Multiple factors have converged to provoke the current international preoccupation with quality and standards during the past several decades— the rapid expansion of tertiary education; the simultaneous shrinking of public subsidies for higher education; the knowledge explosion; the need for universities to acquire more expensive infrastructure; the mobility of professionals and researchers; and finally the increasing worldwide competition for prestige and (often) for the same funds, for the same students, and for the same faculty. Additionally, expectations of the output and achievement of higher education have become increasingly complex. While at one time, the purpose of higher education might have been to provide a thorough grounding in classical knowledge or preparation for a few specific professions, suddenly a diverse public looks to universities as engines of development, social equalizers, professional training grounds, centers of continuing education, and on and on.

Universities are under pressure from many directions to reform many long-standing traditions and pedagogy, account for their activities and use of resources, and address broad social agendas. National governments have implemented policies to diversify higher education, encourage greater operating efficiency, improve
productivity, increase fiscal independence, and foster more competition between institutions (Clark 1998). There is also a growing demand for greater accountability to a new array of education “consumers”. The challenges facing higher education in order to measure up against diverse and (often) ambiguously-defined expectations are vast.

At the very least, most countries have now accepted the need for both greater accountability and for some formal process to assure multiple constituencies that higher education is being evaluated regularly in a transparent way. During the last decade, the discussion has moved beyond national borders as regional and international organizations endeavor to find comparability between degrees and congruency and harmony among the quality assurance schemes now in effect.

Quality means so many different things to different people. Harvey and Green (1993) ask, “Whose quality?” It has become increasingly problematic that different stakeholders judge quality against divergent values and priorities. Nevertheless, the quality movement has moved forward leaving many fundamental concepts and much vocabulary undefined.

The Changing Shape of the QA Discussion

In its early stages, the quality assurance movement was largely motivated by waning confidence in higher education. So many new and different types of institutions were awarding degrees to a much expanded student population that concerned stakeholders were questioning the comparability of degrees. The general lack of
information about the internal workings of universities and colleges became a cause for concern. “Opportunistic politicians” (Harvey and Newton 2004) exploited the uncertainty of students, taxpayers, and employers about growing public investment and the value of a university degree to impose new reporting obligations on higher education.

Since the 1980s nearly every nation has introduced some kind of quality assurance scheme to higher education. Typically, an intermediary agency is established to coordinate the information needs of government and individual institutions. In most cases, the initiative begins with standards or fixed criteria that structure internal and external evaluations that provide information to external stakeholders and identify opportunities for improvement to internal actors. Programs initially tend toward easily verifiable or measurable (quantifiable) criteria. In its earlier stages, the US system emphasized ‘inputs’ such as size of the library, number of professors with advanced degrees, faculty/student ratios, rates of graduation, etc. In the US and elsewhere measurable criteria have expanded to include faculty publications and citations, faculty awards, and grants secured. Increasingly the pursuit of quality has led to the perplexing challenge of measuring the non-quantifiable characteristics and production of higher education.

There is broad consensus that inputs alone do not guarantee the quality of the enterprise or, as Harvey and Newton put it, inputs are as conclusive as “evaluating the quality of a football match for spectators by examining the stadium, the pitch, the team sheet, and the credentials of the coach” (2004, p. 150). Recent trends have emphasized
outcomes over ‘inputs’ as institutions attempt to measure their impact. This is not easily accomplished since education is a slippery commodity to quantify. And, as Trow (1998) points out, outcomes should be measured over the course of the graduate’s lifetime in order to be measured accurately.

As institutions have begun to make peace with the importance (and inevitability) of greater accountability, the discussion has moved to a deeper level. It is increasingly apparent that quality in higher education requires more than responding to standards. Now, scholars are insisting that quality must be imbedded in institutional culture, not specific criteria, and that the process must be ongoing, not a periodic response to an audit or inspection. If the process of insuring quality is to be ongoing, then the responsibility lies with individual institutions to integrate quality assurance into all levels of activity. With many new layers of quality assurance in place it is time for politicians and the larger society to again trust that universities can indeed determine and protect the quality of their work (Harvey and Newton 2004; Trow 1998).

The discussion of criteria, standards, measures, and validation continues to evolve. There are (in practice) two levels of quality management—one involves a sequence of procedures to document and report; the second requires the consideration of less-tangible aspects of higher education. With growing international experience, the discussion has become more nuanced as participants move increasingly towards the less tangible; there, the challenges of quality assurance more complex.

How it’s Done: Accrediting, Auditing, Assessing, Assuring
When confidence in colleges and universities wavered new programs for external supervision were put into effect. The vocabulary that accompanies these new programs is daunting, mostly because the same or similar words are used with such different meaning. We refer to quality assurance, quality management, quality control, quality enhancement. The mechanisms to measure quality may include accreditation, audit, assessment, and external monitoring.

Countries may review entire institutions, specific degree programs only, or both. Systems are both voluntary and compulsory. In cases where accreditation is voluntary, there are usually incentives to participate. In the case of the US, for example, accreditation if voluntary but institutions must be accredited in order to receive funds from the national government for student financial aid or research. In most fields of study US students must graduate from accredited degree programs to qualify for a professional license, likewise in Argentina. In the case of Chile program accreditation is voluntary but extremely useful as successful completion of the review provides programs and institutions with useful data to legitimize demands for additional resources (Lemaitre 2004).

The US relies on two levels of accreditation, both managed by membership organizations. Regional membership associations certify the performance of colleges and universities while non-profit professional member organizations review and accredit individual degree programs. More often accreditation, audits, and external reviews are coordinated by quasi-governmental agencies. Still, the process is generally
the same—self-studies are conducted; teams of peer evaluators are evaluated, reports are compiled and reviewed, some decision is taken.

The process requires an enormous commitment of time and resources. The self-study itself is a serious undertaking. In theory it is an opportunity for an institution to step back from daily activity and to assess strengths and weaknesses, to build on the former and resolve the latter. The value of the endeavor depends, to a large degree, on the extent to which the academic community is engaged. When quality assurance is viewed as an external obligation, simply as accountability to an external audience, the process is easily delegated to a specific administrative office or an external consultant with limited impact; it becomes a bureaucratic exercise. When the process is viewed as an opportunity for honest reflection and includes a broad range or participants, the potential for improvement and development is much greater but so, alas, is the effort.

The literature returns over and over again to the ambiguous goals of this process and what it accomplishes. Of course, there are multiple goals—reassurance that public money is being spent wisely, that students are learning, that degree studies are relevant, that institutions are attentive to opportunities and necessities for improvement, that faculty are properly qualified, and many more. The processes of accreditation, audits, and assessment as currently followed lend themselves to measuring some things better than others. The impact of all of this effort has proven very difficult to measure.

What Does ‘Quality’ Actually Mean in Practice?
One of the enormous challenges confronting the quality issue is defining exactly what quality means in higher education. The quest for a broadly useful definition is ongoing. Quality is generally agreed to be desirable even if it is indefinable, but the ambiguity of its meaning complicates the design of systems to insure it.

The fact that the quality assurance discussion has moved to an international level adds linguistic challenges to the confusion over definitions. Distinctions made between words such as “assessment” and “evaluation” in English have no equivalents in many other languages (Vlasceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea 2007).

Different constituents and stakeholders use different constructs for addressing quality in higher education. To complicate the discussion further, quality often becomes tangled with the related, but separate issues. But as Stensaker (2008) points out, we now have the “. . . need to go beyond formalities and definitions of quality and pay more attention to good practice and how this can be demonstrated” (p. 9). Something needs to be demonstrated and this is the challenge going forward.

As already stated, there are many approaches to insuring quality but the emphasis is often on evaluating without a clear idea of the objectives the process is meant to achieve (Harvey and Newton 2004). The ambiguity contributes to some degree of doubt about the value and impact of so many evaluations taking place today. Yogi Berra, an American baseball player as famous for his quotable comments as for his athletic achievement once said, “You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you are going, because you might not get there.” This applies to much of the quality assurance schemes operating today.
Regulation, Accountability, and Autonomy: Are we moving from a regulatory to an evaluative state?

In many cases, quality assurance schemes arose from a general ‘need to know.’ As higher education expanded and diversified, governments were unable to provide the level of control or supervision exercised in the past. Nor was that level of national presence seen as desirable any longer. Yet an ongoing tension exists between government authority and institutional autonomy. Responsibility for quality assurance sits at the fulcrum of that tension. Quality assurance schemes unavoidably represent some level of external regulation and these schemes can be contentious, depending on who establishes the procedures and measures and how they are implemented.

Does higher education need to be regulated or can it regulate itself? Are quality assurance schemes a mechanism for external regulation or for keeping external regulation at bay? Guy Neave (1994) suggested that despite the appearance of greater autonomy, the devolution of responsibility for quality from the state to individual institutions was passed along with norms of performance still determined by governments or parastatal agencies, allowing the state to “hedge its bets.” Or as Harvey and Newton describe it, “establishing delegated accountability” (2004, p. 151).

Concerns are frequently raised about whether institutions can truly ‘police’ themselves and whether doing so allows institutions to become too complacent. In the US, despite a long history of self-management, the federal government has frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the level of performance expected of higher education
institutions. As a result, the national government has made repeated attempts to use its funding clout to impose additional standards for institutional performance in areas not addressed by regional institutional accreditation. While the national government was not successful, many state governments have followed suit exercising greater control through performance-based funding. Indicators commonly added include time to degree, class size, student retention, and faculty workload (Dill 1997, p. 39). These easily quantifiable outcomes provide public reassurance but it is not so clear whether they insure academic quality.

The line between accountability and regulation is a fine one. Accountability means ‘coming clean’ or revealing to external constituencies details deemed important. Institutions that receive public funds are understandably obligated to account for how those funds were used but to what end and with what results?

Trow (1998) suggests that accountability may indeed serve as an impetus for improving performance and therefore (perhaps) a component of quality assurance. But reporting on performance not the same thing as assuring quality and Trow warns that this might actually work against quality improvement if accountability pushes institutions to conform to external standards that constrain diversity or inhibit the autonomy institutions need to foment their own development. Accountability can too easily come down to responding to a checklist of pre-defined criteria established externally and passing an inspection at regular intervals (Stensaker 2008).

Yet institutions should be accountable for their performance. Institutions accept public and private funds to deliver a service and should be able to verify that good (if
not excellent) service was indeed provided. There is a great deal at stake for participants, most importantly students whose personal and professional future opportunities are often shaped by this educational experience but for the larger society as well. The question is, of course, how to incorporate accountability usefully.

Standards and Accreditation

The concept of ‘standards’ is in itself ambiguous and interpreted differently in different systems. In the US, ‘standards’ is used interchangeably with ‘criteria’ although in Europe the meaning is different. Standards generally provide a critical reference point but may refer to minimum requirements, targets for performance, measures for comparison. Standards can be applied to academic content covered, intellectual abilities demonstrated, service provided, etc. (Vlasceanu, Grünberg, and Părlea 2007). Despite the vast meaning(s) of standards, they generally serve as the basis of quality assurance programs.

Dill (2007) suggests that from the public policy perspective, academic quality requires the assurance of academic standards. But, whose standards? How specific? How high? How low? Different processes are followed to check or validate that some pre-defined standards have been achieved.

. . . accreditation refers to a process resulting in a decision that warrants an institution or programme; audit explores internal processes; assessment passes a judgment (often with a grading) usually about the quality of a teaching or research subject area; and external examination checks standards (be they
The term ‘accreditation’ is used increasingly in international discussions of quality. It is often viewed as a guarantee that standards have been established and honored. In their glossary compiled with support from UNESCO Vlaseanu et al (2007) offer the following definition:

The process by which a (non-)governmental or private body evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole or of a specific educational programme in order to formally recognize it as having met certain pre-determined minimal criteria or standards (p. 25).

The US has the longest-standing system for institutional accreditation, a system unusual because of the absence of a national authority over higher education. Also unusual in international context is the long experience with institutional diversity within this sector. Educational institutions in the US belong to one of six regional membership associations depending on where the institution is (physically) located. Despite some variations, the process of accreditation follows the same general pattern throughout the country—self-study, external review, agency recommendations and decision. This process has been imitated by most quality assurance programs around the world with the difference that the coordinating agency (elsewhere) typically has some connection to government.

The other commonly followed pattern, also originated in the US, is mission-driven evaluation. In other words, to accommodate the diversity of institutions and
their objectives, an institution or program is often evaluated in terms of its success it meeting the goals it set for itself. This concept implies a great deal of elasticity within standards. While this flexibility offers many advantages it also allows mediocre institutions to adjust their goals so that they can be easily fulfilled (Lemaitre 2004) or provides the opportunity for “manufacturing an improved identity” (Newton 2000).

Still it is generally accepted that it is possible to apply carefully-formulated standards across institution types but, as just mentioned, this glosses over the less-attractive realities within higher education. External evaluators are expected to have the skill to adapt standards to each unique context. This places enormous faith and responsibility on peer evaluators who may have had little or no training for this kind of activity. The practice risks lax interpretation and at the same time the possibility of turning peers into inspectors (Westerheijden, Stensaker, and Rosa 2007).

How far can standards be adapted to diverse environments before they lose their value and utility? At what point do standards become simply a mechanism for certification? Is conforming to standards enough to guarantee a threshold for quality? . . .

. . . the introduction of relative rather than absolute standards by which to ‘judge’ institutions or courses raises issues of comparability. Quality as conformance to (relative) standards tells us nothing about the criteria used to set the standards. . .

. For quality to be conformance to relative standards seems to undervalue the notion that quality implies something ‘above the ordinary’ and the conformance standards set may seem rather ordinary and in no way exceptional (Harvey and Green, 1993, p. 13).
Standards, while important, are often over emphasized in quality assurance programs. Standards can be written so that they are irrelevant or unrealistic in a particular environment. Conforming to standards without consideration of context accomplishes little (Gil Antón 2006). At best standards can serve as a framework for organizing evaluations, not as well as precise measurements for comparison purposes. At their worst, standards function as a meaningless checklist and distract from a deeper consideration of quality. Yet much credibility is placed on value of standards and accreditation as will be explored later in this essay.

Prestige

Prestige is another characteristic often viewed as a reflection of quality. Prestige can be misleading though as it emanates from a complex convergence of circumstances. Generally prestige is highly correlated with the research productivity of the faculty of a university (Dill 1997). It can also be a reflection of institutional wealth, difficulty of gaining admission, ‘star’ faculty or, more recently, a position in one rankings or another.

Correlating prestige with quality is risky as an institution’s reputation so often results from one or more specific characteristics or activities and rarely reflects the broader performance of an institution.

Prestige also comes from less rational public perception. Rankings have achieved considerable influence in the current ‘marketplace.’ Not only have rankings ramped up competition between institutions but also greatly shaped the perception of quality.
Although few educators concede that rankings are an indication of quality, students, parents, and policymakers often do. Trow (1998) warns us that the rankings more often only affect how and what institutions report, rather than encourage significant improvements in quality.

Rankings vary widely in the criteria they use and despite being explicit about methods and meaning, the general public focuses more on an institution’s placement in the rankings than how it got there. Rankings often rely on “reputational measures” (Dill 1997) that tend to be not only highly subjective, but also self-perpetuating. Yet rankings are widely popular and their influence in the quality discussion cannot be overlooked.

Rankings are perhaps most seductive because of their ease of use. It is unrealistic to hope that “consumers” of higher education will review self-study reports or reports completed by external evaluators when comparing institutions. Rankings provide easy answers; they advise prospective students that a university ranked # 5 is better than a university ranked #21. Of course, with limited validity. Institutions are not so easily compared. A number of alternatives are being introduced to make better comparative data available. A new website, College Portrait, has been set up by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) to compare US schools. Their effort to be fair to the diversity among institutions quickly opened them to criticism for their lack of precision (Lederman 2010). The Center for Higher Education in Germany publishes data to allow students to construct their own rankings, according to their needs (Thompson 2008). For now the rankings still have undue influence in the discussion of quality.
A myth that was in vogue at one point was that a competitive higher education market would be a powerful incentive for institutions to improve the quality of their activities. This assumption has been debunked by a number of scholars. It is now recognized that competition may actually have perverse effects, diverting funds to investments that will enhance an image in the ‘marketplace’ or in the dramatic rhetoric of an OECD report (2010), “. . . to throw their best assets overboard in the rash attempt to keep their university afloat.”

One of the fallacies in suggesting that competition will improve quality is assuming that people have access to good information and use it to make thoughtful and rational choices.

. . . it is assumed that the student has insufficient information about the quality of academic institutions or programs to make discriminating choices. If such information were to be provided, either by institutions under government mandate, or by independent quality assurance agencies, it is assumed that subsequent student choices would provide incentives for institutions to improve their academic quality. . . However, this logic rests upon a long and complicated causal chain, which assumes that reliable and valid measures of academic quality readily exist and that students will base their enrolment choices on this type of information (Dill 1997, p. 37)
For most individuals, let alone teenagers, the official processes of quality assurance schemes and accreditation are incomprehensible and, as a result, not terribly useful. Rankings provide data that are easily referenced. As a result, they are also appealing. Their growing influence has meant that many colleges are now focusing resources on investments that promise a better position (Labi 2008).

In a competitive market, it is important to keep in mind that non-academic factors often sway an adolescent’s college choice. Increasingly, colleges are using residential facilities and amenities such as luxury dorms with swimming pools (Fogg 2008) and double beds over the traditional twin (Strauss 2007) to compete for students. While market forces drive change and ‘improvement’ the results may not have any bearing on the academic performance of the institution.

Institutions compete for top faculty as well as top students. Likewise, the competitive pressure may serve to focus resources on gains with limited impact on the quality of an institution as a whole. Dill (2007) asserts that in fact the competitive market for high-profile faculty only diverts attention from teaching and learning and concentrates resources on prestige:

. . . the indicators of academic prestige drown out the weaker signals of the quality of teaching and student learning, and the aggressive pursuit of prestige crowds out the activities associated with the improvement of academic standards. . . . the dominance of the prestige goal in systems of mass higher education encourages all institutions to invest in cream skimming the student market, in building their research capacity, and in incentives designed to recruit
and retain the most prominent scholars/researchers. The pernicious effect of this competitive pursuit of academic prestige is that it diverts resources as well as administrative and faculty attention away from the collective actions within universities necessary to actually improve academic standards (Kuh and Pascarella 2004) (p. 65).

Dill goes on to warn that hiring well-known research faculty diverts attention from teaching and encourages “individual academic autonomy” (in the hands of star research faculty) at the expense of “individual involvement in the collective quality assurance activities of academic program planning and co-ordination” (Dill 1997, p. 39).

In other words, competition tends to sidetrack resources that could well have had a broader impact on institutional quality. The pursuit of prestige tends to encourage focused efforts rather than deeper ones. Rather than invest in long-term strategies for institutional development universities often leverage limited resources to draw attention through accoutrements such as star faculty, investments to improve ranking position, or more luxurious student amenities.

Refining the Discussion

In their early stages, quality assurance schemes tend to pursue the most obvious strategies, validating the qualifications and workloads of professors, infrastructure and resources, preparedness and progress of students. It was assumed that addressing the basic building blocks of higher education and responding to the external pressures for increased accountability and competition would produce better quality. But there is no
simple formula for quality assurance. And here, the lack of definition and ambiguity of objectives come back to haunt. Quality assurance programs—accreditation, audits, or whatever—result in some level of institutional change. The question is what kind of change and is it the change that is desired. At the very least, the requirements of accountability built in to most quality assurance schemes have obliged institutions to do a better job capturing and organizing data. But that is not enough.

How quality in higher education is being considered and judged is shifting as nations acquire experience with evaluating institutional and program performance. There is increased attention to the “transformative” role that higher education should play in the development of their students (Harvey and Green 1993).

Alexander Astin asserts that quality is demonstrated by the impact that an institution has on its students, in particular on their personal and intellectual development (Harvey and Green 1993). Gil Anton (2006) asks us whether there has been improvement in student learning commensurate with raised standards applied to higher education. We need to understand much more about the impact of higher education on students but to date both methodology and data are lacking.

Until recently quality assessment has given surprisingly little attention to the fundamental activities of teaching and learning where, of course, institutions have the greatest impact on students. Yet, important as these activities are, they are not easily measured, compared, or benchmarked. The number of faculty publications, student examination results, graduates who work in their field of study or go on to advanced study are of only limited use in measuring quality when viewed from this perspective.
AHELO (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes), an ambitious new initiative of the OECD is proposing to develop meaningful measures of learning outcomes intended for use on an international scale. AHELO proposes to examine institutions on the basis of four categories—general skills (analytic reasoning, critical thinking, ability to generate ideas, the ability to apply theory, writing skill, leadership, etc.); discipline-specific skills (expertise in a field of study); learning environment (physical and organizational characteristics, student-faculty interaction, psycho-social attributes, behavior and attitudinal outcomes); and value added to the development of individual students. The usefulness of this kind of evaluation and data to quality development is undisputable. That OECD does not expect AHELO to be ‘up and running’ before 2016 is a reflection on just how challenging this undertaking will be.

In the meantime, academic tradition may make it difficult to refocus evaluations and audits on the learning and pedagogy. Powerful trends work against the growing concern with teaching and learning by quality assurance agencies. Prestige, rankings, and funding reward research more readily than excellence in teaching. Referencing research conducted by Kuh, Dill (2003) suggests that incentives that encourage a growing “faculty disengagement” from the classroom not only undermine the quality of teaching but also distract from “collective faculty activities such as curriculum development, teaching evaluation, and student assessment” (p. 4). The emphasis on scholarship and productivity encourages faculty to work independently, yet improvements to academic programs require faculty to work collectively. Dill emphasizes the importance of “the internal transfer of new knowledge on improving
teaching and student learning” (p. 8) to support the pursuit of excellence. Developing processes for the assessment and improvement of student outcomes will require an integrated institutional engagement that will necessitate a shift in incentives and rewards to faculty and other members of the academic community.

What Have We Learned?

The challenge of how divergent ideas about quality and quality assurance can be translated to higher education institutions is a difficult one. Despite all of the ambiguity, mechanisms for some level of quality assurance and shared benchmarks have become essential. There must be a means of communication from inside higher education institutions to the outside.

Attempts to borrow concepts and processes from other sectors are problematic as quality in other arenas is more easily measured as specific outputs. Exactly what the output of education should be is a subject of contentious debate. Yet, what is important is that quality no longer be taken for granted and that there is a general need for a mechanism to validate that each institution provides something valued by the larger society.

We have also learned that the interpretations of politicians, institutional administrators, faculty and students about what reflects quality in higher education are different and that quality assurance systems in use serve the needs of some constituents more than others.
Quality has been addressed in most countries through a now almost standard protocol for evaluating activities in higher education. This process involves obliging institutions to establish internal procedures for monitoring their success in achieving standards of quality following by a periodic external inspection to verify and expand on the results of the internal evaluation, all under the auspices of an agency with some official recognition.

Institutions are no longer permitted to ‘police themselves’ without some kind of impartial external validation. Yet, self-regulation remains a critical piece of the quality assurance process. What most national quality schemes accomplish today is to insure that the evaluation sequence described above takes place. The external system exists to insure “internally propelled quality management” (Westerheijden 2007) is adequate. How effective the process is depends entirely on the level of institutional commitment and engagement. Which, of course, varies from one institution to another.

The crucial factor in a system of academic quality control, monitoring, and improvement lies in efforts to create an institutional culture marked by self-criticism, openness to criticism by others and a commitment to improvement of practice (Trow 1998, p. 44).

For now, there really is no alternative to trusting (Trow 1998) institutions with primary responsibility for their own performance. The activities of today’s modern colleges and universities are too vast, too complex; ongoing external coordination and oversight is impractical as well as undesirable.
No external agency, no accrediting body or coordinating council, can assess academic units with the accuracy and in the detail necessary to make good judgments and decisions. Nor can their assessments have the legitimacy for the institution and its units that internal reviews carry with them when they are done properly (Trow 1998, p. 46).

External control will always have limited impact on quality improvement and possibly (even) to the detriment of improvement rather than its enhancement depending on the way the control is exercised. For now periodic evaluations or inspections can be best used to insure that procedures are in place for ongoing self-assessment and improvement and for verifying the content of evaluation reports. Considering that most external evaluators are on site for only a few days, they rely on the information presented to them; the knowledge they gain about an institution cannot go very deep.

Regardless of how eminent, distinguished, and important the members of expert panels may be, data gathering, information processing, and strategic considerations could for a priori reasons constitute the Achilles heel of these models . . .(Blackmur 2007, p. 31).

Institutional leadership and culture of an institution are key to the pursuit of quality. Quality assurance has to be fully integrated into institutional management and operation. By engaging broad participation in a commitment to quality an institution will always be attentive to weaknesses and opportunities to improve. This type of engagement will promote the “collegial connections and communication of academic
norms that will lead to quality academic programs” (Dill 1997, p. 39). Most institutions are still learning how to do this.

The Internationalization of Quality

The mobility of students, scholars, and programs has contributed to the urgency of pushing the quality discussion to an international level. While established international organizations—OECD, UNESCO, ISO—are addressing the implications of increasing cross-border activity, many new organizations are assuming a role as well.

There is a growing trend towards international cooperation to achieve mutual recognition of the degrees and diplomas awarded by member countries. Quality assurance is inevitably a prerequisite to international recognition. Since the early 1990s, new organizations have created international forums where national quality assurance agencies can pursue agreements and collaborations. One example is RIACES, an organization whose members are national agencies for quality assurance in Latin America. Among its many objectives is an agreement on comparable criteria used by the diverse accrediting agencies in the region to facilitate the comparability of degrees and institutions (González Enders 2010). The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) brings together national agencies and members of regional organizations into a larger organization with a broader international reach for similar purposes. In addition INQAAHE contributes to the development of accrediting agencies in a number of ways including disseminating information about ‘good practice’ in quality assurance, providing training materials and
by facilitating the sharing of information and experience internationally (Woodhouse 2004; INQAAHE 2010).

In addition new supra-national agencies are engaging in accreditation activities in different countries. The European Quality Improvement Scheme (EQUIS) is an example of this. EQUIS accredits business and management programs throughout the world creating a single measure of quality for programs in this area.

There is little doubt that when local accreditation provides international validity there are important benefits to many sectors. Although much international activity and discussion is taking place and accelerating at great speed, the agreements being made and considered are all dependent on whether participants can be confident of shared vocabulary, shared values and shared objectives. Currently the discussion tends towards “we will recognize what you recognize.” With the ambiguity that hangs over the understanding of quality and standards in higher education, the process of mutual recognition seems to rest on a house of cards.

Conclusion

The discussion of quality will always be complicated by the lack of consensus about what quality means in higher education. Many attempts have been made to define it; most of the literature acknowledges the elusiveness of a useful definition. Harvey and Green offered different views of quality in their often-quoted 1993 essay — [quality] as exceptional, as perfection (or consistency), as fitness for purpose, as value for money and as transformative (p. 11). As noted in this essay, quality is often confused with
competitive position in the marketplace, star faculty, and prestige. Quality, to a large
degree, remains in the eye of the beholder and different perspectives will respond to
different measures of it.

UNESCO’s compiled a glossary (Vlasceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea 2007) is an
important attempt to align the shared vocabulary of quality. For the short-term, the
same words and phrases will continue to be understood differently by different actors
with, in some cases, agreements signed on the basis of misunderstandings about those
meanings1.

The diversity of higher education has made the problem even more complicated.
Because quality is expected of ALL higher education institutions quality assurance
programs must accommodate the enormous range of missions and resources that these
institutions now represent—nationally and internationally. The question remains as to
how usefully the same criteria can be applied to this growing diversity. Much care
needs to be exercised before we apply standards from one country to the performance
of another, a trend evident as national accrediting bodies are beginning to validate
programs and institutions beyond their borders.

We know that we can easily document faculty credentials and research,
student/faculty ratios, institutional facilities, etc. What we truly need to know about the
performance of academic institutions and programs seems to defy easy measurement.
We need to measure too many variables that cannot be quantified. Often numerous

1 Considering that regional agreements have been signed that recognize degrees as comparable as
long as they are ‘accredited’ in the country where they were awarded without fully exploring the
ways in which accreditation might be conducted or whether it fully meets the needs of all parties.
variables combine to produce results making measurement even more difficult.
Different institutions operate within the constraints of very different realities that must be factored in to the way their activities are assessed (Gil Antón 2006). Certain conventions have been achieved but no one seems entirely satisfied with them.

There are national, regional and (increasingly) international agencies that provide oversight to quality assurance processes. In most cases these organizations rely on standards and/or criteria that reflect input as the basis of quality assessment although there is increasing attention to outcomes. The oversight that these intermediary organizations can provide is limited. In the end external agencies only guarantee some degree of attentiveness to quality. The critical work of quality assurance and quality improvement must be conducted locally. Essential to success is, . . . encouraging colleges and universities to become ‘self-developing’ organizations— institutions continually seeking improvement in their teaching and learning processes (Dill 1997, p. 36).

As a result of the implementation of so many new quality assurance schemes, quality is now a part of institutional management and planning everywhere. There is still limited research on the outcomes of all of the increased attention to quality (Stensaker 2008; Lemaitre 2004). Institutions (at the very least) now do a better job of collecting information and data. We know that all of this evaluation is producing a lot of reports and making the internal activity of higher education a little more transparent. The quality of institutional management is certainly better as a result (Stensaker 2008).

We also know that more attention is needed to teaching and learning, the impact
of postsecondary study on students, and the relevance of academic programs to a
globalized socio-economic environment. We know that we need to pay more attention
to whether the incentives and rewards distributed within higher education contribute to
the greater quality of its principle activities.

The key issue left unresolved is what purpose is all of this attention to quality
meant to serve. Are we pursuing quality assurance or quality improvement? Are we
demonstrating that standards (whatever they mean) are being met or that performance
is improving (Harvey and Newton 2004)? Many quality assurance schemes attempt to
do both. But while we do not seem able to define what quality is, perhaps the best we
can do is to engage in an ongoing process of improvement.

Although ‘globalization’ and the resulting mobility of individuals, institutions,
and activities underscores the growing importance of international benchmarks and
standards for higher education, quality management has to remain a largely local
endeavor. Context and culture are important factors in the consideration of quality.
External agencies have provided an important impetus, insuring that the pursuit of
quality remains at the top of the higher education agenda. In order to receive benefits
from the many evaluations now taking place, a broad range of participants within each
higher education institution needs to recognize value in the process and participate in
earnest. Quality assurance is truly more of a process than a result and requires the
cultivation of institutional cultures where all actors are open to self-criticism and
attentive to opportunities for improvement.
References


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