Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Defining, Measuring, Improving It

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The Seminar This Week

• Part 1: Context and key issues
• Part 2: Design of QA and Processes
• Part 3: Examples of different approaches to QA
The first part is easy

• Everyone wants quality
  – Cars
  – Food
  – Health care
  – Higher education
What part do the rankings play?

• Do the rankings influence our perception of quality?
• Why?
• Do they reflect quality?
• Do they get in the way?
When Did It Start?

• When did the discussion of the quality of higher education in Brazil begin?
• Who raised it?
• And how was it addressed?
• Whose interests are being served by the current system?
World Trends

• The US has the oldest tradition of external evaluations of universities dating to the beginning of the last century.

• At the beginning of the 1990s, fewer than half of the European countries had national quality assurance programs.

• By 2003, almost every European country had a quality assurance program implemented and operating.
World Trends

• In 2010 there are very few countries in the world that are not developing national programs for quality assurance in higher education
World Trends

• Why are all countries suddenly preoccupied with quality?
• What are the driving forces? Why now?
• Why is this especially important in Europe?
Inevitable but not welcome

• There isn’t a country in the world where initiating a quality assurance program hasn’t provoked anxiety or conflict
• These tensions are an inevitable part of the process of introducing evaluation programs
• Why?
Does ANYONE enjoy being evaluated?
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Evaluation = ?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Judging</td>
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<td>Budget cuts</td>
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<td>Criticism</td>
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Extra work without compensation

Is it possible to discuss quality assurance and evaluation so that people hear different words?
Evaluation = ?

• Evaluation can be:
  – An opportunity to identify opportunities for development and improvement
  – A confrontation
  – It depends on the relationship between the institution and the evaluators
Evaluation = ?

• In groups
  – What conditions would make an evaluation useful and welcome for you and an evaluator qualified to do it?
Where it gets complicated

• Every constituency will have a different understanding and expectation of quality
  ◦ Professors
  ◦ Administrators
  ◦ Students
  ◦ Parents
  ◦ Employers
  ◦ Politicians
Where it gets complicated

Resources → Quality

Diversity among professors

Diversity of institutions

Diversity of students and the preparation they have had before enrolling in university
A precarious balance:
The [Iron] Triangle*

* Source: John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning
So what and how do we measure quality?

- Discussion

Is it possible to have national standards and criteria in diversified systems?
What measures can be used to provide nationally useful information?
What is the long term objective?

Certify that an institution complies with fixed criteria?

Or

Develop a culture where everyone is constantly attentive to opportunities to improve?
Quality has to allow for complexity

“Where there are differentiated systems and diverse higher education institutions with different traditions and identities, it is necessary to allow for different interpretations of quality and different responses to standards . . .”

José Dias Sobrinho, 2008
So what and how do we measure quality?

- NEASC solution
  Criteria should be constructively ambiguous
The Importance of Flexible Frameworks

World trend

Ex ante
- Fixed criteria for the entire system
- Regulation
- External supervision

Ex post
- Flexible criteria adapted to different institutions
- Self-regulation
Cultivating New Attitudes

• In the end, quality assurance has to be a process of “self-regulation”

• Without a commitment at all levels of an institution, the process doesn’t work—there is no quality assurance
Cultivating new attitudes

• If quality assurance is reduced to complying with standards determined without regard to the complexity and diversity of higher education . . .

quality assurance too easily becomes a bureaucratic process
You never get there... 

All systems of quality for higher education in the world are a continuous process of adjustments, reflections, and reforms.

The process begins one step at a time with each institution building on the lessons learned from its own experience.
The Challenge

- Establish an environment conducive to discussion and reflection across institutional boundaries
- Gain the trust of a broad base of participants from all sectors that the process offers benefits to all
- Create a space where the discussion is ongoing
References:

Muito obrigada!