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Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Literature Review

A N D R E A   W I L G E R

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Introduction

Most industrialized countries recognize that in order to sustain and develop the economy, an ever-increasing pool of skilled people is required. Rapid technological developments dictate that workers be adept at lifelong learning and just-in-time learning. In addition, higher education's knowledge base is constantly expanding, particularly in scientific and technological disciplines. These factors put colleges and universities under increasing pressure to produce high quality outcomes, both in research and learning.

These pressures are exacerbated by the rising costs of higher education. Though tuition rates have slowed in the mid-1990s, many parents and students believe that the cost of a college education is out of their reach. Similarly, state and federal lawmakers continue to be concerned with the cost of attaining a four-year degree. While institutions have done much to control costs and limit increases, prices continue to outstrip inflation. External pressures to further control costs (e.g. a recently announced Congressional inquiry into the costs of higher education, as well as similar efforts at the state level) are unlikely to abate soon.

As the primary funders of higher education, both federal and state governments face escalating higher education budgets that are often in competition with other priorities. Officials want assurance that public money is well spent. Likewise, parents and students seek assurance that the money they devote to postsecondary education is a sound investment and will produce an adequate return. The question of "value for money" is of paramount importance to those who fund higher education.

The question of how institutions can best meet the burden of assuring quality is the subject of several publications. This paper provides a review of the quality assurance literature in higher education. Before proceeding, it is important to outline the limits of this literature review. The review focuses very specifically on quality assurance in higher education. I have made no attempt to review the broader business quality assurance literature, as I have addressed this subject in a previous review (*Seven Lessons from the Business Quality Literature: A Review*). Nor have I included the literature on quality in higher education. Higher education researchers have devoted many books and articles to various aspects of quality (e.g. TQM, CQI, benchmarking)—quality assurance is just one aspect of the broader quality movement.

Definitions of Quality Assurance

The literature contains many definitions of quality assurance in higher education. One of the most complete comes from a quality assurance handbook from Hong Kong:

> Quality Assurance is a collective process by which the University as an academic institution ensures that the quality of educational process is maintained to the standards it has set itself. Through its quality assurance arrangements the University is able to satisfy itself, its students and interested external persona or bodies that:
>
> • its courses meet the appropriate academic and professional standards,
> • the objectives of its courses are appropriate,

- the means chosen and the resources available for delivering those objectives are appropriate and adequate, and
- it is striving continually to improve the quality of its courses.

(Hong Kong Baptist University, 1994)

This definition includes several key dimensions of quality assurance in higher education. First, quality assurance focuses on process; it seeks to convince both internal and external constituents that an institution has processes that produce high quality outcomes. Second, quality assurance makes explicit accountability for quality at various points within an institution. Quality is the responsibility of everyone in the organization. Third, quality assurance is a continuous, active, and responsive process which includes strong evaluation and feedback loops. Effective communication is essential to a successful quality assurance system. At its core, quality assurance asks the question, "How does an institution know that it is achieving the desired results?" (For other definitions of quality assurance in higher education, see: Loder, 1990; Higher Education Quality Council, 1994; Australian Higher Education Council, 1996; and Dill, Massy, Williams and Cook, 1996)

The literature on quality assurance underscores that an effective quality assurance system rests on several assumptions, including: (1) that an institution has a well-defined mission and goals, (2) that an institution's mission and goals are widely communicated and understood throughout the organization, (3) that an institution has clearly defined quality within the context of its mission and goals, and (4) that an institution has a strong communications network. An institution that lacks these "preconditions" will have a difficult time implementing a successful campus-wide program of quality assurance.

Other key components of a quality assurance program include the following:

- everyone at the institution has a responsibility for maintaining quality (i.e. any substandard outcomes are corrected at the source);

- everyone at the institution has a responsibility for enhancing quality (though an institution may have a quality director or quality council, their role is that of coordination/oversight; they are not the only entities responsible for quality);

- everyone at the institution understands and feels ownership of the systems which are in place for maintaining and enhancing quality (this is generally achieved by broad-based participation in the design and implementation of a quality assurance program); and

- administrators (often working with faculty and the customer or client) regularly monitor the effectiveness of the quality assurance system.

Equally important in understanding quality assurance is defining what quality assurance is not. This is particularly important with respect to U.S. higher education, which, to date, has little experience with formal quality assurance systems. Quality assurance should not be confused with any of the following:

- *Quality Control.* Such a system checks whether institutional inputs and outputs meet a predefined quality threshold; substandard inputs or outputs are rejected. Quality control usually relies on inspectors and is generally not regarded as sufficient in light of more sophisticated quality systems.

- *Quality Audit*. An external group of auditors ensures that the quality assurance and quality control processes are appropriate and working effectively. A quality audit usually accompanies a quality assurance system but the two are not to be confused.

- *Accreditation.* In the U.S. and Canada, this process is used to assure the educational community, the general public, and other agencies or organizations that an institution or program (a) has clearly defined and educationally appropriate objectives, (b) maintains conditions under which their achievement can reasonably be expected, (c) is in fact accomplishing them substantially, and (d) can be expected to continue to do so.

- *Peer Review* . This term generally denotes the involvement of external professionals in making judgments and/or decisions about proposals for new programs, the continuation or modification of existing programs, the quality of research programs, or the quality of institutions.

While any of these may be components of a quality assurance system, they are not synonymous with quality assurance.

Why Quality Assurance?

Much of the current support for quality assurance is premised on the assertion that higher education needs a strengthened system of accountability. Many concerned parties, particularly those external to institutions (e.g. state and federal officials, parents, industry leaders), believe that a consistently high level of collegiate learning is no longer guaranteed and that institutions must actively engage in assurance processes. Advocates of quality assurance view accountability as necessary not only to satisfy external constituents but as a precondition for improvement, especially in undergraduate education. Advocates of quality assurance also are concerned that the current system of accreditation in the U.S. does not do a credible job of guaranteeing quality, especially given the time and resources devoted to the process. Though several changes have been proposed in U.S. accreditation to address the system's weakest features, proposed changes have not been well received by institutions, particularly private institutions, and reforms have stalled. Advocates of quality assurance also assert that a rigorous quality assurance system assists both in considering broader questions about the definitions of and evidence for quality and in clarifying an institution's mission and purpose.

Assuring quality is only one part of what is needed to satisfy accountability demands; many higher education commentators believe however that this is the best place to start. They believe the present time may represent the last chance for the academy to help shape a workable future framework for quality assurance, accountability, and improvement. If internal forces mitigate against the establishment of quality processes, external stakeholders will force their own version on the academy. (Dill, 1992; Education Commission of the States, 1995; Dill, Massy, Williams & Cook, 1996)

Definitions of Quality

Integral to any quality assurance program in higher education is a working definition of quality. Most of the literature on quality assurance assumes that individual institutions (or groups of institutions, such as a state system) will develop a working definition of quality; few writers have actually articulated a definition of quality, particularly with respect to undergraduate education. Those who have defined quality have suggested the following characteristics:

- technical knowledge or competence in a major field;

- literacy (communication and computational skills, technological skills);

- "just-in-time" learning ability that enable graduates to learn and apply new knowledge and skills as needed—often referred to as lifelong learning skills;

- the ability to make informed judgments and decisions (correctly define problems, gather and analyze relevant information, and develop and implement appropriate solutions);

- the ability to function in a global community, including knowledge of different cultures and contexts as well as foreign language skills;

- a range of characteristics and attitudes needed for success in the workplace including: flexibility and adaptability; ease with diversity; motivation and persistence; high ethical standards; creativity and resourcefulness; and the ability to work with others, especially in groups;

- demonstrated ability to apply these skills to complex problems in real-world settings.

There are a few interesting things to note about these characteristics of quality. First, it is clear that the characteristics of quality found in the quality assurance literature are primarily expressed in the language of external stakeholders, particularly those who employ graduates. This assumes involvement of key external constituents in the conversations about and design of quality assurance systems. Second, this list of quality characteristics is comprehensive; any reasonable attempt to fulfill this list would necessarily require the efforts of the entire institution rather than the efforts of just one faculty member or one department. This notion of quality—that it requires a total institutional effort—is not the norm in U.S. higher education.

Quality, according to the quality assurance literature, encompasses a distinctive set of institutional characteristics and behaviors that increase the likelihood that the above outcomes will be realized. While these characteristics do not constitute quality itself, they can serve both to stimulate quality improvement and to signify that quality is present. These characteristics include:

- a clear statement of intended learning outcomes that provides clear direction for assessment; in other words, an institution should be able to state in very concrete terms what outcomes it intends for its undergraduates;

- satifactory performance in graduate education and on relevant licensing and certification examinations;

- results of direct assessments of student abilities on exit consistent with institutional goals, and the "value added" by the institution, given students' starting points;

- student satisfaction with the contribution made by the institution toward attainment of their own goals, relative to the costs incurred.

Criteria for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

According to the literature, an adequate quality assurance system must do more than simply assess quality. Equal emphasis must be placed upon communicating the results of these assessments to interested parties, both to satisfy demands for accountability and to enable institutions to use the results to affect changes and improvements. Many stakeholders require such information—among them are students and their parents, state and federal officials and other policymakers, governing and coordinating boards, employers, K-12 educators and others with whom higher education has partnerships, the media, and the public at large. Although different authors highlight different aspects of communication as important, most agree that the following list of attributes constitutes an effective communications system to support quality assurance in higher education :

- an open process for examining the evidence for quality and public communication of its results;

- frequent, regular, and up-to-date reporting of results;

- a method of reporting that enables appropriate comparisons to be drawn across institutions in order to inform consumer and investor choices;

- concise and intelligible reporting, tailored to meet the needs of different constituents;

- a variety of measures that allows for presentation of a balanced profile of institutional performance and the context in which it occurs;

- wide dissemination of results to interested parties through multiple channels, including the media.

Advocates of quality assurance in higher education have suggested a number of criteria that any quality assurance process in higher education should meet. These criteria or standards can be grouped in three broad categories: (1) questions/concerns about the primary emphasis and focus of quality assurance, (2) questions/concerns about the quality assurance process itself and how it operates, and (3) questions/concerns about the information produced, how it is used, and how it is reported.

1. Questions/concerns about the primary emphasis and focus of quality assurance include:

- Is the institution's definition of quality centered principally on undergraduate teaching and learning?

- Does the institution draw its conclusions about quality primarily on the basis of student outcomes (rather than on faculty or student inputs)?

- Are the outcomes based on the needs of key constituents—external as well as internal—and stakeholders?

- Do the outcomes reflect skills and abilities that are important to students after graduation?

- Do the outcomes reflect the institution's undergraduate educational mission, including such things as intellectual and moral development, employability, and students' own goals?

- Does the assessment of these outcomes allow judgments to be made about both the absolute levels of achievement reached and the institution's particular contribution to these levels of achievement? In other words, is the institution's "value-added" assessed?

2. Questions/concerns about the quality assurance process itself and how it operates include:

- Does the process involve all key constituents in making quality judgments, or does the institution simply disclose the results?

- Does the process rely on evidence of student performance after completion or graduation?

- Does the process focus the institution on making improvements?

- Is the process continuous and systematic, rather than episodic and infrequent?

- Does the process as a whole encourage institutions to reach beyond minimums toward increasingly higher levels of performance? Are institutions encouraged to exceed, not simply meet, standards?

- Does the process work effectively as part of a comprehensive, integrated system of accountability and quality assurance that may include components designed and implemented by the state or federal government, the private sector, and the academy itself?

3. Questions about the information produced by the process, how it is used, and how it is presented include:

- Is the information generated by the process useful and worth the cost of producing it?

- Does the process provide adequate information for stakeholders to make choices or decisions important to them?

- Does the process allow appropriate comparisons to be made between institutions—either generally or within specific areas or programs?

- Is the information that it yields readily intelligible to a broad array of constituents both within and external to the institution?

- Are both the information produced and the judgments based on that information openly available and publicly reported?

- Does the institution have adequate internal feedback mechanisms?

It is important to note that the above standards are very broad and are meant to be applied to a quality assurance system on any campus. Individual campuses will have other criteria based upon their unique circumstances.

Building an Effective Quality Assurance Program

A comprehensive system of quality assurance and accountability may consist of a number of different entities and processes acting together—including an institutional program, voluntary accreditation, and state and federal policy. The majority of the literature on quality assurance in higher education focuses on institutional programs. Most authors agree that quality assurance is an area in which the academy itself—with full participation from its various constituents—is best equipped to lead. But institutions must be willing to take the initiative or they risk intervention by others (e.g. state governments, governing boards) with a stake in the enterprise. Most authors agree that an honest, open dialogue across affected constituents is a key starting point in developing an effective quality assurance program.

Most authors also agree that academic quality is best guaranteed when the responsibility for it is located as closely as possible to the processes of teaching and learning. Quality and its assurance should be seen primarily as a professional issue, not a management function. Ultimately, quality is not maintained and enhanced through systems or controls but through professional commitment. Institutions need to provide an environment within which quality is everyone's responsibility and within which a self-critical commitment to its maintenance and enhancement is part of the professionalism of all faculty and staff. Establishing such a "culture of quality" where attention to quality permeates every aspect of the organization is a high priority in successfully implementing quality assurance.

Higher Education Quality Assurance in Practice

Most of the literature on quality assurance in higher education focuses on descriptions and reviews of actual programs. Great Britain, Hong Kong, Australia, and Sweden all require colleges and universities to have some type of formal quality assurance program. Though much of this literature is fairly technical in nature, several key characteristics of actual quality assurance programs emerge.

- Quality assurance is framed as a genuine opportunity for colleges and universities. Each of these countries bases their program on the premise that quality assurance, while mandated nationally, offers institutions an opportunity to showcase their achievements while at the same time rendering themselves accountable for the quality of their educational programs. In practice, there is an extensive list of constituents interested in the quality of higher education including: students, employers, parents, taxpayers, the government, and even the academic community itself. Quality assurance provides institutions with the opportunity to demonstrate that issues of quality are being systematically and consciously addressed and improved.

- The great variety of missions, sizes, traditions, and resources which characterizes higher education institutions in these countries is reflected in an equal variety of responses to quality assurance. There is no dominant model of institutional response. In Australia and Great Britain, there is a sense that the older and more established institutions responded to the quality assurance mandate in similar ways; the same could be said of the newer institutions. In general, the older universities seek to consolidate, formalize, and make more explicit informal quality assurance policies and systems, while the newer institutions seek to simplify and streamline existing procedures. Also, many older institutions are moving to centralize responsibility for quality assurance, while many younger institutions seek to devolve responsibility. But these generalizations must not be overemphasized; variety of institutional response is more evident than similarity of response.

- A review of the literature shows that there are very few institutions in any of these countries which had to start from scratch. The majority of institutions already had at least some informal quality assurance mechanisms.

- Although the quality assurance systems are far from complete, most institutions are seeking a reasonable balance between delegating responsibility for quality assurance to the appropriate unit level and retaining institutional control and direction. Institutions also are seeking a similar balance between individual responsibility for achieving high quality educational outcomes, based on values of professionalism and trust (a traditional collegiate model) and a greater degree of standardization and collective responsibility.

- Almost universally, responsibility for quality assurance is clearly identified by the institution, although patterns of responsibility differ. In some institutions, a central office or major committee has oversight of the quality assurance system, while in others a senior administrator forms a series of committees which deal with quality assurance matters.

- In general, institutions need to improve coordination between various levels of the quality assurance system, both vertically and horizontally. The literature offers many examples of institutions in which the various components of quality assurance exist in a piecemeal fashion. This is primarily a communication issue.

- The revised mission statements that institutions designed as part of the quality assurance program generally feature teaching and learning prominently. This is true even of the more research-oriented institutions. Clearly, colleges and universities were responding to external criticism of the lack of focus on undergraduate teaching and learning.

- Nearly all institutions have effectively linked quality assurance and strategic planning. On the other hand, links between quality assurance, strategic planning, and the budget are often weak.

- Many universities have designed effective reviews of their quality assurance programs, including a systematic investigation of the strengths and weaknesses of the various procedures in place. The U.K.'s quality audit program offers the best example of this.

- Institutions are increasingly relying on the use of external examiners (particularly from the business community) in their quality assurance programs for advice and critiques on a wide range of issues such as course/program design, teaching and learning evaluations, and faculty policies.