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Towards a General Model of Higher Education Quality Assessment

Introduction

New systems of quality assessment are discussed in many Western European countries these days, and often the first steps are taken to start the development of such systems. In several countries it appears to be difficult to combine in these new systems of quality assessment the government's goal regarding the national higher education system on the one hand, and the views and characteristics of the higher education institutions on the other hand.

In this paper I will discuss the experiences with quality assessment in several countries, in Western Europe as well as in Canada and the United States. From this discussion I will deduce a number of important elements of a general model of higher education quality assessment. I will suggest that the elements of this general model to be presented offer a good starting-point for the development of a quality assessment system in specific countries.

Experiences in the USA and Canada

In the United States and Canada, the market is the most important form of coordination in higher education. Competition between higher education institutions is something which is generally accepted. Higher education institutions are organised on a basis which to a considerable extent is similar to private corporations. There is considerable power at the top of the higher educational institution. The institutions have a corporate board or its equivalent and a true chief executive officer.¹ The influence of governmental steering is limited in these countries.

The higher education institutions are supposed to regulate themselves, if they do not want to loose resources, students and scholars to their competitors.

In the United States the growing diversity in institutional forms and the initial lack of centrally defined standards led by the late nineteenth century to a level of chaos in the US higher education system. If the chaos would have stayed unaddressed by the institutions, it may be expected that this would have led to government intervention, something which was not very attractive to the higher education institutions. As a consequence the institutions took the initiative to develop themselves two processes of quality-assessment.²

The first process of quality-assessment is accreditation. Accreditation of a higher education institution or a specific study programme within an institution consists of a procedure of self-assessment by the organisation seeking accreditation, followed by a visit of a team of external assessors and a final discussion, by a peer-board using pre-existing accreditation standards, on the question whether or not to give accreditation. In the US accreditation has two forms. The first is institutional accreditation, conducted by regional bodies that are controlled by the higher education institutions themselves. The second form of accreditation is specialised accreditation conducted nationally by profession-controlled bodies.

The second process of quality assessment in American higher education, is the intra-institutional process of systematic review of study programmes. This review process is being used by some universities to assess programme quality, to enhance institutional decision-making, and in some cases to provide a basis for the redistribution of marginal resources within the own institution.³

In Canada, quality assessment in higher education is somewhat differently organised. In Canada quality assessment has not so much taken the form of a full process of accreditation. Only two crucial elements of the accreditation system have been chosen to implement a quality assessment approach in this country: self-assessment and the visits by peers. For example the technical schools and community colleges in British Columbia have employed such an approach, as has the provincial university of Alberta.⁴

So, in higher education systems with an emphasis on market coordination and a high level of institutional autonomy, two forms of quality assessment

have evolved. The first is a collaborative, peer-instituted and managed approach which either uses consensual pre-existing standards and actual public decisions about programme or institutional adequacy (accreditation), or else employs self-study and peer visits but does not employ standards and public decisions (as in British Columbia). The second form of quality assessment is an intra-institutional review approach which is usually oriented towards decision making at the level of the institutions.⁵

Developments in Western Europe

Contrary to the United States and Canada, the predominant form of co-ordination in the Western European higher education systems is state control. The Western European higher education systems have been heavily controlled by governments for a long period of time. In these centrally controlled Western European higher education systems the number of institutions is relatively small, the institutional autonomy is limited and the funding is generally provided by the state.

During the 1970s and the 1980s the Western European higher education systems have been confronted with a number of far-reaching changes. Most of these changes can be related in one way or another to a shift in governmental strategies towards higher education. A major underlying political force was the rise to power of conservative governments in many of these countries. The socalled value-for-money approach of these governments with respect to the public sector led to the end of the more or less unconditional government funding of public higher education. A new ideology was used to legitimise new governmental policies to “abolish wastage and anarchy”⁶. In practice this implied, among other things, that public funding of higher education was increasingly becoming linked to the performance of higher education institutions. As a consequence, the question of how to assess performance, or quality, of higher education became one of the central issues in Western European higher education in the last decade.

A second important development in higher education policy-making in Western Europe is the rise of the governmental strategy of “self-regulation”⁷. During the second half of the 1980s, the ministries of education and higher education institutions especially in the countries of northwestern Europe

have agreed upon the desirability of more self-regulation by the higher education institutions. Several governments in Western nations have advocated in this period deregulation by central ministries and increased competitiveness among the higher education institutions. As was indicated before, at the same time governments sought “value-for-money”. Governments wanted less programme duplication and more attention for societal needs. At the same time they confronted the higher education institutions with considerable financial stringency. This complex intention has been analyzed generally by Van Vught⁸ as a different form of central steering, both at “arms lengths” (with ministries “steering from a distance”), and post hoc (with an increasing emphasis on ex-post evaluation of institutional output).

The establishment of a governmental strategy which is directed towards more autonomy for higher education institutions was motivated by governmental actors by the wish to create more innovations in the systems of higher education. Also, there was to be a greater awareness on the part of society and the public about the quality of study programmes, which implied that credible quality assessment should be developed, something which was virtually non-existent in the Western European higher education systems before the 1980s.

In some Western European countries new attempts to set up quality assessment systems arose from the developments described above. A quality assessment system was either initiated by the central governmental authorities (as was the case in France and the United Kingdom)⁹ or it was negotiated between governmental actors and the leaders of higher education institutions (as was the case in the Netherlands)¹⁰. In several other countries discussions about quality assessment were started but no clear attempts to introduce a system are undertaken yet (e.g., in Belgium, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Spain).

The Western European experiences with quality assessment systems in higher education are still rather limited and the various approaches have not yet produced an overall Western European system. In France a nationally constituted body has been given the power to evaluate higher education institutions with the prerogative to set its own agenda. The British approach to qualify assessment appears to be the result of a highly political process in which the drive for “more value for less money” has resulted in a rather heavy emphasis on performance indicators, “ranking” and “competitive tendering”¹¹.

It seems that the most systematic effort of quality assessment in Western Europe has been initiated in the university sector in the Netherlands. In this country the Ministry of education left it to the universities to develop a quality assessment system. The Association of Co-operating Universities in the Netherlands designed a system consisting of two main elements: self-assessment and peer-review. After a successful pilot year in which self-assessments and peer-review study-visits were conducted by all programme sites of four disciplines, the system was implemented. There now have been a considerable number of self-assessments and site visits to quite a number of study programmes. The experiences with the system appear to be rather positive, although the nature of the system is being further debated.¹²

The Dutch polytechnics have been discussing a similar system with institution-wide and programmatic review aspects, which will start its operational phase soon.¹³

Looking at various experiences with quality assessment in Western European countries so far, it may be concluded that important discussions have started and that relevant aspects of a comprehensive approach to quality assessment have been created. Especially the Dutch system appears to offer a number of useful elements that can be integrated in a general model of quality assessment. However, the Western European experiences so far also show that further development of the conceptual basis of quality assessment might have a positive influence on the introduction of a specific quality assessment system in one or more particular countries. It is for this reason that in the following paragraph a general model of "self-regulatory quality assessment" is introduced.

A general model for self-regulatory quality assessment

The introduction in several Western European countries of the governmental strategy of "self-regulation", in which higher education institutions are offered more autonomy may lead ministries of education, that are interested in deregulation, innovation and adaptation to societal needs, to the conclusions that a quality assessment system in which the higher education institutions play a major role, is a good mechanism for public accountability. Also to higher education institutions such a quality assessment system may be assumed to be of inter-

rest. Generally speaking, higher education institutions tend to defend their autonomy. It seems reasonable to expect that higher education institutions would prefer quality assessment systems in which they themselves are in control of the review process.

The following general model of self-regulatory quality assessment is based on the idea that quality assessment should to a large extent be organised and controlled by the higher education institutions and should be a collaborative effort of peers.

The scheme is based on two bodies of thought. The first consists of the lessons that are learned in the quality assessment systems in the USA and Canada. The second is derived from the conceptual basis of the quality assessment system in the Netherlands¹⁴.

The recent experiences in the Netherlands and those gained in Canada and in the United States lead one to the assumption that certain basic elements are necessary if one wants to built up a useful quality assessment system¹⁵. I will now present a number of elements that appear to be crucial.

The first element has to do with the fact that there should be agreement amongst the various actors in the higher education system on the legitimacy and the role of the agent who will manage the quality assessment system. This agent should have necessary competent staff members and enough resources to organise and operate the system. If possible, the managing agent of the quality assessment system should have a mandate, both from government and from the higher education institutions. A negotiated agreement between the ministry of education and the universities, as was the case in the Netherlands, offers the possibility to introduce a quality assessment system which is acceptable for all parties. In the Netherlands this agreement was based on a prior quid pro quo: the universities were given more autonomy under the condition that they would develop and conduct a system of quality assessment. The Dutch universities used their existing Association of Co-operating Universities to design and implement the quality assessment system. In other countries other managing agents may be chosen. But an unbiased, supportive, respected, properly staffed and funded agent is needed to make the system work.

Secondly, it may be deduced from both the North American and the Western European experiences that the quality assessment system must be based on *self-assessment*. It is often argued in the higher

education literature that, in order for academics to accept and implement changes, they must trust and “own” the process in which problems are defined and solutions are designed. This is certainly also the case in quality assessment. Only if the academics accept quality assessment as their own activity, can the system be successful. This is why self-assessment is a crucial part of any system of quality assessment. The evaluation of the first pilot year of the Dutch experiences confirmed this insight. Faculties reported that the self-assessments, though rushed, and new for some, were useful. The faculties involved also indicated that they felt their self-studies to be important incentives for adaptations of existing programmes and routines. In the Netherlands as well as in North America, the self-assessments have been helped by the availability of manuals and workshops, especially during the start of the process.

The self-assessment should be combined with the *process of peer-review*. The peer-review process will usually take the form of site visits by external experts who should be accepted by the faculty to be visited as unbiased specialists in the field. The external visitors should visit the programme site for a period of a few days, during which they can discuss with the faculty the self-assessment report and the plans for future changes. Also, the external visitors should take the opportunity to interview staff, students, administrators and (if possible) alumni. A site visit should be ended by presenting a first concluding report for the faculty and for the administrators of the university. In the Netherlands a team of external experts visit each programme site of a specific discipline. By doing so the peer review process can take the form of a comparative analysis. The experts present a report after each visit to a specific programme site, as well as a general overall report on the discipline after all visits.

A fourth element of the general model of self-regulatory quality assessment has to do with the availability of *relevant data*. These data are both useful for undertaking the self-assessment (and writing up the results of such an assessment in a report) and for the discussions between faculty and external experts. When a self-assessment starts, it will often be found that the relevant data are not available. Especially if there is no former experience with self-assessment and external peer-review, directly useful information will probably not exist. Relevant data can be gathered by means of surveys of students, faculty, alumni and employers. For reasons of adequate planning, such surveys should be conducted well in time before an external visit.

Ideally, a self-assessment report and the specific programme reports of a peer review team should be *confidential*. Only if these reports are confidential will the academics accept the results. Such an acceptance will usually involve the recognition that changes are necessary and that quality can be improved. If the reports are not kept confidential, the necessary commitment of the academics may disappear and the effects of the total system of quality assessment may be very limited. The public and government can be given a general summary of specific reports. Government could limit its role to “meta-evaluator”, making sure that quality assessment procedures are being followed, but not itself stepping into these procedures.

This brings us to the *role of government* with respect to the development and the implementation of a quality assessment system. From the experiences in the USA and Canada as well as from the first results of the new approach in the Netherlands, it may be concluded that the role of government should be modest. Government should sustain from detailed regulation and far reaching interventions. It should limit itself to a role of oversight. Government should see it as its task to ensure that the system functions and that the outcomes of the processes are not discarded by the higher education institutions. In the Netherlands the Ministry of education has the possibility to intervene in the higher education institutions if, after a number of external visits, the results of the quality assessment procedures have not led to administrative reactions. Such a threat appears to be quite effective. The higher education institutions take the quality assessment procedures seriously, probably also because the ministry might decide to step in if they would not.

A next element of the general model of self-regulation quality assessment concerns the role of *the institutional administrators*. An important task which these administrators face is to create the conviction within the higher education institutions that there will be consequences from the outcomes of the quality assessment processes. In the USA and Canada it is in some cases agreed from the start that some of the marginal resources of the institution will be redistributed in light of the results of the quality assessment. Generally speaking, it can be suggested that there must be a regular system to review the results of the self-assessments and the external reviews. Institutional administrators should make it clear that they will reward programmes that are judged to be of good quality and that they will help programmes that are advised to innovate and reorganise. Institutional

administrators should show that the outcomes of the assessment system are taken seriously.

But the role of the institutional administrators is more complex than that. It is also their task to *prevent isolationism* in the quality assessment system. Such isolationism can easily be created when a specific programme within a higher education institution is reviewed in the context of a quality assessment system without any reference to other programmes in that institution or to the administrative process of the institution. The faculty of such a programme under review will feel isolated if their colleagues in other faculties and the institutional administrators hardly pay attention to the review processes and outcomes. If, moreover, these outcomes are not related to managerial and budgetary decisions, the result will be frustration and a decreasing willingness of the faculty to co-operate in a next cycle of quality assessment.

It is up to the institutional administrators to develop and implement an *institutional policy of quality assessment*. Crucial aspects of such a policy should be the design of an institution-wide scheme of programmes to be reviewed, as well as the integration of the outcomes of the review processes into the planning and budgeting cycles of the institution. Regarding the first aspect (the design of an institution-wide scheme of programmes to be reviewed), the institutional administrators should realise themselves that not only academic study programmes should be reviewed, but also library facilities, records offices, maintenance systems, staff support systems and certainly also administrative systems. Institutional administrators should offer to have themselves evaluated and they should make it clear that quality assessment at their institution will involve the review of all the constituting parts of the institution. Regarding the second aspect of the institutional policy of quality assessment (the integration of the outcomes of the quality assessment processes into the planning and budgeting cycles of the institution), the institutional administrators should see it as their task to (re)design their planning and policy processes in such a way that the results of review processes can be used in the decision-making procedures of the institutions. Strategic plans, annual plans and budget allocations should not be decided upon in isolation of the outcomes of the quality assessment processes. If institutional administrators take quality assessment seriously, they should act accordingly in the context of their administrative procedures.

Perspective

In this paper I have discussed quality assessment in higher education in the perspective of some of the more important international experiences with this phenomenon. From these experiences I have tried to deduce a number of relevant elements that together may form the basic features of a general model for self-regulatory quality assessment.

The recent discussions in Western Europe with regards to quality assessment seem to underline the importance of several of the elements presented in this paper. Self-assessment and external peer-review are considered to be the major mechanisms of quality assessment in many countries. In several countries the discussions about on the one hand the role of government and on the other hand the tasks and responsibilities of the higher education institutions appear to be leading towards the positions presented in this paper.

It may be expected that in the years to come the self-regulatory model of quality assessment may gain importance in Western Europe. Like in the USA and Canada, quality assessment will then first of all be an important responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves and will be a collaborative efforts of peers.

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