

International quality assurance efforts in higher education: There is a link with what is happening here in the USA

by
Fernando F. Padró
Cambridge College

There is a significant link between higher education quality assurance efforts in the USA and what is happening abroad. Issues surrounding the global economy and its diversification requiring assurance that the increasing national intellectual capital demands are being properly met are driving these efforts. So too driving QA efforts are concerns based on the impact of technology on access and delivery of instruction. And changing expectations of the role of the university regarding revenue generation and service to the community through research enter the QA as well. Not to be forgotten additional drivers for change are the changing vision of the role of the faculty and how university performance should be evaluated.

Evidence of the link between international efforts and the influence these efforts can have in higher education in this country can be seen in the continued existence of the National Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) in the *Higher Education Reauthorization Act of 2008* (Title 1, §106) to continue advising the Department of Education on the recognition of accreditors and related topics. While the underlying efforts of the *2006 Spellings Commission Report* have failed in their efforts to completely restructure quality assurance and reporting processes as pursued by accrediting bodies have dimmed in their impact, the HEA Reauthorization Act represents some trends the Commission supported such as transparency in accreditation (publishing reports), information to consumers about affordability and costs, make public transferability policies, determining graduate results (employability or furthering educational or training activities), and looking at an analysis of the regulatory environment in higher education. The Reauthorization Act in 2008 also added an international concern seen in policy documents or protocols from other countries when it added resources to identify, warn potential users, and combat “diploma mills.”

International agencies such as the OECD, UNESCO, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization to name only some of the key players, are actively involved in establishing criteria and standards for higher education systems. There are many declarations that abound creating a nexus between quality assurance in higher education and quality of life in terms of economic well-being and social integration and participation. Evidence of this approach is seen in the inclusion of education in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). Article VII (1994) specifically refers to the need for a robust quality assurance system based on standards to be in place to allow the recognition of degrees from different higher education systems. And it is the importance placed on this link that is one of the obvious driving forces of the reshaping of higher education systems in Europe undertaken by its *Bologna Process*. Under this reform movement, Europe is moving on degree standardization, setting qualifications in terms of learner outcomes, streamlining the transferability of credits, improve quality assurance, encouraging cooperation and networking, and generating transparency. The first legal entity created to engender a transnational system was the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) who drafted the standards and guidelines national systems of higher education must pursue and through which universities will be evaluated. One interesting wrinkle the European changing landscape has is a requirement for agencies to establish contact and participation with international QA bodies such as the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).

The OECD’s (2008) current volume on projections for higher education up to 2030 (ISBN 978-92-64-04065-6) points out to influences that changing demographics will have on higher education policy which, in turn, will impact notions of institutional quality for universities. However, more interesting to

this author is its prediction of changes affecting the academic teaching profession. Changes are beginning to occur challenging the traditional notions of faculty work and the relationship between faculty and higher education institutions. The Bologna Process more readily accepts the old corporatist notion of recognizing monopolies of interests, hence faculty units are listened to. Here and in other parts of the world, this recognition is not as firm, hence the animosity of groups such as the AAUP when it comes to the call to generate more appropriate quality assurance measures. So, rather than not paying attention to what is happening abroad to the different QA efforts that are taking place, faculty as well as administrators and policy makers should make themselves more aware of what is happening. For those of us who are knowledgeable with what is happening abroad, the nexus is apparent regardless of personal approval or opprobrium. Nevertheless, many of the practices that seem to be coming to higher education are being generated elsewhere through the efforts of international agencies and national systems who want to become stronger competitors in the international education arena.