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1. Descriptive

ACHIEVEMENTS
• The quality imperative has pervaded the higher education systems
  – Most institutions have established internal QA procedures
  – Most programmes/institutions are subject to formal external QA procedures
  – Most academic staff are conscious of a stronger QA regime and comply with it
  – Most students do not actively participate to, but acknowledge the existence of QA systems
Achievements

• A common approach to QA has been developed and institutionalised
  – General acceptance of some basic rules and ‘good practice’
  – Crucial role of INQAAHE and regional associations
  – Still too many national idiosyncrasies, endangering the automatic mutual recognition of QA decisions and, in turn, the automatic recognition of degrees
  – Development of meta-evaluation and registration procedures of QA agencies
Achievements

• Internal and external QA have a positive impact on the quality of education provision at programme and institutional level
  – Ensuring that most programmes meet threshold quality standards and sub-threshold provision has been improved or closed down
  – QA has successfully addressed the education function of HE, balancing the strong priority for research
  – Institutional leadership with regard to quality has been strengthened as part of general reinforcement of strategic management capacities
1. Descriptive RISKS
Risks

• Bureaucratisation, formalism and ‘legalism’
  – QA has been ‘captured’ in procedures and regulations, in which completing forms and ‘ticking boxes’ in standardised questionnaires becomes the norm
  – Legalistic procedures lead to extreme formalism and avoid risk-taking behaviour of evaluators
  – Formalising QA procedures often increase the difficulties for peers to ‘read’ the actual situation in programmes or institutions
• **Window-dressing in the reputation race**
  – Many procedures still give ample space to window-dressing behaviour or superficial compliance
  – Institutions are increasingly relying on ‘professional’ quality managers who have to guarantee the smooth processing of reviews
  – Each new review or assessment has to cope with the collective learning process to better survive the test
• Balancing accountability and improvement functions has proven to be quite difficult
  – Stringent external accountability functions endanger internal improvement functions, expose the academic professionals, and threatens the legitimacy of the QA regime in the academic community
  – Too much emphasis on improvement and enhancement functions takes the critical edge off the evaluation process
Risks

• Cost and workload involved in QA may be very high indeed
  – Cost is an issue in many countries, but direct monetary cost is in most cases still acceptable
  – State funding for QA agencies is sometimes seen by institutions as diverting their legitimate resources
  – Non-monetary cost in hidden staff time and all kinds of ‘grey’ activities probably is very high
• Most QA schemes still rely too much on input and process standards
  – QA standards and procedures defined from a supply-side or delivery perspective: is what is delivered to students of sufficient quality?
  – Tendencies towards learning outcomes still very hesitant: AHELO (OECD) projects needs more institutional and political support, because it could nurture QA with empirical evidence on actually achieved learning outcomes
• Most QA schemes apply standards situated at threshold level
  – Little support and acceptance of attempts to diversify quality statements or labels above threshold level
  – Little incentives generated by QA for good programmes to further improve themselves towards excellence and to market themselves as such
• Limits of peer review methodologies
  – Peer review is a very powerful method of inter-collegial assessment in professional environments
  – But it’s also very sensitive to personal opinions and existing debates in a disciplinary field
  – Generational dimension: aged colleagues coming to assess younger colleagues/rivals
  – Independence of peers in some cases still is an issue, because of impact of networks, friendship or hostility, and competition and rivalry in academia
  – Use of international peers limited due to cost and language issues
Risks

• In general, still limited internalisation of ‘quality culture’ in institutions
  – Emergence of formal QA regimes may have eroded informal collegial control
  – Still relatively high internal tolerance for visible and sometimes acknowledged lack of quality
2. Analytic

A GOVERNANCE ANALYSIS
A governance analysis

• Need to look deeper into what really is happening in terms of the general governance of higher education systems

• In many countries, and in line with New Public Management concepts, external QA was introduced as part of the exchange between institutional autonomy and public accountability
A governance analysis

• New forms of steering replacing old control and command forms of public regulation
  – Steering on output and performance, incl quality
  – Guaranteeing level-playing field in ‘quasi-markets’
  – Trusting sectoral and institutional self-regulation

• Institutions gaining more autonomy
  – Strengthening internal governance, leadership and management
  – Increasing inter-institutional competition, also on an international level
A governance analysis

- QA became situated at the crossroads of the main rationales defining the HE arena, each defining its dimension of *quality*
  - **Public policy rationale**: efficiency, rationalisation, access, relevance, productivity
  - **Institutional rationale**: autonomy, expansion, cohesion, market share, revenue generation
  - **Market rationale**: rankings, reputation race and competition, world-class status
  - **Academic rationale**: academic freedom, flexible networks, research driven, scientific quality
A governance analysis

• QA was seen as linking and integrating the various rationales into a coherent notion of quality
  – Serving public accountability (including public information function)
  – Supporting the internal quality culture of autonomous institutions
  – Increasing market transparency
  – Trusted by academia and researchers

• The emergence of QA rested on the assumption of a harmonious development of the system
A governance analysis

Quality Assurance - intended

Public policy

Institutional autonomy

Academia

Market
A governance analysis

• But, in reality, the assumed changes in the governance of HE systems did not happen as foreseen
  – The dimensions developed in antagonistic directions
  – Increasing tensions between the main rationales in the higher education governance system
• As a result, QA systems becomes increasingly vulnerable to these systemic contradictions
A governance analysis

- *Governments* have not really decreased their regulatory power
  - Many recent HE policies include an increase in intervention (e.g. UK)
  - Systemic considerations (‘Bologna Process’, ‘innovation’, ‘the knowledge economy’) are seen as a legitimate reasons for increasing regulation
  - New levels of regulation in a system of ‘multi-level governance’

☞ *Governments increasingly define QA as a tool of public policy and accountability*
• *Institutions* have missed the opportunity to assume real autonomy
  – Defining autonomy almost exclusively as territorial ‘negative liberty’ (“free of”), and less so as ‘positive liberty’ (“free to”)
  – Leadership and internal management generally is not strong enough for real autonomy
  – Institutions wrongly perceive QA as something which makes them vulnerable

➤ *Institutions no longer see QA as a tool of self-regulated institutional development*
A governance analysis

- *(Quasi-*)Markets have emerged, with (international) competition, but without some essential elements
  - Despite rankings etc., transparency has not significantly improved, but has suffered from the institutional reputation race
  => QA has been increasingly taken-over by a desire of HE systems to function as markets but without real transparency
A governance analysis

- **Academic and research rationale** is still very strong, even the backbone of HE systems, but increasingly self-centred and inward-looking
  - Difficulties in identifying the long-term public policy perspectives
  - Opposing marketisation and commodification

⇒ **QA is no longer trusted by academia as belonging to their own realm (equivalent to peer review in research)**
A governance analysis

- Quality Assurance - intended
- Quality Assurance - realised

Public policy

Institutional autonomy

Academia

Market
Instead of becoming a tool of transparency and public trust in a quasi-market supported by academia, QA risks to be captured in a deadlock between

– Governments looking to increase their capacity to intervene and regulate
– Institutions frustrated in their desire for autonomy
– Market forces resisting real transparency
– Academia distrusting the added-value
3. Prospective Strategies
• QA in HE functions best
  – When it is at arm lengths of governments, while maintaining a strong public policy focus
  – When it supports institutional autonomy by demonstrating how QA can help to improve
  – When it enhances the transparency and trust at system level in a ‘quasi-market’ situation
  – When it is fundamentally trusted by academia as being part of their own sphere
1. Be a driver of *innovation* in the system
2. Focus on what is really *relevant* to academia, institutions, students and society
3. Positively recognise institutional *diversity*
4. Invest in your main capital which is *trust*. 
Strategy 1. Innovation

• For quite some time, QA was one of the most powerful drivers of innovation in HE
• When institutionalising, standardising and mainstreaming, the risk of conservatism grows
• QA should again become one of the main innovation-oriented forces in the system
  – QA tools for innovative practices
  – Innovators belong in peer-review panels
  – Linking and networking with other innovation-oriented forces
Strategy 2. Relevance

• After 20 years of QA, it is no longer necessary to check all standards and indicators of quality

• Focusing more on what really matters, will help to restore the balance
  – Outputs and outcomes, more specifically learning outcomes
  – Complementing and correcting reputation-oriented transparency tools by providing real information on achieved quality
Strategy 3. Diversity

• It is critically important to escape the risk of standardisation, by tuning to the real diversity in students and institutional profiles
  – By critically making our tools and instruments more flexible and sophisticated (‘smart quality assurance’)
  – By accepting that ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches are not going to help in a diversifying world
  – This may involve a process of ‘de-standardisation’
Strategy 4. Trust

• Trust is probably the most important capital of the QA system and community, but that capital is not at a reassuring high level
  – Invest more in restoring trust levels in academia and institutions
  – By demonstrating the added-value of being a ‘critical friend’
  – Convincing them that real openness and transparency is at the core of the academic value system and that reputation races are not sustainable
Thank you!

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