurance systems, and fast-tracking the initiative of the African Association of Universities (AAU). Consequent to the above, a road map for the implementation of the programme on gender and transformative leadership in African universities was developed. An outline of curriculum and modules are being drafted by gender specialists from the Universities of Ghana, the Gambia and Liberia, in close collaboration with Rutgers University (USA) FAWE, ECOWAS and Action Aid International.

Target groups and key partners

Target groups for promoting QA in higher education include higher education institutions, faculty members, management, researchers, students (current and future), as well as funding organizations, employers, policy-makers, and local communities.

Key partners include bilateral donors (e.g. the Republic of Korea); international organizations (e.g. the World Bank); development agencies (DAAD, AUF, CoL); development banks; regional organizations (EU, ALECSO, ISESCO); and specialized NGOs, including associations of universities and QA networks.

Key resources

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Advocacy messages

◗ Design a quality assurance framework that is coherent with the vision and consistent with the goals of higher education.

◗ Develop a strong quality culture and transparency in higher education systems, emphasizing internal quality assurance mechanisms.

◗ Develop semi-autonomous QA agencies to assure external quality assurance.

◗ Adapt quality assurance approaches and mechanisms in conformity with diversification policies, both at institutional and programme levels.

TECHNICAL NOTES

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