Impact of Quality Assurance on Learning Efficiency

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Introduction

Although quality assessment and accreditation systems have been in operation for years, there are no extensive studies on their effects over the quality of teaching or on reactions linked to academic tradition or the norms and values of disciplines, schools and higher education institutions (Westerheijden, Stensaker and Rosa, 2006). Some authors recognise the “need for a critical review of what the impact of external quality monitoring is on higher education” (Stensaker, 2003, p. 152). So far most impact studies have concentrated on the effectiveness in establishing quality systems rather than on “the impact that the process has had on, for example, the learning experience, pedagogic development, or the nature of research outcomes” (Harvey and Newton 2004, p. 154).


More recently, Stensaker *et al.* (2008:1) state that “although a main function of external quality assurance is to stimulate change and improvement of teaching and learning, there are still few studies focusing on these issues” and:

> "there is a lack of studies demonstrating how those [programmes] scrutinised by such processes change as a result. ... Our study indicates that quality assurance schemes can be accused of not being very efficient and targeted processes stimulating bureaucracy, organisation and regulation more than addressing issues that are central in the minds of academic staff and students. (Stensaker 2008:13)."

Measuring the impacts of quality assessment presents methodological problems due to the difficulty in isolating the effects of assessment from those of other processes impinging on higher education (Stensaker, 2003; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Carr, Hamilton & Meade, 2005), the task being further complicated by the complex nature of higher education institutions (Weusthof, 1995; Askling, 1997; Brennan, 1997; Stensaker, 2003). A possible way for avoiding difficulties consists in analysing instead how different university actors (rectors and coordinators of self-evaluation processes) perceived its effects, and their opinions on quality assessment systems (Rosa, Tavares and Amaral 2006). Authors do not attempt to analyse the impact of quality assessment in terms of quality improvement of institutional processes and products (teaching, research, services) but to analyse how different university actors (rectors and coordinators of self-evaluation processes) perceive the effects of quality assessment over their institutions and study programmes and how they criticise the national QA system and its strong and weak points, as well as their proposals for the system’s improvement.

However, the perceptions of the different higher education actors about the impact of quality assurance differ from actor to actor, with the institutional leadership and administration being the groups in general identifying most positive effects (Rosa, Tavares and Amaral 2006; Stensaker *et al.* 2008). Another conclusion is that special attention should be given to the student dimension in quality assurance as “students are least convinced of the positive effects of the various evaluations conducted, and that they also is the group that is least informed about effects in general” (Stensaker *et al.* 2008: 13). This is confirmed by the work of Sónia Cardoso (2009) who has interviewed a number of students on their representations on the evaluation of higher education institutions.
However, recent trends observed in European higher education apparently indicate that the accountability component of quality assurance processes will be further reinforced relative to the improvement of teaching and learning component. The emergence of markets in higher education is associated with demands for increased consumer information on the quality of the educational provision for markets to operate efficiently. This legitimates the state intervention to provide information to consumers by disclosing the results of quality assessment and by providing performance indicators. The emergence of New Public Management and the attacks on the efficiency of public services, including higher education, resulted in the loss of trust in institutions and professionals, and in the gradual proletarisation of the academic professions (Halsey 1992). At international level, the implementation of the Bologna process and its convergence with the Lisbon strategy are changing the traditional pact between the university and society by shifting the balance towards the economic function of the university. This shift may lead to a stratified European Higher Education Area and the introduction and/or reinforcement of European accreditation systems.

**Recent European developments**

There were some very recent developments in Europe that need to be taken into account. Comparing state approval versus accreditation schemes, in the years 1998 and 2003, reveals an overwhelming movement from state approval towards accreditation schemes (Schwarz and Westerheijden 2004). All recently implemented quality systems are also based on accreditation rather than on quality assessment (e.g. Germany, Austria and Norway). This might reflect an increased lack of trust in higher education institutions to satisfy the government and society about their capacity to ensure adequate standards of quality.

For Neave (2004) “the creation of new model accreditation agencies added further to the apparatus of verification...” which corresponded to “the replacement of a circle of trust and confidence with a cycle of suspicion” (Jeliaskova 2001; van Brueggen et al 1998).

The quality agencies that had some relation with universities (cases of Flanders, Portugal and the Netherlands) did not resist the shift in the emphasis of quality assurance from improvement to accountability and were dismissed
under public accusations of lack of efficiency and irrelevance, being replaced with “independent” accrediting agencies complying with the European standards and guidelines.

In Europe, the Ministers of Education assembled in Bergen in 2005 gave their blessing to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), drafted by the ENQA (2005), in cooperation and consultation with its member agencies and the other members of the “E4 Group”. In 2007, the European Ministers of Education assembled in London established the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) based on a proposal drafted by the E4 (ENQA 2007). The Register will not accept quality agencies based on associations of universities arguing against their lack of independence, which would obviously exclude all the US Regional Accrediting Agencies.

The decisions of the 2009 Bologna meeting of European HE Ministers at Leuven, can have considerable consequences for the European Area of Higher Education (EAHE) and its institutions. The implementation of the Bologna process in European higher education systems has been a very important tool for change used in Europe. European Ministers of Education meet every two years to analyse the implementation progress and to determine future action. Quite recently (28 and 29 April 2009) European ministers of education had another conference held in Belgium. We can read in the final communiqué of the Ministers this statement:

**Multidimensional transparency tools**

22. We note that there are several current initiatives designed to develop mechanisms for providing more detailed information about higher education institutions across the EHEA to make their diversity more transparent. We believe that any such mechanisms, including those helping higher education systems and institutions to identify and compare their respective strengths, should be developed in close consultation with the key stakeholders. These transparency tools need to relate closely to the principles of the Bologna Process, in particular quality assurance and recognition, which will remain our priority, and should be based on comparable data and adequate indicators to describe the diverse profiles of higher education institutions and their programmes.

What was interesting was to observe the failed attempts of students to modify the Ministers communiqué by introducing a phrase that would make rankings unacceptable. Indeed students were the only ones raising this question, having been left completely abandoned by the representatives of higher
education institutions such as EUA, EURASHE, USNET or the Coimbra group, or other partners such as ENQA and ECA. Indeed the Commission has quite recently commissioned a report on a classification of European universities (van Vught 2009) that will strongly contribute to a ranking of European universities and the implementation via Bologna of a stratified European Area of Higher Education. So it seems that Europe is determined in implementing a fast system to classify or rank universities, having realised that using quality systems will not produce a fast and evident answer. In the site of CHEPS we can read:

Towards a classification. The growing consensus with respect to the principle and value of diversity is a solid basis for further policy development in the European Higher Education and Research Areas. But in order to make diversity useful it needs to be understood. Therefore, a logical next step for Europe with respect to transparency measures is the development of a classification of higher education institutions. (CHEPS)

U-map is the third phase of the CEIHE project. In this phase we will evaluate and fine-tune the dimensions and their indicators and bring them into line with other relevant indicator initiatives; finalise a working on-line classification tool; articulate this with the classification tool operated by the Carnegie Foundation; develop a final organisational model for the implementation of the classification; and continue the process of stakeholder consultation and discussion that has been a hallmark of the project since its inception in 2005. (CHEPS)

In the sixth ENQA General Assembly, 28-29 September 2009, Barcelona, a member of the European Commission has clearly stated that a multi-dimensional ranking system of universities will be implemented. Indeed the results of the tender for the design of this multidimensional ranking system are already known and the contract will be signed with CHERPA – the Consortium for Higher Education and Research Performance Assessment –, a European network of institutions: the CHE – Centre for Higher Education Development (Gütersloh, Germany), the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente (Netherlands), the Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) at Leiden University (Netherlands), and the research division INCENTIM at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium). A fifth partner in the project is the Observatoire des Sciences et des Techniques (OST) in Paris. The European Federation of National Engineering Associations (FEANI) and the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) are also associated with the project.

The project aims at designing a global ranking of higher education institutions, which avoids the flaws and problems of existing international
rankings and which should provide a valid and fair comparison of institutions. The design will follow the “Berlin Principles on the ranking of higher education institutions” which stress the need to take into account “the linguistic, cultural, economic and historical contexts of the educational systems being ranked”.

The basic approach is to compare only institutions that are similar and comparable in terms of their missions and structures. Therefore the project is closely linked to the idea of a European classification (“mapping”) of higher education institutions developed by CHEPS. The feasibility study will include focused rankings on particular aspects of higher education at the institutional level (e.g., internationalization and regional engagement) on the one hand, and two field-based rankings for business and engineering programmes on the other hand. CHEPS states:

The field-based rankings will each focus on a particular type of institution and will develop and test a set of indicators appropriate to these institutions. The rankings will be multi-dimensional and will – like the CHE ranking – use a grouping approach rather than simplistic league tables. In contrast to existing global rankings, the design will compare not only the research performance of institutions but will include teaching & learning as well as other aspects of university performance.

The different rankings will be targeted at different stakeholders: They will support decision-making in universities and especially better informed study decisions by students. Rankings that create transparency for prospective students should promote access to higher education.

It is becoming apparent that the Bologna process and the Lisbon strategy are converging and allowing the European Commission an increasing influence over European higher education (Amaral and Neave 2009a: 271), despite the fact that in the sphere of higher education policy, the legal basis for Community intervention tends to be weak as education has always been considered an area of national sensitivity (Gornitzka, 2009: 103). When we examine the activities and policies of the European Commission what is apparently at stake are developments that aim at building a stratified EAHE against the traditional view still prevailing in many European countries that national universities are all equal, which is a reminiscence of the Legal Homogeneity Principle. In the words of Martin Trow:

If there is less anxiety about the “quality” of higher education in the United States it is both because our system is so variable in that regard, and because we never made (or could make) any commitment as a nation to the
maintenance of common standards across our thousands of colleges and universities. We also are less embarrassed by the role of the market in cultural affairs. As Louis Hartz (1955) reminded us, in America, by contrast with Europe, the market preceded the society. (Trow 1996)

What the future will be is just another guess. Apparently, there will be a classification system of higher education institutions. It is possible that the development of the Bologna process and the actions of the Commission will also produce a ranking system of European Universities. But none of this has a direct relation with the problem of learning efficiency. And as the staggering costs of quality assurance are becoming more evident to governments, it is no wonder governments will prefer low-cost and fast mechanisms such as classifications and rankings.

A new approach – evaluating learning outcomes

Harvey and Newton (2006: 236) argue in favour of transforming “quality assurance in the direction of the improvement of the student experience requires ... creating conditions for bringing about sustained change and improvement in institutions”. For them, the preponderant forms of external quality assurance processes “...hijack and mystify quality as a politically motivated, ideological, compliance structure... ‘quality’ no longer has anything to do with academic endeavour: knowledge creation and student learning. Even improvement-led approaches remain imbued with an ideology that distrusts the academy.” (ibid: 237). They also consider that in general at present the quality assurance process “...is a bureaucratic process quite removed from either the student learning or the creative research processes, which, it is argued, lies at the heart of quality in higher education” (ibid: 226).

Returning to the important question of assessing the quality of education offered by a higher education institution we refer to Douglas Bennett (2001) who considers the only valid approach is based on the value added, meaning “...what is improved about students’ capabilities or knowledge as a consequence of their education at a particular college or university”, or more simply, the difference a higher education institution makes in their education. However, as Douglas Bennett also recognises, the assessment of value-added is difficult for a number of reasons such its many dimensions, differences between institutions, time for consequences of education to fully unfold and complexity and cost.
Therefore, he considers that a second-best and more feasible strategy will consist in assessing outcomes, by evaluating the skills and capabilities students have acquired as they graduate (or shortly after) or the recognition they gain in further competition.

This is the road that the OECD is apparently trying to follow. As stated in the presentation leaflet of its new programme, “Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes” (AHELO), OECD claims it is necessary to develop “an assessment that compares learning outcomes in an universally sound manner, regardless of culture, language, differing educational systems and university missions” while considering “current university rankings may do more harm than good because they largely ignore a key measure of quality, namely what goes on in the seminar rooms and lecture theatres”. AHELO was born out of discussions at the 2006 OECD Ministerial Conference in Athens, and is managed under the aegis of the members of the OECD Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE).

It is well known that much of the power exhibited by OECD has to do with its technical capacity, namely with its capacity to provide reliable education statistics (Amaral, 2009):

*Without doubt, the OECD counts as a powerful agent in the convergence of national policies for higher education, both within the framework of Neo Liberalism and of its more diffuse expression, Globalization. It commands a range of sophisticated and subtle vehicles for advancing these perspectives. Amongst them are regular, up-to-date and exceedingly high quality data and information systems, functioning cross nationally, and what we have termed an “indirect strategy” of development, based on peer review, high-level networking and on the recourse to what is sometimes alluded to as ‘soft’ law. These axes of communication penetrate to the highest levels of permanent officials in the appropriate Ministries of its member countries and to a lesser extent, into academia itself. To be sure, OECD does not possess the power of the purse. But this, as we have pointed out, is not necessarily a disadvantage. Rather the contrary.*

and:

*Propagating world-wide trends in education is the central task of such transnational actors as the United Nations’ Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, (UNESCO) the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Some, as children of the Bretton Woods Agreement of 1944, possess the power of the purse. They can exert direct pressure over governments, especially those whose economy is fragile. Such is the case of the World Bank (Samoff and Carol, 2006) and the International Monetary Fund. Others, amongst which OECD and UNESCO, have influence of a different kind – indirect, permeative and heuristic – often taking the form of international surveys and comparative analyses. (Amaral and Neave 2009b)*
This power has been clearly reinforced by the success of successive PISA exercises at the level of primary and secondary education. More recently, the OECD has decided to extend its influence over higher education by creating a new PISA for this very specific sector of education, the AHELO project. In the words of Martens and Wolff:

...[nation-states] turned to international organisations not only to pursue substantial policy goals but also because it was in their strategic interest to use the intergovernmental policy arena to manipulate the existing distribution of formal institutional competencies in their domestic political systems...

...the strategically motivated internationalisation triggered institutional dynamics which backfired on its protagonists and led to the opposite of what was originally intended, namely, a general weakening of the state’s role in education policy. By internationalising education policy through the EU and the OECD, new modes of governance and steering philosophies were introduced, new non-governmental actors became involved, and new ways of thinking about how state and society should interact in this field gained importance. (Martens and Wolff, 2009: 77-78).

For the OECD, the “Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) is a ground-breaking initiative to assess learning outcomes on an international scale by creating measures that would be valid for all cultures and languages” (OECD, 2009). According to Richard Yelland:

Decades of rapid growth in higher education numbers of students and institutions increased the need for greater attention to quality and relevance in higher education. Following several meetings with ministries and higher education stakeholders, IMHE, with the support of both governments and institutions, embarked on a feasibility study to explore the scope for developing an international Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO). The purpose is to gauge whether an international assessment of higher education learning outcomes that would allow comparison between HEIs across countries is scientifically and practically feasible. (Yelland, 2008: 7)

OECD sources propose that a large number of higher education students in over ten different countries will take part in a feasibility study to determine the bounds of this ambitious project, aiming at the possible creation of a full-scale AHELO upon its completion. In the words of OECD the new project may very well result in substantial changes to higher education, as we know it today:

The AHELO feasibility study is likely to discover much that is unrelated to learning outcomes. What these findings will reveal no one can say. But the chance is they may fundamentally change our thinking about higher education and its role in society. (OECD, 2009a)

Our past experience (see Martens and Wolff, 2009) shows that once open the
Pandora box is quite difficult to close, even when powerful governments are involved. This means that in my opinion the PISA project for higher education will go on. The best we can do is to hope that some of OECD’s soothing declaration will come true:

* * *

_AHELO is not a university ranking like the Shanghai Jiao Tong, the Times Higher Education or any number of others. The designers of AHELO reject the idea that higher education can be reduced to a handful of criteria, which leaves out more than it includes. Instead, AHELO sets out to identify and measure as many factors as possible influencing higher education, with the emphasis being always on teaching and learning._ (OECD, 2009a)

For the time being the OECD is about to initiate a “feasibility study” of its AHELO programme that will consist of four “strands”: three assessments to measure learning outcomes in terms of generic skills and discipline-related skills (in engineering and economics) and a fourth value-added strand, research based. The measurement of generic skills (e.g. analytical reasoning, critical thinking, problem-solving, the practical application of theory, ease in written communication, leadership ability, the ability to work in a group, etc.) will be based on an adaptation of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) developed in the US. For the discipline-based strands the feasibility study will concentrate on disciplines with less variable study outcomes across countries and cultures, such as medicine, the sciences or economics, building on the approach used in the Tuning Process for Engineering and Economics. The value-added strand will not be measured, as this would not be compatible with the timeframe of the feasibility study. Therefore, “the feasibility study will only explore different methodologies, concepts and tools to identify promising ways of measuring the value-added component of education” (OECD, 2009a: 10).

The OECD also considers the importance of context, although it also recognises the difficulty of context measurement. The feasibility study aims at defining the limits of a contextual inquiry and divides context into four topical areas: Physical and organisational characteristics, education-related behaviours and practices, psycho-social and cultural attributes and behavioural and cultural attributes. In the proposed model student learning outcomes “are a joint product of input conditions and the environment within which learning takes place” (OECD, 2009b: 4):
Inputs can include student characteristics such as incoming abilities and demographic characteristics such as gender and socio-economic status, both of which have been shown by research to be related to learning (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005). Environment consists of the setting in which learning takes place (for example classrooms, on-line, in the workplace, etc.), the curricula and pedagogies that constitute the medium of instruction (for example, hierarchical course-taking, lecture-recitation, or problem-based learning), and student learning behaviours (for example, collaboration, active learning, or interaction with instructional staff). All these three have been similarly related to student learning outcomes through decades of empirical study (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005; Kuh 2008). (OECD 2009b: 4)

The OECD (2008) has produced an interesting report aiming at providing an international perspective on current practices in standardized learning outcomes assessment in higher education, which uses examples from a number of countries including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom and the United States. The assessed outcomes include both cognitive outcomes and non-cognitive outcomes.

Cognitive learning outcomes “range from domain-specific knowledge to the most general of reasoning and problem-solving skills” (Shalveson and Hunag 2003: 13). The OECD only considers a division of cognitive learning outcomes into knowledge outcomes involving the “remembering, either by recognition or recall, of ideas, materials or phenomena” (Bloom 1956: 62) – and it includes general content knowledge outcomes and domain-specific or subject-specific learning outcomes – and skills outcomes, again divided into generic and domain-specific.

A non-cognitive learning outcome refers to changes in beliefs or the development of certain values (Ewell 2005). Studies on non-cognitive outcomes often focus on the presence or certain theorized stages of identity development (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005) and may be developed both through classroom instruction and out-of-class activities organized by HEIs to supplement the curriculum. However, the definition of desirable non-cognitive outcomes is controversial and subject to cultural contexts and not always shared by all stakeholders. Some studies suggest that non-cognitive outcomes are rather related to social maturation, generational effects (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005) or “significant life events” (Glenn in Pascarella and Terenzini 2005: 272).

The OECD report then tries to answer four questions: What is being assessed? How are these outcomes being assessed? Who each instrument is going to assess? Why is the assessment being applied?
Learning outcomes are also present in the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) drafted by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), through its members, in consultation and co-operation with the EUA, ESIB and EURASHE and in discussion with various relevant networks. The Guidelines form the response to the twin mandates given by the European Education ministers to ENQA in the Berlin communiqué of September 2003 to develop “an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance’ and ‘to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies”. The standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area as proposed by ENQA were adopted by the European ministers in the 2005 Bergen Ministerial Bologna Conference Communiqué and in 2007 the European Ministers in the 2007 London Bologna Conference Communiqué endorsed the proposal of the E4 group (ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESIB) to create a European register of accredited quality agencies that will be “voluntary, self-financing, independent and transparent. Applications for inclusion on the register should be evaluated on the basis of substantial compliance with the ESG, evidenced through an independent review process endorsed by national authorities, where this endorsement is required by those authorities” (London Communiqué 2007).

The ESG clearly states that quality assurance programmes and awards for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions are expected to include “development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes” and student assessment procedures are expected “to be designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives” (ENQA 2005: 17).

The other important development consists in the definition of the national qualification frameworks. The London communiqué states:

*We note that some initial progress has been made towards the implementation of national qualifications frameworks, but that much more effort is required. We commit ourselves to fully implementing such national qualifications frameworks, certified against the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, by 2010. We see the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, which we agreed in Bergen, as a central element of the promotion of European higher education in a global context. (London Communiqué, 2007).*

a theme that is recaptured in the recent Leuven Communiqué:
We aim at having them [national qualification frameworks] implemented and prepared for self-certification against the overarching Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area by 2012. This will require continued coordination at the level of the EHEA and with the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. Within national contexts, intermediate qualifications within the first cycle can be a means of widening access to higher education. (Leuven Communiqué, 2009).

It is possible that in the end the OECD will assume a very virtuous position by claiming that the AHELO system for Tertiary Education provides a clear comparison of universities by looking at competencies of graduates that avoids much of the shortcomings of plain ranking systems.

**A brief note about Chile**

There is a recent World Bank report (World Bank 2007) entitled *Chile. Institutional Design for an Effective Education Quality Assurance* that presents a view on the current situation of quality assurance in Chile. This report refers that in July 2006 the Chilean government announced a series of policy changes including the implementation of a new Super-intendancy of Education and a reallocation of functions across the Ministry of Education, the Super-intendancy of Education and several other higher education institutions. “In addition to new education quality assurance functions, the Super-intendancy of Education will likely assume some of the roles and responsibilities that were previously exercised by the Ministry of Education” (World Bank 2007: 1). The main objective of the report is “to present the Government of Chile with policy options related to the institutional distribution of roles and responsibilities for effective quality assurance in education” (ibid).

The report presents a conceptual framework for analyzing a country’s education quality assurance system, and concludes that a number of important functions are not explicitly defined in Chile, which may be a factor impeding the functioning of an effective system of education quality assurance and it recognizes that “strengthening the quality assurance functions of each of the participants in the Chilean education system is more likely to produce the improvements in education quality and equity that Chilean society is demanding” (World Bank 2007: 9).

By analyzing nine selected international education systems the report
defines four alternative “instructional visions” for the institutional design of an education system: Limited State, Quality Contracts, Differentiated Instruction, and Managed Instruction. Apparently there are countries that succeeded in ensuring education quality in each of the three latter visions while Chile is the only one identified as having a limited state instructional vision:

The Chilean education system is based on the premise that parents should have the freedom to select the most adequate school for their children, and that schools compete for students based on their quality. The government establishes minimum operation and reporting requirements regarding student attendance, finances public and private schools based on a per-student formula, and provides the market with information on school quality, arguably to an insufficient extent. While publicly financed schools must follow a national curriculum, to date the Government does not hold schools accountable for meeting established performance standards or adhering to specific instructional models (World Bank 2007: 29).

The World Bank considers that in Chile the education system has remained fairly unchanged throughout the past decades: “In this sense, the system continued to be based on the notions that parental school choice and competition among schools should lead to high education quality” (World Bank 2007: 30), while at the same time a mismatch was developed “between its instructional vision, which was founded on a limited state vision, and its application to education provision and quality assurance functions” (ibid: 35).

The World Bank report recommends Chile to consider moving to a mix of the Quality Contracts and Differentiated Instruction visions as their coexistence “within one system is actually not uncommon. In England and many districts of the U.S., for example, special character charter schools function under quality contract rules within dominantly differentiated-instruction systems” (ibid: 36).

At last, considering that “Countries that are most successful in ensuring quality tend to institutionally separate policy development and implementation functions from monitoring, evaluation and oversight functions” (ibid: 40) the World Bank report recommends that Chile needs first to make a decision on the instructional vision it wishes to adopt to guide its quality assurance system before it allocates the general functions by separating the “oversight, measurement and reporting responsibilities from those related to policy and programming as a mechanism to introduce accountability at the national agency level” (ibid: 38):

This report suggests dividing the responsibility for education quality control between the Minister of Education, the Super-intendancy of Education, and the
National Council on Education, thereby introducing an external system of checks and balances. Along these lines, we propose that, in general terms, the Ministry of Education be the agency responsible for designing, implementing and intervening in policies and programs. The Super-intendancy of Education would be responsible for oversight-evaluation, measuring and publicizing results and the national Council on Education would maintain its current mandate of approving curriculum and learning standards. (World Bank 2007:41).

Conclusion

The Council of Europe has produced two timely and important documents, one on Public Responsibility for Higher Education and Research (Weber and Bergan 2005), the other on Higher Education Governance (Kohler et al. 2006). These documents stress two fundamental ideas: that governance should avoid micromanagement, leaving reasonable scope for innovation and flexibility, and that quality assessment mechanisms should be built on trust and give due regard to internal quality development processes. No doubt every academic would strongly support these ideas based on elevated and generous principles (Amaral 2008).

Options for the future of a quality system are not separated from considerations of the type of higher education system the relevant authorities want to foster. Apparently, the objective of Brussels puts more emphasis on competition and the creation of a European Higher Education Area than on cooperation and quality improvement. The increasing emphasis on market mechanisms, new public management and competition, accompanied by the loss of trust in institutions and the proletarisation of academics, may well lead to developments in an opposite direction to that proposed in the documents produced by the Council of Europe.

For Martin Trow “formal requirements for accountability are inherently suspicious of claims to professional and personal responsibility, claims which were in fact the basis on which academics in elite colleges and universities in all countries formerly escaped most formal external accountability for their work as teachers and scholars” (Trow 1996).

The problem is that Universities have not been able “to develop and then translate support in the society at large into political support” (Trow 1996: 5) when they came under attack from New Public Management and blame policies (Ball 1998). Universities have rested on their claims for the specialism of their ‘unique’ attributes while their environment changed dramatically. Trow argues
“In the US, where trust is still a central element in the life and autonomy of our institutions, an enormous amount of time, thought and effort goes into creating and sustaining the element of trust in support communities” (1996: 4).

Frank Newman asks “Have we fallen asleep assuming that we have made this case and we now fail to keep making it?” (Futures Project Report 2001: 11). Today the society no longer understands university attributes such as “academic freedom, the teaching and modelling of civic communities marked by civil discourse, dispassionate enquiry and community service” (Futures Project Report 2001: 11). This has been explained by Lamar Alexander, US Republican Senator for Tennessee a propos of the recent debates on the 2007 re-authorization of the American Higher Education Act:

> Congress simply doesn’t understand the importance of autonomy, excellence and choice, and the higher education community hasn’t bothered to explain it in plain English to members who need to hear it and understand it. (Alexander 2008)

John Immerwahr in a recent report refers that the American legislators he interviewed had a perception that universities “are deeply conservative, and they largely seek greater autonomy as a way of avoiding pressures to change” and also that some legislators were reluctant to grant universities more autonomy without having “better measures of performance” (Immerwahr 2002: 4). If universities want to preserve their core attributes then they must do a better job of making its case:

> We have to make the core values matter to more than just ourselves, and we need to forge alliances with other social forces to give effect to them. (Mala Singh in Futures Project Report 2001: 11).

Universities must convince society that they care for what they do by self-imposing “measures of quality, commitments to insuring access and greater transparency about financing” (Futures Project Report 2001: 10). Judith Eaton reports that institutions have answered to increased demands for accountability by “developing outcomes-based approaches to judging institutional effectiveness, including student achievement in general education and in the majors” (Eaton 2007).

I see the emergence of “quality enhancement” as an attempt of universities to regain trust by restating that the quality is their major responsibility and that the role of outside agencies should be limited to quality audits. When the 1992
re-authorisation the US Education Act led to a generalised discussion of the American accreditation system and to attempts at greater federal intervention a number of academics proposed a similar approach. For instance, David Dill et al. (1996) supported the idea that institutions should keep the main responsibility for quality and suggested that the route to quality assurance must combine “a mutually reinforcing system of institution-based quality assessments of teaching and learning and a coordinated regional system of external academic audits”. And Martin Trow proposed the role of outside supranational, governmental or quasi-governmental agencies should consist of “monitoring and encouraging the emergence of this culture in institutions of mass higher education, but not through ‘evaluations’ based on uniform criteria and linked to funding” (Trow 1994: 39) and accreditation should be transformed into “... searching audits of each institution’s own scheme for critical self-examination, its own internal quality control procedures.” (ibid).

The big question is how far will universities succeed in regaining trust. As Trow reminds us, “Trust cannot be demanded but must be freely given. In Trollope’s novels, a gentleman who demands to be treated as a gentleman is almost certainly no gentleman” (1996: 10).

Not being an optimist at my age I see a very strong possibility that a highly stratified European Higher Education Area will develop and a very slim possibility that quality assurance will become more dedicated to the improvement of the teaching and learning functions of higher education institutions. Recent developments in Germany show that some states are starting to look into the huge costs and the amount of work associated with a generalised system of programme accreditation (Ziegele and Affeld 2008). In Lower-Saxony there has already been movement towards a system of institutional audits. Does this mean that we will be moving back to a system based on the fundamental responsibility of institutions for quality, supported by a less intrusive system of audits? Or will we be moving into a system of simplified classification and ranking?

The other development has to do with a trend observed in a number of European countries: the establishment of “research universities” to compete at world level. This may lead to very stratified national higher education systems – and to a stratified European Higher Education Area – with what Guy Neave suggests will be “a highly focused and selective ‘Guardian Relationship’
resurrected and built around a few highly performing establishments” or, a variant alternative would be “the emergence in Europe’s higher education systems of a ‘temporarily protected’ sector, consisting of highly-performing research universities at the apex and at the base a ‘market-driven’ mass sector” (Neave 2009).

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