

MODULE 1: HIGHER EDUCATION IN A GLOBAL WORLD: THE CONTEXT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

INTRODUCTION

An understanding of the higher education context in which quality assurance agencies operate is an essential foundation for the design of good quality assurance practices and accountability. This module, as the title suggests, sets out to introduce you to the trends in higher education at a time when national boundaries are melting away and the world has become more globalised than it has ever been.

There are some who argue that the foundations of our contemporary concern with quality in higher education goes back to, at least, medieval times when the professors in the universities of Bologna and Paris were put under a bond by the student guilds to ensure the teachers lived up to the detailed regulations of the university and provided value for the fees the students paid. (Charles, 2007). However, while there were some very significant developments in university structures and the way they operated in 19th century Europe and the US, it was not until the latter part of the 20th century that concerns with quality assurance and accountability came into the sharp focus that it enjoys today.

Starting in the 1960s, higher education institutions (HEIs) began to open their doors to provide opportunities for a wide spectrum of student ability from the previous situation where they catered only for the elite students who had exclusive access to higher education. This ‘massification’ of education led to concerns in society at large that the quality of higher education programs was being compromised and that earlier standards were not being met. By the 1980s governments were wrestling with this and other questions around the quality of the output of the numerous higher education institutions they had established to meet the expanding numbers of students. The dilemma was how to ensure quality but also how to continue to meet the need for large numbers of graduates to drive the new information-based economies. At that point there was an ideological shift in government thinking world-wide about the role of government and a realisation that instead of trying to regulate for quality, as the medieval students guilds had attempted, it would be possible to evaluate the quality of institutions and programs through an elaborate process of peer review. From this came the establishment, with government assistance in most cases, of agencies that are in the business of evaluating institutions and programs and reporting their assessments - usually to the general public. These agencies are referred to as ‘external quality agencies’ or EQAs.

But before we come to consider the phenomenon of EQAs worldwide we need to examine the global context in which they operate. In Unit 1 you will learn about the huge increase in patterns of demand for higher education and the impact of demographic shifts on student populations. The impact of market philosophies will also be considered in detail and how this has changed the balance of funding from largely public to include major private expenditure on higher education. Unit 2 shows you how the new

information technologies have changed the way higher education is organised and delivered and it also discusses the emergence of the state as the evaluator as well as regulator of education.

The focus of Unit 3 is on globalisation and internationalisation of education and introduces the remarkable developments contributing to student and staff mobility in addition to encouraging alliances between institutions and across borders.

In Unit 4 you will learn about the different types of qualifications offered by higher education institutions and the frameworks that have emerged to make different systems more compatible so that students and graduates can move with ease from country to country. Unit 4 also has some discussion of the new modes of delivery and the diverse types of students enrolling in higher education. It demonstrates just how far the sector has come from catering almost exclusively for an elite group of full-time, on-campus, students.

The final unit, Unit 5, turns your attention to the governance and management of higher education institutions. It looks at universities as organisations and examines aspects such as the different functions they perform, the culture and their leadership. This unit also gives information on the range of networks of universities that exist nationally and internationally.

Extensive reading lists are provided in the module along with key websites to give you the main sources you will need to consult for general reading and for completing various learning activities and assessment tasks.

The material for this Module was prepared by a team of international quality assurance practitioners convened and supported by INQAAHE (International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies), with support also from the World Bank. Hence the perspective is international with examples drawing on a huge range of national and regional quality assurance agencies. This will give you the widest possible exposure to global practices and to the ideas of leading practitioners on the international scene. But, inevitably, with such international authorship comes some variation in the use of terms, citation styles and abbreviations within and between different parts of the Module. While we have done our best to ensure that the meaning of terms is clear in the contexts in which they occur you will need to adapt to the variations as you work through the materials. As you do further reading you will realise this adaptation is also required when you move outside your own national and regional boundaries to work with the literature of quality assurance agencies in other places.

The objectives of this Module are:

- To identify the major trends in higher education globally including the increases in demand and demographic shifts in student populations

- To show the impact of new political and market ideologies on the shape of the sector and a consequent variety of providers and students
- To discuss the impact of new technologies on how and where students learn
- To demonstrate the impact on the sector of globalisation and internationalisation
- To outline the different systems of higher education qualifications and the emergence of frameworks and agreements to harmonise these to improve the portability of qualifications and prior studies
- To discuss governance and management of higher education institutions with attention to organisational aspects, governance, resources, and key functions
- To highlight the range networks of HEIs at local, national and international level
- To indicate key contextual factors leading to the burgeoning of quality assurance agencies

At the end of the module you will be able to:

- Understand the broad trends leading to the contemporary concern with accountability and quality assurance of higher education institutions
- Discuss global trends in education including growth in enrolments, demographic shifts, and impact of political and market ideologies on the patterns of provision
- Outline the impact of global trends on your country and region particularly in relation to the range of public and private providers
- Discuss the impact of new technologies on education and the way that HEIs have responded by designing new modes learning
- Understand the impact of globalisation and internationalisation on the reach of HEIs
- Discuss the variety of higher education qualifications and the new frameworks designed to harmonise these at national and regional levels with reference to the impact in your country or region
- Identify the key networks of HEIs in your country and region
- Understand the dynamics of individual HEIs in terms of organisational factors, functions, resourcing, governance and so on.

Reference

Charles, C.B., (2007) The Evolution of Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Lafayetteville, NC., Lafayetteville State University School of Education Faculty Working Paper
http://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=soe_faculty_wp