Is Big Brother Watching You?

The Evolving Role of the State in Regulating and Conducting Quality Assurance

Jamil Salmi*
Prepared for the
Council on Higher Education Accreditation
January 2015

* Global Tertiary Education Expert; Former World Bank Tertiary Education Coordinator
jsalmi@tertiaryeducation.org; www.tertiaryeducation.org

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A national advocate and institutional voice for academic quality through accreditation, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is an association of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

The French philosopher Paul Valéry observed with nostalgia that "the trouble with our times is that the future is not what it used to be." This is particularly true in the realm of tertiary education, which is in great flux. A recent report published in the United Kingdom proposed the image of "an avalanche" to describe the radical changes affecting tertiary education in many parts of the world (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi, 2013). Indeed, powerful transformative forces of three kinds–rupture factors, crisis factors and stimulus factors–are challenging tertiary education systems all over the planet.

First, a growing number of rupture factors are at play in transforming the ecosystem in which tertiary education institutions are operating, drastically influencing how they perform their teaching and research functions. Among these rupture factors are technological innovations such as flipped classrooms for interactive learning, massive open online courses (MOOCS) reaching hundred of thousands of students all over the world, new forms of competition from for-profit and corporate universities that provide professional qualifications closely linked to labor market needs, and new accountability modalities like the global rankings, which allow us to measure and compare the performance of universities across all continents (Salmi, 2013).

Second, as a result of the 2007 financial downturn, the tertiary education sector in most regions of the world has been affected by serious crisis factors. In the United States, for example, the level of public support for tertiary education has been reduced substantially in nearly every state–48 out of 50 over the 2008-13 period–under the combined impact of the economic recession, federal mandates to fund other sectors such as healthcare, and the reluctance to increase state taxes (Miller, 2013). In Europe, 13 out of the 20 university systems that the European Universities Association has been monitoring since the beginning of the financial crisis experienced overall budget decreases in real terms between 2008 and 2012, nine of them of more than 10 percent (EUA, 2013). The cuts have been even more severe throughout the developing world, with the aggravation of falling household incomes and soaring graduate unemployment rates.

The third type of factors worth mentioning are the stimulus factors that refer, in contrast to the previously mentioned crisis dimensions, to the availability of significant additional funding for tertiary education in a small number of countries where governments consider that the role of universities in support of innovation and growth is so important that they deserve extra resources. In most cases, the package of additional funding has come in the form of an "Excellence Initiative" designed to strengthen the leading universities of the countries concerned, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Russia, South Korea, and Taiwan to mention a few recent examples.

Against this background of complex forces at play, tertiary education enrollment has continued to increase rapidly in most parts of the world. The proliferation of tertiary education institutions has generated concerns about the quality and relevance of the programs offered, especially in the case of private providers, and put additional pressure on quality assurance agencies. Ironically, even in situations of significantly reduced public funding for tertiary education, governments have not lightened their demands on quality assurance agencies and tertiary education institutions. If anything, it seems that the

role of government has become more intrusive in recent years and the accountability requirements have grown significantly.

In this context, the main objective of this report is to analyze how the interplay among governments, quality assurance agencies and tertiary education institutions has evolved in the past decade. After a brief summary of the history of quality assurance, the second part of the report documents the evolution of the role of the State vis-à-vis quality assurance agencies in recent years, identifying significant developments, key issues and new challenges. While the report takes a global perspective, it does not in any way attempt to provide an exhaustive review of trends in the relationship between governments and quality assurance agencies. The third part of the report explores the growing importance of new forms of accountability, such as rankings and measures of learning outcomes. The report concludes by proposing a few principles to help reach an appropriate balance between autonomy and accountability as they apply to the relationship between governments and quality assurance agencies.

THE QUIET QUALITY ASSURANCE REVOLUTION IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

Until the 1980s, tertiary education institutions in the United States, the United Kingdom and Commonwealth countries were the only ones in the world with a strong tradition of external quality assurance (QA). In the absence of a federal Ministry of Higher Education, the quality assurance function was carried out essentially through private accreditation agencies. This continues to be the prevailing modality today, unlike what happens elsewhere in the world.

This all started to change in the 1980s and the 1990s, as most Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries moved to establish some form of government-sanctioned quality assurance. Van Damme (2002) explains the rapid expansion of quality assurance in this period as the combination of at least five factors at play in many countries. First, the transition from elite to mass higher education led to concerns about a possible decline in academic standards. Second, employers lost confidence in the ability of tertiary education institutions to maintain the relevance of their programs in an increasingly competitive and global economy. Third, as governments reduced funding for tertiary education because of fiscal restrictions, they called for greater accountability in the use of public resources. Fourth, the growing competitiveness within and across tertiary education systems made it more important to have tangible measures of quality. Finally, stakeholders began to demand more transparency in tertiary education as far as quality was concerned. For example, the first college ranking published in 1983 by *U.S. News and World Report* responded to this societal preoccupation for more information about the performance of tertiary education institutions.

Europe witnessed a considerable drive as a direct result of the Bologna process officially launched in 1999. One of the most important dimensions of the Bologna process activities has indeed been the development and/or strengthening of quality assurance in all participating countries, based on the principles issued through the Berlin Communiqué in 2003, and the Standards and Guidelines prepared by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and adopted by the

Ministers of Education/Higher Education in 2005 at the Bergen meeting. By 2008, most countries had a functioning evaluation or accreditation agency. The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) has been a strong factor in influencing QA agencies wishing to integrate the community of national systems recognized as being in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines. The successful convergence of QA regulations has been one of Bologna's most noticeable outcomes.

The former socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have also been keen to participate in this process. Today, most of them have a quality assurance system in place, even though the capacity is still unequal, as reflected by the fact that many of the agencies from these countries have not been accepted as full members of ENQA. For example, the agencies from Albania, Armenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Russia, and the Slovak Republic are only affiliate members.

Whereas only a minority of developing countries had a formal quality assurance system by the turn of the century, the QA movement has gained tremendous momentum in the past 15 years. In Latin America, the first quality assurance body was established in Mexico in 1991, followed two years later by a national accreditation agency in Colombia. In the following two decades, most countries in the region set up a national quality assurance body, with the exception of the Central American nations, which started with a regional accreditation agency. Today Uruguay is the only country in the region without any formal quality assurance and accreditation body, although the Ministry of Education is responsible for licensing new private universities. In the majority of cases the quality assurance agencies have been operating as independent bodies, but in three countries, Ecuador, El Salvador and Nicaragua, the government has maintained direct control of the quality assurance body.

Asia and the Middle East have experienced a similar evolution. In South-East Asia, Indonesia took the lead in establishing a national quality assurance agency in 1994, followed over the next two decades by almost all the countries in the region. Today, Myanmar is the only tertiary education system without a formal external quality assurance department or agency. In the Arab world, the first decade of the new century saw the creation of quality assurance systems in most countries, 11 out of the 17 main countries in the region by 2009. Yemen was the twelfth nation, and today only five countries are without a formally established QA system. Two of them, Lebanon and Tunisia, are at an advanced stage in the setting up process.

Africa is perhaps the region where the quality assurance movement has been slowest. By 2006, only six countries had a fully established quality assurance agency, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa being the pioneers in that domain. In the past eight years, however, progress has been impressive, and today, 23 countries have a national QA agency. The concluding declaration of a recent pan-African conference on quality assurance urges all countries that do not have with a proper QA system to put one in place as a matter of priority, especially in view of the growing importance of private tertiary education and e-learning (Jongsma, 2014).

As a result of this worldwide phenomenon, countries can be characterized today as belonging to one of the following four categories:

- Advanced systems whose tertiary education institutions have well-developed internal quality assurance processes with a strong focus on quality enhancement, in line with national standards defined by the external quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies, often linked to the national qualifications framework; leading OECD economies would be in this category.
- Well-established systems still relying predominantly on external quality assurance, where a significant proportion of tertiary education institutions do not fully meet the national quality assurance standards; many industrial and developing countries would be in this category.
- Countries that are in the process of setting up and consolidating their quality assurance system; many developing countries and countries in transition in Eastern Europe and Central Asia would be in that category.
- Countries that have not established a formal quality assurance system; these would encompass a few countries in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Middle East, and about two dozen countries in Africa.

It is worth mentioning in this brief account of the modern history of quality assurance that, in parallel with the spread of national quality assurance agencies, the quality assurance movement has also taken on an important international dimension under the impulsion of the donor community (Wells, 2014). First, the German academic exchange agency, *Deutsche Akademische Austausch Dienst* (DAAD), undertook in the late 1990s to help the Spanish-speaking Central American countries build up their capacity to carry out accreditation, resulting in the establishment of a regional accreditation body (*Consejo Centroamericano de Acreditación de la Educación Superior*) in 2004. The premise of this project was that a regional agency could serve their quality assurance needs in a more effective manner than if each country would set up its own accreditation organism, from the viewpoint of achieving a critical mass of peer reviewers and reducing the risk of conflict of interest that small countries invariably face. DAAD is currently following a similar approach to support the development of quality assurance in West Africa.

Second, alarmed by the impact of the rapid growth of cross-border education on quality, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the OECD teamed up between 2003 and 2005 to elaborate guidelines in support of all stakeholders involved in the provision of cross-border education programs (governments, providers, faculty members, students, quality assurance agencies, professional associations). The joint document resulting from this effort offers a synthesis of good practices and proposes tools to monitor and improve the quality and relevance of cross-border education in order to protect students from below-standard practices (UNESCO and OECD, 2005).

In 2008, UNESCO also joined forces with the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the U.S. professional association in charge of recognizing accreditation bodies, to address the growing issue of *diploma mills* and *accreditation mills*, which offer and sanction worthless degrees affecting thousands of students not aware that they are exposed to fraudulent practices. Their 2009 Declaration sought to provide guidance to countries and quality assurance agencies keen on combating dishonest practices in tertiary education (CHEA and UNESCO, 2009). The official Communiqué of the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education further alerted Member States to the alarming phenomenon of degree mills (UNESCO, 2009).

Third, the World Bank tertiary education strategy published in 2002 (*Constructing Knowledge Societies*) identified quality assurance as a global public good.

> *Globalization and the growth of borderless education raise important issues that affect tertiary education in all countries but that are often beyond the control of any one government. Among the challenges of particular concern to countries seeking to build up their advanced human capital capacity are new forms of brain drain that result in a loss of local capacity in fields critical to development; the absence of a proper international accreditation and qualifications framework; the dearth of accepted legislation regarding foreign tertiary education providers….*
>
> *The rapid development of virtual providers of tertiary education programs on a global scale, the increasing mobility of professionals across national borders, and the absence of quality assurance infrastructure and capacity in many developing countries make it important to establish an international framework that sets out minimum common standards worldwide* (World Bank, 2002, pp. 98 and 101).

Following up on this recognition, the World Bank set aside grant resources to support the strengthening of INQAAHE (*International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education*), the international umbrella association for quality assurance, and the development of quality assurance regional networks. A series of *Development Grants* helped establish the Asian and Pacific network (APQN) first, followed by the Latin American network (RIACES) and then by networks in the Arab (ANQAHE), African (AfriQAN) and Caribbean (CANQATE) regions. These grants culminated with a collaborative project, the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC), financed by the World Bank and managed by UNESCO, to consolidate the regional networks. More recently, the German cooperation program and the European Union have supported the development of AQAN, the ASEAN quality assurance network.

Finally, it is important to note that this significant transformation of the tertiary education landscape has, interestingly, happened without too much controversy. In contrast to reforms in the areas of governance and financing, which have more often than not generated heated debates and encountered strong resistance in the academic community, the development of quality assurance has been widely accepted in most countries across all regions of the world. This can be explained by a combination of two major forces. First, the evolving balance in the steering of tertiary education systems has generally meant greater institutional autonomy and growing reliance on market mechanisms in exchange for increased accountability, including through formal quality assurance mechanisms (World Bank, 2002). Second, as described in the previous paragraphs, external factors at the global and regional levels have heavily influenced national and institutional behaviors. While the Bologna process has been a powerful vector of convergence in Europe, in developing countries the emergence of regional QA networks has acted as a strong catalyst. In addition, the expansion of cross-border education has reinforced the perceived need for regulatory and quality assurance measures in many corners of the planet.

RECENT TRENDS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE: THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE STATE

Against the historical background presented above, this section documents recent trends in quality assurance requirements from the viewpoint of the evolving relationship between governments, quality assurance agencies and tertiary education institutions. As signaled earlier, the purpose is not to provide an exhaustive account of developments in all countries of the world in the past decade, but to give a sense of major trends through a few illustrative cases.

Increased Scrutiny

The first important development could be described as *tightening of quality assurance requirements*, in the form of stricter regulations or even the closing of universities in countries where the quality assurance standards and process have proven insufficient to weed out below-standard institutions. This has often come as a result of the rapid proliferation of tertiary education institutions, growing suspicion towards the quality of private sector providers–especially the for-profits–and evidence of fraudulent practices.

Latin America, the region that started earliest to put quality assurance in place, offers several examples of such shortcomings. As most countries opted initially to focus on program accreditation rather than institutional accreditation, they have found it difficult to keep up with the fast growth of programs, especially in the private sector. In Colombia, for instance, after more than 20 years of accreditation effort, accredited universities offer less than one percent of all graduate programs. The proportion of accredited institutions was seven percent in 2013, and the share of accredited programs was 13 percent. Interestingly, more private universities (13) had obtained the high level accreditation than public ones (only nine) (OECD, 2012). In Costa Rica there were only 63 accredited programs by 2011, and only 74 in Bolivia.

In 2012, the Government of Ecuador shut down 14 private universities out of the 26 that the Accreditation Agency had put on its list of worst performers. The same year, the Chilean government closed down a private university, *Universidad del Mar*, because of poor quality. In 2014, the Colombian Ministry of Education closed down several medical programs offered by a well-known private university, *San Martin Foundation*, because of serious concerns about the quality of teaching and lack of compliance with legal and tax requirements. The Ministry is contemplating similar actions against an undisclosed number of universities. Table 1 shows similar examples from other parts of the world, namely Eastern Europe, Africa and East Asia, illustrating concerns about inadequate quality and/or fraudulent practices.

Table 1 – Recent Examples of University Closures

Countries	Action	Reasons
Albania	Closure of 18 universities in 2014	Issuance of fake diplomas
Romania	Closure of six universities in 2013 and four in 2014	Poor quality
Ethiopia	Closure of five universities and 11 put on probation in 2011	Poor quality
Kenya	One hundred illegal institutions closed down in 2011. All non-accredited universities might be closed down in 2014.	Lack of authorization to operate and poor quality
Nigeria	Closure of nine institutions	Lack of authorization to operate and poor quality
Philippines	Closure of an international business school in 2011	Poor quality

Sources:

Albania: *http://www.ansamed.info/nuova_europa/en/news/countries/albania/2014/08/07/albania-closes-18-universities-for-issuing-fake-diplomas_de759b5e-1c73-4b57-9f9e-4b6805f4e802.html*

Romania: *http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/romania-closes-four-private-universities*

Ethiopia: *http://ethiopiaobservatory.com/2011/09/06/1768/*

Kenya: *http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20110128230404414&query=shut+down*

Nigeria: *http://www.aitonline.tv/post-nuc_shuts_down_nine_universities_over_illegal_licence*

Philippines: *http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/270293/pinoyabroad/news/pinoy-hk-students-cautioned-on-closed-economics-school*

The Chilean case is perhaps the most striking. Recent scandals have completely undermined the credibility of the accreditation process. Considered for many years as one of the most advanced quality assurance systems in the region, the Chilean Accreditation Commission has lately been under fire with accusations of conflict of interest, lack of independence and insufficient professional rigor. One rector and a former acting chair of the Accreditation Commission were jailed under accusations of fraud and conflict of interest. The entire quality assurance system is undergoing a significant overhaul in the context of a new Accreditation Law presented to Congress.

In Russia, acknowledging that the quality assurance efforts of the Ministry of Education have not been sufficient, the Government has begun to involve the Attorney General's office to monitor the operation of public universities. More than 700 Russian universities are expected to undergo audits in the next year or so.

In Hungary, the State has restricted the scope of responsibility of the Quality Assurance Agency in recent years. Established in 1993, the Hungarian QA body lost its full member status with ENQA in 2013. As a result of the new Higher Education Act passed in 2011, it now plays only a consultative role with regard to accrediting new institutions or programs. It also lacks financial independence.[1]

In the Netherlands, a government report published in 2011 deemed existing quality assurance methods insufficient. This report also indicated that the Minister of Education should have authority to issue orders to a university's board if serious failings were found. As a consequence, the Government decided to increase the role of the Ministry of Education's Inspectorate, thereby undermining in part the authority of the official Accreditation Organization (NVAO) (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2011).

In Poland, the Government introduced amendments to the tertiary education legislation in 2011 to shift the focus of the Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA) from inputs to learning outcomes, and from quantitative aspects previously regulated by national legislation to qualitative aspects.[2]

With regard to similar efforts to tighten quality assurance in East Asia, the South Korean experience is worth mentioning. In 2011, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology clamped down on low-quality private providers by "naming and shaming" 43 tertiary education institutions deemed of substandard quality, after a thorough evaluation of the country's 346 private institutions (Kim, 2011). As a result they lost access to the 143 million dollars of annual state subsidies that they had been receiving, and their students would not be eligible for student loans anymore. A few months later, in early 2012, the Ministry prohibited 36 universities and two-year colleges from receiving foreign students, again because of low quality.

Along similar lines, the Government of Yemen decided in 2014 to stop financing scholarships for studies in private institutions in Malaysia, complaining about "poor educational quality and high costs" (Tan, 2014). More than 4,000 Yemeni students are currently studying in private Malaysian universities.

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1 *http://www.mab.hu/web/doc/mabmin/External_Review_Report_300713.pdf, particularly pages 8-10, 34-35, 41.*

2 *http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/PKA-review_Final-report-of-the-review-panel.pdf*, page 9.

In Turkey, the new higher education law proposed by the Government in 2014 would give YÖK, the national regulatory agency for higher education, additional powers regarding quality assurance for doctoral degrees.

The United States is the last country example worth mentioning in this regard. In late 2013, the Senate questioned the effectiveness of the accreditors, wondering whether the various accreditation agencies were strict enough (Field, 2013). They called for the application of more rigorous standards and warned of potential conflicts of interest between the peer reviewers and the institutions being assessed.

Consolidation and Transformation of QA Structures and Procedures

A second, related trend is the transformation of QA structures and procedures to improve how the quality assurance functions are carried out. This has taken at least five forms: moving from program accreditation to institutional accreditation, making accreditation compulsory, decentralizing accreditation, merging existing QA agencies/departments into a single structure, and consolidating independent QA agencies.

Some countries where the QA agency has been unable to keep up with the rapid growth of programs, especially in the private sector, have started to offer the option of institutional accreditation as a complementary way of ensuring quality. Colombia, for example, has moved in that direction, although the number of universities that have received institutional accreditation is still very small. In Mexico, the federation of private universities (FIMPES) relies on institutional accreditation to ensure the quality of education offered by its members.

In the Middle East, the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education decided in 2013 to make accreditation compulsory rather than voluntary, as it had been in the past. Chile is considering the adoption of a similar measure as part of the general overhaul of the QA system mentioned earlier.

Following the U.S. example of decentralized accreditation, Mexico has moved from a direct accreditation system to a distributed approach, whereby the government approves accreditation agencies responsible, in turn, for the external quality assurance functions of higher education institutions. Since 2002, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (COPAES) has recognized accreditation agencies and associations according to the general criteria that it defined at the beginning of its mission (*Lineamientos y Marco general para los procesos de acreditación de programas de educación superior*). This explains why Mexico is perhaps the Latin American country that has advanced most in the area of quality assurance in its region, although progress has been mixed among the various types of institutions.[3]

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3 The largest public universities (including UNAM) are autonomous and, as such, are not required to be accredited. The proportion of students enrolled in accredited programs ranges from 90 percent among the public, non-autonomous universities to 50-60 percent among the technological universities and institutes, to only 23 percent among private universities. (Source: R. Tuirán, "La Educación Suprerior en México, 2006-2012: un balance inicial", 2013.)

Another dimension of transformation worth mentioning are efforts to rationalize and consolidate the oversight structure in some countries that had several QA agencies operating. In 2012, Ireland decided to integrate four agencies into the new Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), replacing the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and incorporating the functions of the Irish Universities Quality Board.[4] Similarly, in Austria, the new QA agency that was constituted in 2014 amalgamates the formerly separate quality assurance bodies responsible for universities and *Fachhochschulen* (polytechnics). In Malaysia, where the accreditation department within the Ministry of Higher Education National Accreditation Board (Lembaga Akreditasi Negara, LAN) was initially set up with jurisdiction over the private institutions exclusively, a second QA department (Quality Assurance Division, Ministry of Higher Education (QAD) was later created to look after the public institutions. In 2007, the Ministry brought both departments together under a single QA department called the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA).[5]

A variation of the merger option is found in countries that have traditionally kept the quality assurance functions under the direct responsibility of the main funding agency. In Pakistan, for instance, the Higher Education Commission, which plays the role of a higher education federal ministry, is also in charge of all quality assurance functions. Similarly, in Nepal, the University Grants Council is also responsible for quality assurance.

Finally, some countries have made efforts to strengthen the independence of their QA agencies. In Croatia, for example, the government realized in 2009 that the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE), the national agency responsible for quality assurance that had been set up in 2005, did not operate with sufficient autonomy because of the constraining legal framework. The new Act on Quality Assurance in Research and Higher Education redefined its responsibilities, making ASHE the only institution in Croatia competent to perform external quality assurance and establishing its Accreditation Council as a fully independent body composed of academics, students and other relevant stakeholders in the Croatian higher education sector.[6]

Some of the Nordic countries, notably Denmark and Sweden, have experienced a pendulum movement in that respect. Both countries started with a relatively hands-off system focusing on quality enhancement at the institutional level, but then moved to program accreditation with more State control. Denmark, which has today two QA agencies, one for institutional accreditation and one for crosscutting systemic aspects, has gone back to an approach built on mutual trust, thereby guaranteeing more autonomy to higher education institutions. In Sweden, the Government forced a new QA system on the higher education sector in 2011 without consultation with the institutions themselves. As a result, the new Swedish QA agency (HSV) got into trouble in the European area in 2012 for its perceived lack of independence from government. In addition, ENQA singled out HSV for not abiding by European standards and guidelines with respect to the impartiality of its assessment of internal quality assurance mechanisms (Myklebust,

4 *http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/About-Us.aspx*

5 *http://www.mqa.gov.my/*

6 *http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/ASHE_-_Agency_for_Science_and_Higher_Education*

2012). The government is now planning to allow HSV to operate more independently and to rely again on institutional accreditation.

In France, a new High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCERES) will soon replace the Agency for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (AERES), which was created in 2006. This change aims to increase the autonomy of French universities in alignment with the 2007 governance reform, as HCERES would only perform evaluations and accreditations on request from the universities (Pain, 2013).

Use of Funding Mechanisms for QA Purposes

It is also worth noting that some governments have encroached indirectly on the responsibilities of QA agencies through changes in the funding mechanisms used to allocate public resources among tertiary education institutions. In the Netherlands, for example, the funding formula rewards universities whose graduates finish their studies on time. Similarly, in the Canadian province of Quebec, successive governments have pressured the universities to become more efficient through quantitative indicators of completion rates (Salmi and Hauptman, 2006).

In the United States, the number of states relying on some kind of performance-based funding approach has increased from seven to 33 since 2010 (College Productivity, 2012). The overarching objective of these initiatives is to reward those tertiary education institutions that make deliberate attempts to raise the proportion of students completing high quality programs.

Similarly, performance contracts in Austria, Chile, France and Spain allow universities to receive additional funding in return for a commitment to fulfill a number of national objectives, including quality improvement, as measured by specific targets agreed between the relevant ministry of education and the institution.

Deregulation

In contrast with those countries whose government has tightened up quality assurance structures, regulations and procedures, there are some cases where the national authorities have opted instead for relaxing the supervisory role of the quality assurance agency (Australia) or even relieving the public quality assurance agency of its exclusive responsibility to carry out evaluation and/or accreditation functions (England). In Australia, the definition of the role and responsibilities of TEQSA, the quality assurance agency, has been in flux. Established in 2008 upon recommendation of the Bradley review of higher education that called for a strong national regulator with the power to register and close down established universities, TEQSA took over the duties of the previous agency (AUQA) with an extended mandate, combining the functions of the state-level quality assurance bodies and the national QA agency. But in 2013, the government decided to backtrack, stripping TEQSA of its full responsibilities and halving its budget for regulation and quality assurance (Hare, 2014). With this change, the government's purpose was to lessen the regulatory burden on higher education institutions, emphasizing "risk, necessity and proportionality" as working principles.[7]

7 https://www.education.gov.au/teqsa-advisory-council-terms-reference

In England, a surprise announcement by the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) in October 2014 revealed the government's intention to open the door to private companies, charities and government agencies to take over the current responsibilities of the Quality Assurance Agency (Grove, 2014). The main reason behind the proposed shift is the perception that, faced with a rapidly changing higher education world, the Quality Assurance Agency has been unable to cope with the need for frequent reviews, that it has been too lenient, and that the review process has become more formal than effectual. How the new system would be organized and would operate remains to be defined.

It should also be noted in this context that the 2006 Services Directive of the European Union, which guarantees the freedom of public and private tertiary education institutions from any European country to establish a branch campus or franchise institution in any other country of the Union, infringes on the independence of national QA agencies. According to the Services Directive, the primary responsibility for quality assurance does not rest with the QA agency of the receiving country, but with the country from which the cross-border institution originates.

Taiwan has recently experienced a milder version of deregulation. The Ministry of Education decided in 2012 to grant the most reliable universities the status of "self-accrediting" universities. This move was meant to respond to the wish for more institutional autonomy and the intention of the Ministry to help strengthen internal quality assurance systems. Self-accrediting universities are expected to have the capacity of assessing their own strengths and areas for improvement and to develop their own review standards. In addition, they would be given the authority to organize an external evaluation without prior review by HEEACT, the Taiwanese Quality Assurance Agency.

Quality Assurance and Innovation

One of the challenges faced by quality assurance and accreditation systems has been to find the right balance between enforcing standards in a reliable and consistent manner and allowing sufficient space for innovations in curriculum design and pedagogical approaches. Three recent developments, in India, Peru and Saudi Arabia, illustrate the tension between quality assurance and innovation that strict government regulations can create.

In India, a number of institutions have introduced four-year undergraduate degrees in the past few years, moving away from the traditional British-like three-year programs (Narayan and Sharman, 2014). Among those who made the change are the University of Delhi, several Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the Indian Institute of Science and a few private universities. The rationale behind the change was to align their degrees closer to U.S. degrees, open the option of offering dual degrees with U.S. universities, and give their students the opportunity to acquire research skills during their undergraduate studies.

However, India's main regulatory body, the University Grants Council (UGC), has not recognized this change as a desirable move. Instead, in 2014 it instructed all the institutions that implemented the four-year degree to reverse course and stick to the standard three-year degree. The institutions concerned have tried to fight back through the courts or by asking the Minister of Human Resources to intervene in their favor, arguing that the four-year degrees were in line with international trends.

> *These moves could push the brightest students of India away from choosing a career in science. It could threaten innovation in higher education that is in bad need of an overhaul. Experiments to improve education must be encouraged, especially if the premier institutes of the country are taking the lead. We can only know what works best if we attempt a variety of approaches. (*Vishwesha Guttal, assistant professor at IISc)

The IITs, which get their budget directly from the Central Government, not from the University Grants Council, have also argued that the UGC did not have jurisdiction over their academic affairs. But it looks doubtful that the UGC will reverse its stand.

For several decades, the Peruvian tertiary education system was one of the least regulated ones in Latin America. The National Council that was responsible for authorizing new universities, CONAFU, consisted of university rectors and former rectors for whom it could be difficult to remain fully objective and independent when it came to licensing and accrediting new private sector competitors. To reduce the risk of conflicts of interest inherent to this setup, the government introduced a new Higher Education Law in 2014 that establishes a more independent and professional regulatory agency (*Superintendencia Nacional de Educación Superior Universitaria - SINEDU*) in charge of authorizing new institutions to operate for a fixed number of years.

At the same time, however, the Law includes a number of restrictive clauses that seem to be out of sync with recent developments in the field of virtual and distance education. For example, the members of the Board of the *Superintendencia* must hold a PhD, but it cannot be an online degree. Similarly, no one who obtained her/his PhD online is eligible to become rector of a public or private university, the dean of a faculty, or even a full professor. The Law goes on to prohibit undergraduate degrees that are not taught at least 50 percent in a presential mode as well as continuing education programs that are shorter than five years, the equivalent of a regular full-time undergraduate degree.

Several private universities, which have successfully pioneered the development of innovative virtual and continuing education programs in Peru, have claimed that political and commercial interests influenced the drafting of the Law. Whether this is true or not, the fact remains that these clauses against online education do not appear to be grounded in sound technical knowledge and run contrary to the current evolution of tertiary education delivery modalities, as reflected by the development of the MOOCs and the rapid expansion of online programs all over the world.

A last example worth mentioning is that of Saudi Arabia. At the same time as the Government made accreditation compulsory rather than voluntary, as mentioned earlier, it decided that it would not recognize the international accreditation received by some programs, such as ABET accreditation for engineering programs. By forcing these programs to undergo the national accreditation process as well, the Ministry is sending a negative message to the more innovative universities that took the initiative to submit themselves to the scrutiny of international accreditors.

More generally, universities in many countries complain that the evaluation/accreditation procedures have become so bureaucratic and cumbersome that they risk becoming a ritualistic process that adds little value to the actual quality of programs and pedagogical practices because of the focus on formal

compliance rather than on quality enhancement aspects. Anecdotal evidence from countries as diverse as Argentina, Australia, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom points to a lengthy and costly review process that does not always translate into meaningful guidance on areas that could be improved. A recent report prepared by the Australian Evaluation Agency, TEQSA, acknowledges the urgency of "reducing the excessively bureaucratic procedures, which strangles universities," considering the numerous reports required every year by Parliament and Government at both the State and Federal levels (Maslen, 2013). As early as 2008, Peter Williams had observed from his vantage as president of ENQA that too many QA agencies had become fixated on processes rather than focusing on their original quality promotion purpose. He expressed concern about what he called "the ossification" of quality assurance (Williams, 2008).

Table 2 summarizes what can be considered as the most salient changes in the relationship between the State and the quality assurance agencies and/or tertiary education institutions.

Table 2 – Typology of Government Interventions in Recent Years

Types of Government Intervention	Country Examples
Creation of a QA department within Ministry or regulatory government body	Brunei (2011), Lao PDR (2008), Nepal (2007), Vietnam (2004)
Creation of independent QA agency	Ecuador (2011), Greece (2005)
Merger of various QA agencies	Australia (2008), Austria (2014), Ireland (2011)
More rigorous QA standards/requirements	Chile (under review), Netherlands (2011), Turkey (2014)
Making accreditation compulsory instead of voluntary	Saudi Arabia (2013)
Closing of low quality universities programs	Colombia (2014), Ecuador (2012), Romania (2012)
Naming and shaming/Cutting state subsidies	South Korea (2011)
Excessive bureaucratization	Argentina, Australia, England, Netherlands
Use of funding mechanisms to influence quality	Austria, Chile, France, Quebec, many U.S. States
Barrier to innovative practices	India (2014), Peru (2014)
Deregulation	Australia (2013), England (2014)

Source: Elaborated by the author

NEW FORMS OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

No good book was ever written on command, nor can good teaching occur under duress. And yet, conceding this, the fact remains that left entirely to their own devices academic communities are no less prone than other professional organizations to slip unconsciously into complacent habits, inward-looking standards of quality, self-serving canons of behavior. To counter these tendencies, there will always be a need to engage the outside world in a lively, continuing debate over the university's social responsibilities.

Derek Bok (1990)

New instruments of accountability have appeared or been discussed in recent years, which could potentially affect the work of national QA agencies or complement the pool of information available to measure the performance and operation of tertiary education institutions. Of particular relevance in this context are the following modalities:

- Student engagement surveys
- Assessment of student learning outcomes
- Labor market observatories
- Rankings
- Benchmarking

Student Engagement Surveys

Following the example of the United States, where the first large-scale survey of student engagement (NSSE) took place in 2000, a number of countries have developed and implemented their own version of a survey to ascertain how students feel about the quality of teaching and learning in their institutions. Today, student engagement surveys are carried out regularly in Australia, Canada, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Pilot surveys have also been undertaken in recent years in countries as diverse as China and South Africa.

Continuing a movement that started in the 1960s with student evaluations of their teachers, student engagement surveys include not only subjective indicators such as the level of satisfaction of students, but also attempt to measure more objective aspects related to the degree of active engagement of students in interactive and collaborative learning activities (Ramsden and Callender, 2014). In countries where surveys of student engagement are conducted regularly, high school graduates tend to be better equipped to choose which college or university they would like to attend. Institutions that participate voluntarily in student engagement surveys can use the results for quality improvement purposes.

Student engagement surveys face two challenges (Klemencic and Chirikov, 2014). First, some observers have questioned their validity and reliability with respect to the ability of students to make informed

judgments when asked to report learning gains and also in relation to the selection of the key factors that are supposed to determine student learning, assuming standards of institutional practice and student behavior (Porter et al, 2011). Second, not all stakeholders are ready for the kind of transparency that these surveys imply. For instance, many U.S. universities, including top-tier universities, continue to refuse to release their NSSE results (Salmi, 2007).

Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

Unlike lower levels of education – primary and high school – the world of tertiary education does not have a long tradition of measuring learning outcomes. However, promising initiatives have emerged in recent years. In the United States, a growing number of institutions have been using one of three assessment instruments to try to measure added value at the undergraduate level: the ACT Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), the ETS Proficiency Profile (EPP) and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). Similar instruments have been in use in other industrial countries such as Australia (Graduate Skills Assessment).

A few Latin American countries–Brazil and Colombia for example–have also been pioneers in attempting to measure the acquisition of knowledge and competencies of undergraduate students. In Brazil, for example, when the late Paulo Renato, then Federal Minister of Education, introduced the *Provão* in 1996 as a voluntary test designed to compare the performance of similar programs across all universities, it was the first such national assessment system in the world. The *Provão* consisted of a final course examination for undergraduate students that did not count towards the graduation of the students themselves but served to evaluate the results of their program and institution. The Provão was replaced in 2004 by a new test (ENADE), applied every three years to a sample of students, which examines the test scores of both first-year and last-year undergraduate students as an attempt to measure the added value of undergraduate programs (Salmi and Saroyan, 2007). Similarly, the Colombian Assessment Institute (*Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación*) has implemented two tests (SABER-11 and SABER-PRO) since 2009 that measure students' abilities at the start and end of their undergraduate education.

In some cases, policy-makers have considered the opportunity of using students learning outcomes for quality assurance purposes. But these proposals have been met with caution by the tertiary education community, as illustrated by the controversy sparked by the 2006 report of the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education in the United States. The report recommended measuring learning outcomes to complement the existing accreditation system.

> *". . . by law, student learning is a core part of accreditation. Unfortunately, students are often the least informed, and the last to be considered. Accreditation remains one of the least publicized, least transparent parts of higher education–even compared to the Byzantine and bewildering financial aid system"* (NACIQI 2007).

Initiatives to measure student learning outcomes in an international perspective have also been received with little enthusiasm. In 2012, the OECD conducted a pilot experience to measure the achievement of generic competencies and the acquisition of professional skills in the areas of economics and engineering in the context of the AHELO project (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes). Even

though seventeen countries participated in the feasibility study and the pilot, the future of the project, presented as an alternative to the global rankings, remains uncertain (OECD, 2013).

The recent emergence of private companies specializing in testing the work readiness of young graduates has introduced a new twist with respect to the assessment of student learning outcomes. In India, for example, several large multinational firms make it compulsory for anyone interested in applying for a job to take one of these professional tests.

> *More than 1.5 million people in India have taken a test called the AMCAT (Aspiring Minds' Computer Adaptive Test). The assessment measures aptitude in English, quantitative ability and logic. … It also includes a variety of situational and judgment tests, which scrutinize personality types and soft skills to see how they might apply in specific fields* (Fain, 2014).

Labor Market Observatories

Another noteworthy development has been the establishment of Labor Market Observatories (LMOs) in a growing number of developing and transition countries, following the example of the many OECD countries that have employment observatories either at the supra-national level (European Union employment observatory), the national level (e.g., Bureau of Labor Statistics in the United States, university-based AlmaLaurea observatory in Italy) and the sub-national level (e.g., Learning and Skills observatory in Wales, OREF in France, Education-Employment Information system in Florida). The examples of Bulgaria, Chile and Colombia are worth mentioning in this context.

Since 2012, the Bulgarian government has published detailed data on the labor market results of university graduates. Using data from the Registry of Tertiary Students and statistics from the National Social Security Administration, the Ministry of Education is able to provide a wealth of information on the types of jobs and levels of remuneration of graduates who left university in the previous five years. The database indicates, for instance, if the graduate found a job, if the position corresponds to the field and level of study, what type of employer she/he is working for, if the graduate has a permanent or temporary job, and the level of salary based on social security contributions.

Supported by the Chilean Ministry of Education and jointly run by the School of Government of the private University Adolfo Abánez and the University of Chile's Department of Industrial Engineering, *Futuro Laboral* aims to equip youths and students with academic orientation tools. *Futuro Laboral* provides information on the occupational situation of graduates of hundreds of professional and technical careers that represent 75 percent of technical and professional graduates. The information available to the public includes detailed data on salaries and employment opportunities. The portal displays, for each program of every tertiary education institution, detailed information on dropout rates, average time to degree, average earnings of the graduates after four years of graduation, current tuition fees for the program and accreditation status of the program. Employment and earnings data are not self-reported, but gathered from the database of the national tax revenue authority. Earnings are matched to the databases of graduates provided by the tertiary education institutions. The privacy of the information is maintained, as the tax service issues only the average values for each program in each institution, provided there are at least 25 individuals in each program/institution's cohort for whom earnings data are available.

Graduados Colombia (Observatorio Laboral para la Educación) was launched in 2005 and is managed by the Ministry of Education. It collects and presents information on the demand and supply of graduates. Students, families, tertiary education institutions, researchers and the productive sector have access to statistics on the academic level of the graduates of technical institutes and universities, the salaries they receive and the average time for finding the first job, as well as the cities where they work. The website serves as a tool for students trying to choose a career, and it is also useful for tertiary education institutions intent on renewing and adapting the programs they offer according to labor market needs. *Graduados Colombia's* site provides links to job offers in Colombia and in other countries, as well as advice and tips on how to write and present a good resume. Visitors are able to look for the results of the graduate and employer surveys, as well as studies on specific disciplines and economic sectors.

These three initiatives show relevant examples of labor market observatories that aim to provide a better understanding of and match among individuals' professional aspirations, tertiary education, and occupational trends. As such, they help to address one of the main challenges of tertiary education: its relevance to individuals and societies.

Rankings

The power of public opinion is nowhere more visible than in the growing influence of rankings. Initially limited to the United States, university rankings and league tables have multiplied in recent years, existing today in more than 35 industrial and developing countries (Salmi and Saroyan, 2007).

> *The* U.S. News [& World Report] *rankings have become the nation's de facto higher education accountability system–evaluating colleges and universities on a common scale and creating strong incentives for institutions to do things that raise their ratings.* (Kevin Carey, 2006)

While fully acknowledging their methodological limitations, it is undeniable that the rankings have often played a useful educational role by making relevant information available to the public, especially in countries lacking a formal system of quality assurance. In Poland, for example, when the transition to the market economy started in the early 1990s, there was a thirst for information about the quality of the rapidly proliferating private education institutions. This demand for information pushed the owner of *Perspektyvy* magazine to initiate the country's first university ranking. Similarly, for many years the annual ranking published in Japan by the *Asahi Shimbun* fulfilled an essential quality assurance function in the absence of any evaluation or accreditation agency. In France, after the publication of the 2008 edition of the Shanghai ranking, the Secretary General of the national teachers union (SNESUP) complained that it was unfair to compare the performance of universities to a race at the Olympic Games, However, the French Minister of Higher Education declared a few days after the publication of the 2008 rankings, "[T]hese lists of winners may not be ideal, but they do exist. . . . They show the urgency of reform for the [French] university" (Floc'h 2008).

Some of the rankings include information from student engagement surveys and/or labor market observatories as key indicators. In Chile, for example, the country's main weekly magazine (*Que Pasa?*) uses the results of *Futuro Laboral* to rank universities and programs every year on the basis of the labor

market outcomes of their graduates. Similarly, in Bulgaria, the Ministry of Education has developed a ranking that incorporates the labor market results of university graduates.[8]

The proliferation of rankings has provoked intense reactions, ranging from disagreements about the very principle of rankings to criticism about the methodology used to produce them, boycotts, political pressure, and even court actions to stop their publication.

> *The expansion of league tables and ranking exercises has not gone unnoticed by the various stakeholders and the reaction they elicit is rarely benign. Such rankings are often dismissed by their many critics as irrelevant exercises fraught with data and methodological flaws, they are boycotted by some universities angry at the results, and they are used by political opponents as a convenient way to criticize governments.* (Salmi and Saroyan, 2007, p. 80)

Despite several attempts to boycott the *U.S. News and World Report* and the *MacLean's* rankings in the United States and Canada, respectively, they remain very popular among students and parents trying to figure out how to choose among universities, colleges and study programs.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking, which is the process of comparing the performance of specific university programs or entire tertiary education institutions to similar programs or institutions, has been proposed as a more meaningful alternative to rankings (Salmi, 2013). Rather than assigning a rank order, benchmarking enables users to compare several programs/institutions against a series of performance indicators without relying on rank order numbers to designate the "best" among peer institutions. Unlike rankings, which tend to lead to a "race to the top," benchmarking can provide a more tempered assessment of performance.

The German Centre for Higher Education (CHE) offers one of the most comprehensive examples of benchmarking, even though people often refer, mistakenly, to the information available on the CHE website as the German ranking. CHE makes a large number of indicators of inputs, process and outcomes available–including the results of student and employer satisfaction surveys–distributed into three broad bands of universities: the top 25 percent, the middle 50 percent and the bottom 25 percent. Users can select which universities and indicators they would like to combine to conduct a more refined search.

Elements of benchmarking have also reached the U.S. tertiary education scene in recent years. In September 2007, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) announced that they would start publishing key performance indicators through a Voluntary System of Accountability Program. The program was a reaction to the recommendations–and perceived threat–of the Spellings Commission report mentioned earlier. According to the plan released by the two associations, each participating university would use a common template–called a College Portrait–to post key data on costs, transfer

8 http://rsvu.mon.bg/rsvu3/?locale=en

and graduation rates, and student satisfaction. The program would also include an assessment of student learning from one of the existing tests. Among the sponsors of this proposal were the same university presidents who had decided to boycott the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings (Fischer 2007).

In his 2013 state of the union speech, President Obama called for accountability changes that would include developing benchmarks for affordability and student outcomes as criteria for receiving federal student financial aid. Early in 2014, the College Affordability and Innovation Act of 2014 was introduced in the Senate. The bill foresaw the creation of an independent commission of students, academics and education stakeholders to develop minimum accountability standards for making college more affordable and more accessible for middle-income and low-income students and adding more learning value. Even though the proposed accountability website has encountered a lot of opposition from many quarters, it seems that the Obama administration is moving ahead with the project.

CONCLUSION

> *Higher education in 2014 may be getting what it deserves, paying the price of having been a law unto itself for too long. It is time to move beyond a defense of privileges and self-interest to constructive engagement with the public's questions before the opportunity passes* (Shirley Mullen, President of Houghton College, 2014).
>
> *The organizing principle for accountability must be pride, not fear* (NCAHE, 2005).

This review of recent trends concerning the development of quality assurance from an international perspective has revealed several important aspects. While the establishment of national QA structures has become a universal movement, with fewer countries left without a proper quality assurance system every year, it is difficult to discern any single general trend in terms of the evolving relationship between the State and QA agencies. The country examples analyzed throughout the paper show a mixed picture, with some countries tightening the supervisory role of the State at the risk of compromising the independence of their national QA agency, others moving to grant more autonomy to their QA agency and/or the tertiary education institutions, and others carrying out significant structural changes with the aim of improving the effectiveness of their QA system.

At the same time, new accountability mechanisms have emerged in recent years, complementing the traditional evaluation/accreditation role of QA agencies. Student engagement surveys, learning outcomes assessments, labor market observatories, rankings and performance indicators used in benchmarking exercises can all provide useful additional information for quality assurance purposes. The multiplicity of accountability mechanisms provides students, employers, government and society at large with more abundant and transparent data about the operation and results of tertiary education institutions. This also gives the opportunity to QA agencies to embrace a more comprehensive approach in fulfilling their quality enhancement mission.

In light of the analysis undertaken in this report, three principles of good accountability can be proposed. First, the relationship between the State and QA agencies must reflect a healthy balance between accountability and independence, with clear rules of engagement defined and agreed upon regarding both elements. While the State–and society at large–have a legitimate interest in ensuring the quality of tertiary education, especially in countries where private providers and/or cross-border providers have multiplied, QA agencies must enjoy sufficient autonomy to carry out their responsibilities in an effective manner. Excesses should be avoided on both sides. Governments must not allow politics and lack of trust to color their relationship with QA agencies, and the latter should not be too lenient towards below-standards providers or too rigid towards innovative institutions.

Second, in order to make a meaningful difference, quality assurance should not focus mainly on the way tertiary education institutions operate, but on the educational results that they actually achieve. To use the distinction proposed by Stein (2005), procedural accountability, which is primarily concerned with rules and procedures, is less meaningful than substantive accountability, which focuses on the essence of the research, teaching, and learning in tertiary education institutions. It may be easier to monitor the first type of accountability, but it is without doubt more relevant to concentrate on the second, notwithstanding its complexity and the difficulties involved in measuring the acquisition of competencies, student learning outcomes, and added value.

Finally, the most effective accountability mechanisms are those that are mutually agreed upon between QA agencies and tertiary education institutions. Agreement ensures a greater sense of responsibility for the evaluation and feedback process and fuller ownership of the quality assurance instruments.

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