

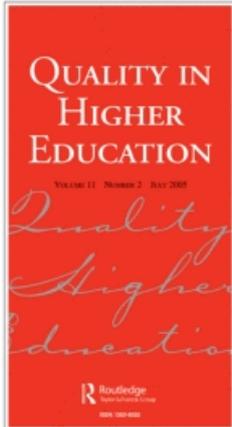
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### War of the Worlds: who wins in the battle for quality supremacy?

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# War of the Worlds: who wins in the battle for quality supremacy?

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**ABSTRACT** *The battle-lines are drawn up in the various struggles for control of supranational external quality monitoring (accreditation and evaluation). The different types of supranational quality processes are outlined (as they existed at the time of the presentation of the paper to the Conference). The question asked is: who benefits from the extension of quality monitoring beyond national (and sub-national) boundaries?*

## **Internationalisation and Quality**

Quality in higher education has become widespread within national boundaries. Current concerns are about developing an international approach to quality. Internationalisation has come about for three main reasons: globalisation of higher education; the growth of transnational education; increasing pressure for international or cross-national recognition of qualifications.

On the one hand, there is pressure to quality assure international developments, while, on the other, a need to make quality assurance international (Thune, 2002). Quality assurance of international developments includes agencies being satisfied with the acceptability of provision by institutions in other countries and 'franchised' provision 'overseas' by providers in their own country.

Internationalisation of quality assurance involves the development of processes or procedures that enable recognition of programmes beyond the boundary of the country in which it has been validated and evaluation and recognition of programmes with no national boundaries (often internet providers).

There are three broad approaches to the internationalisation of quality:

- mutual recognition
- international agencies
- supranational agencies

## **Mutual Recognition**

One approach to international validation is *mutual recognition* between national agencies. The establishment of INQAAHE in the early 1990s was, in part, to provide a supportive network for agencies beginning to establish quality assurance processes but it has also been a basis for mutual information and informal recognition of members' procedures.

Mutual recognition was at the root of developments on the back of the 1998 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) World Conference on Higher Education and the 1999 Bologna Declaration in Europe. In essence, the latter

asserted that any European dimension in accreditation arrangements must rest on national systems.

The Danish Evaluation Institute and the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council recently completed a project to develop mutual recognition (Kristoffersen, 2002). The purpose was to create an international system of recognition of external quality assurance procedures that accommodate national differences. The project also explored the implications of mutual recognition for related educational issues, such as recognition of degrees and diplomas and labour market recognition of graduates.

The MERCOSUR process of mutual recognition involves six countries in South America. They have agreed on an experimental accreditation mechanism, which includes a set of basic procedures and quality criteria. These are to be applied to three professional degree programmes (agronomy, medicine, engineering) by national quality assurance agencies. Students graduating from accredited programmes would have their degrees recognised by the six countries (Lemaitre, 2003).

A recent mutual-recognition proposal for an international confederation for quality review of higher education emanates from the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (Eaton, 2002, p. 3). The proposal reflects the Bologna Declaration by acknowledging 'the primacy of nation *states* in decision making about quality review'. The proposal is to create an 'international confederation of nation-based quality review bodies' that would:

- provide a service to assist nations to maintain themselves as primary sources of responsibility for quality;
- be a vehicle to establish working relationships between countries;
- provide a forum for exchange of ideas about core values for higher education quality;
- develop, in partnership with quality review organisations, an international database of quality programmes and institutions.

Much work has already been done in the area of international co-operation. INQAAHE, for example, is a widespread international forum for discussions about higher education and quality assurance, which *inter alia* established a workgroup in May 2002 to examine mutual recognition, in bilateral or multi-lateral agreements between quality agencies, of each other's judgements and decisions. The information-gathering activity resulted in an extensive public database ([www.inqaahe.nl](http://www.inqaahe.nl)), which will be continually updated (Lemaitre, 2003, p. 2).

Mutual recognition also operates at the institutional level. This might be through special arrangements between two or more institutions in a consortium or through joint involvement in international programmes such as the Socrates programmes in Europe. There is an increasing tendency towards voluntary networks established between universities. For example, the European Consortium of Innovative Universities was created by 11 European universities with the aims of sharing their more innovative experiences and constructing an entrepreneurial university.

Benchmarking arrangements between institutions are another form of mutual recognition at the institutional level. Such arrangements are less about measurement and ranking judgements and are rather more about attempting to learn from one another.

### International Agencies

A second approach is to use *international* agencies. In theory, these could do much the same

as national agencies already do. Organisations that lie outside national systems could directly evaluate, accredit or assure institutions or programmes.

One example is the initiative to establish a Centro-American Accreditation Council, which would act as a second-level quality assurance agency for national agencies operating in any one of seven Central American countries. The proposed council could also provide accreditation to programmes in countries with no formal accrediting mechanisms.

Organisations such as the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS), Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) and the European Consortium of Public Administration programmes (EAPAA) offer, or are intending to offer, a form of voluntary international accreditation of institutions, faculties and programmes (often for international professional recognition) according to certain threshold levels. The University of Delft (2002) in the Netherlands, for example, is currently accredited in the United States by ABET.

The second phase of the European Commission's Leonardo programme, initiated in 2000, included a project to create a European agency for accreditation of engineering studies. This is indicative of a general commitment by the EC towards recognising professional qualifications in countries belonging to the European Union.

The Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE), the Academic Co-operation Association (ACA) and the European Universities Association (EUA) with the co-operation of INQAAHE are collaborating in a programme of internationalisation quality review (IQR) (OECD IMHE, 2002, p. 1). It is based on self-assessment and then a lengthy peer-review process that provides an in-depth external perspective. Institutions from five continents have participated.

EUA audits provide institutions with an international perspective. The audits use an international panel to explore the quality processes. They are voluntary activities; institutions pay for the audit with a view to learning for improvement.

A different form of international agency oversight is that proposed by the UNESCO Global Forum on Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education. It intends to maintain a 'watching brief' on private and transnational higher education providers because 'national governments can no longer be the sole determinants of the public good' (Daniel quoted in Jen Lin-Liu, 2001).

The logistics of peer review and language and cultural compatibility are more complex for international than national organisations. There are also language and cultural problems when using international peers. There does not appear to be much support for an international quality review agency within academia. At a recent international seminar, delegates were of the view that any European-wide accreditation agency would be overly bureaucratic, too closely specified and costly and thus unwelcome (Harvey, 2002a).

### Supranational Agencies

A third approach would be to create *supranational* agencies. These are agencies that evaluate other (national) agencies rather than directly validate programmes or institutions. It has been argued that the international credibility of the quality processes in most European countries is not very high and would be enhanced or better understood internationally if 'kite-marked' by a supranational European agency, such as ENQA (Campbell & van der Wende, 2000).

However, Christian Thune, chair of ENQA, does not support the supranational agency concept. He recently noted that a key concern is to establish a European context for the mutual recognition of quality assurance systems, rather than any international agency,

bearing in mind the essential independence of agencies and procedures at all levels (Thune, 2002). Thune sees ENQA's role as providing the space in which appropriate mutual recognition might take place.

CHEA, in the United States, is a form of supranational agency—although, in this case, it is a supra-regional agency. Similarly, the new accreditation arrangements in Germany are dependent on a federal agency that accredits the accreditors. Following the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, agencies that wish to undertake initial accreditation of bachelors/masters programmes can be set up freely but need to be recognised by the newly-established federal Accreditation Council (Akkreditierungsrat, 1999; Berner & Richter, 2001).

In the Netherlands, the introduction of bachelors and masters is also being linked to a national accreditation organisation that is likely to 'kite-mark' a range of potential evaluation agencies. The Netherlands has more than a decade of well-established national quality assurance processes and linking accreditation to established quality assurance is problematic. Although the Bologna Declaration does not mention how transparency is to be achieved, Westerheijden (2001, p. 68) argues that many Western European countries, the Netherlands included, have interpreted this as introducing programme accreditation instead of, or on top of, existing external quality assurance arrangements.

### **World Quality Register**

The International Association of University Presidents (IAUP) have proposed a supranational 'world quality register' (IAUP, 2002). The proposal is for a consortium, based on IAUP and INQAAHE and other appropriate organisations, with the moral support of UNESCO, to operate the register. The intention is that the public, all over the world, would be assured that the local quality assurance agency that reviewed the institution or programme is reputable and thorough. This would mean the agency meets standards for trustworthy quality assurance, such as a clear commitment to develop academic quality in the institutions and programmes evaluated by it, fair and appropriate quality assessment procedures, and well-developed and publicly-available protocols or manuals that describe, in a transparent way, the procedures and standards used in quality assessment processes. The implication is that only institutions and programmes accredited or quality assured by a recognised agency would have international standing (Harvey, 2002b).

The IAUP proposal would involve a paper-based, expert panel review of agencies seeking registration on the WQR. There are sufficient, well-established agencies to begin the process of registration, which, IAUP claims, would also have a developmental element, through a candidacy status, aimed to help newly-developed agencies, and those not up to standard, to progress to full status.

Since the proposal to the INQAAHE meeting, and following a meeting of the European Network (ENQA) General Assembly, which discussed the WQR, INQAAHE produced a draft position paper (INQAAHE, 2002). This was put to the IAUP triennial conference in Sydney along with full copies of the IAUP Commission proposal and received a mixed reaction. Meanwhile, some ambiguity developed about UNESCO's role in a world quality register.

The main thrust of INQAAHE's position paper (INQAAHE, 2002) was that the autonomy and independence of quality assurance agencies is an essential element in the development of quality assurance. However, the engagement and involvement, support and confidence of higher education institutions and other stakeholders are also important parts of this development. The establishment of a quality register on a global basis can only be done with the support and voluntary co-operation of the agencies and, in many cases,

of the governments of the respective countries. Support of working sub-networks and regional networks as well as international organisations, such as UNESCO, are also necessary. Furthermore, much higher education does not come under the remit of the universities and the engagement of representative bodies of institutions of higher learning in the extra-university sector would be important. The position paper also suggested that essential and elective criteria for a quality assurance agency in higher education might be established. In developing this project, INQAAHE intended to take into account existing projects, such as mutual-recognition projects in MERCOSUR and the Nordic countries. A 'quality mark' could be introduced to indicate that the agency has reached minimum standards and also indicate which elective standards have been reached. An on-going verification process would be necessary once such a system is in place.

In the end, the INQAAHE position paper was not put to the Conference and instead a separate paper from working group 3 of INQAAHE on the development of a set of principles of good practice was debated in Dublin. The Principles were endorsed (see Editorial) but 'it is not intended that they become requirements for membership of INQAAHE' (Lemaitre, 2003) nor that they provide a basis for a supranational agency. At best, they may be guidelines for assisting mutual recognition.

### The Politics of Quality

External quality monitoring is not an apolitical or benign activity. On the contrary it is highly politicised and intrusive. Alvesson and Willmott (1996, p. 11) suggest that the achievement of quality in higher education 'is essentially political in origin'. The politics, though, are concealed behind a facade that suggests 'that "achieving quality" is amenable to technical and bureaucratic solutions'.

The 'politics of quality' refers to the macro and micro agendas that accompany the introduction of quality monitoring procedures (Harvey, 1999). Internationalisation of quality brings the politics of quality into stark relief as can be seen from the machinations around the world quality register, quality confederations and mutual-recognition arrangements.

For example, the 'principles of good practice for an EQA agency' (INQAAHE, 2003) appear to be a rational and logical exposition of fundamental requirements of an agency to carry out its task. However, the discussion document is, in essence, a political statement. The relatively long introduction identifies the political context including the 'quality label' issue. The introduction draws parallels with the ISO process of accreditation of accreditors. In itself, reference to the ISO 9000 series evokes a political, document-based, control mechanism. That the document states 'higher education institutions are analogous to the organisations seeking certification, and EQA agencies are analogous to the companies granting this certification' gives a clear indication of that process of control and takes no account of autonomy, academic freedom or the voluntarism of the ISO process for those who opt to seek certification for their paper-based procedures.

However, the politicisation of the principals goes to a yet deeper level. The paper presumes a need for EQA and for EQA agencies. There is no attempt to question this need. Indeed, the underlying presupposition is that EQA should be professionalised, backed by an assertion that EQA is an emerging profession and reference to the self-regulating mechanisms in other professions such as medicine, law and accountancy. Rather than ask whether EQA is necessary, whether it needs to be permanent or flexible and transitory, the document presumes the need for a codified self-regulatory mechanism for permanent

profession. This is not to suggest that there is no need for professionalisation but that the document does not even address this.

The specific detail of the principles further reveals the politicisation process. The methodology presupposed by the principles is the current dominant methodology of self-review, peer visit and documentary (or statistical) evidence followed by a public report. The IAUP proposal for a world quality register also did not 'impose a specific methodological approach or specific quality standards' but the proposal goes on to say that 'external assessment by the agency should be based on a combination of self-evaluation and peer review' (IAUP, 2002). Likewise the ENQA view of mutual recognition is advanced on the premise that there is a 'basic methodology' to provide a 'European platform' (Thune, 2002).

The views of international delegates at *The End of Quality?* seminar in Birmingham (Harvey, 2002a) cast doubt on the efficacy and acceptability of this dominant methodology. The dominant approach of self-assessment (supported by statistical indicators), peer review and publication has been critiqued elsewhere (Harvey, 1998; Barrow, 1999). Furthermore, the convergence that appears to lie behind such proposals leads to cultural blindness, perhaps reflecting the imperialistic nature of quality evaluation (Lemaitre, 2001).

The world quality register (WQR) is another political gambit. The IAUP proposal was as much founded on fears of not providing some kind of international kite mark as it is on the positive reasons for doing so. 'If the quality assurance world doesn't address internationalisation then others will step in' (Van Damme, 2002). This is similar to the fear that drove the development of some national systems. However, the purpose of a publicly accessible and authoritative register is not clear. Is the identification of trustworthy agencies intended to ensure that the qualifications of accredited or assured institutions have international currency? Or, is it to overcome what van Damme called 'the silly bureaucracy' inhibiting student mobility? Or, is it an attempt to control the activities of (profiteering) transnational providers? Although qualifications and mobility seemed to be the primary reason behind the register, two alternative conceptualisations emerged.

First, the WQR is another staging post in the professionalisation of quality assurance in higher education. Second, and potentially more sinister, is the legitimisation that the WQR would give to higher education exporting countries, keen to by-pass local controls in the search for new markets. Linking the need for the WQR to the GATS agreements, van Damme (2002) argued that academia is in danger of being overwhelmed by trade agreements and should not surrender responsibility to the trade negotiators. The WQR is about enabling trade in higher education, but for whose benefit? This reflects a broader concern about quality imperialism.

Joining the consortium would have raised political issues for INQAAHE. Currently, the network is inclusive and designed to encourage the sharing of practice and mutual support. Involvement in the consortium would have resulted in organisational schizophrenia. As the proposed registration is conditional, INQAAHE would have been involved in making judgements that might discriminate against members. The likely outcome would thus be a fundamental shift in the network, from support to a super-accrediting function.

Underlying much of the debate is the politically pragmatic presumption that new public management is not only an inevitable way forward but that it is applicable to higher education. In effect it prioritises a top-down process of compliance and accountability. Again there is a presumption that the political agendas of public policy management are appropriate to higher education. A political decision that fails to appreciate the role of bottom-up implementation of policy in higher education

Furthermore, when confronted with demonstrating their own accountability and

efficiency, agencies opt for the same methodology: a model that politically sidesteps any systematic external evaluation of their effectiveness in enhancing student learning.

### Conclusion: issues for debate

As this is intended as an interactive session, participants will be asked to explore who would benefit from the internationalisation of quality monitoring. Does grass-roots opposition to internationalisation represent a movement concerned with autonomy and academic freedom or a cynical distrust of yet another layer of bureaucracy? In the end, is there any evidence or potential that any form of internationalisation of quality monitoring will benefit the learning experience of students?

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