Regaining Trust. Is it possible?

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a loss of trust in institutions and more intrusive systems of accountability were developed. This was the consequence both of massification of higher education systems and the implementation of New Public Management policies. In this paper recent trends are analysed, both in Europe and in the United States. These trends are very diverse and include in one extreme the EU policies aiming at creating rankings and in the other extreme the quality enhancement movement that can be seen as an attempt for re-establishing trust in institutions. The paper concludes with some comments on the possibility of reinstating trust.

Recent changes: setting the scene

Over the last decade quality assurance systems went through a number of changes. In the U.S. the reauthorisation process of the 1992 Higher Education Act created the opportunity for attacks on the accreditation system, including its behaviour as institutional guilds (not very different from the medieval guilds) protecting the privileged market positions of their members (McGhee, 2006), inadequate transparency and accountability, impeding innovation (Commission on the Future of Higher Education 2006), etc. There were increasing demands for public accountability and a shift from quality improvement to accountability: “now the shift is away from self-regulation, which tends toward the interests of the member institutions and not those of the public, and this shift may simply indicate that a new approach to quality assurance in higher education is needed” (McGhee, 2006: 6).

In Europe there are many signs pointing to declining trust of governments and society in higher education systems, their institutions and their professionals about their capacity to ensure adequate standards of quality. Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004) analysed changes in quality assurance systems to detect a clear movement towards accreditation schemes. And all recently implemented quality systems are based on accreditation rather than on quality assessment. In Netherlands, Flanders and Portugal, the national quality assurance agencies were dismissed under accusations of excessive dependence on higher education institutions, being replaced with “independent” accrediting agencies (Amaral 2007). The remit of the Danish agency EVA was reduced to assessments of short and medium cycle programmes and a new Agency, ACE Denmark was established with the task of accreditation.

1 A3ES – Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education; CIPES – Centre of Research on Higher Education Policies
and approval of all university programmes. In Finland there was also a change towards more detailed programme level accreditation.

The European Union and the Commission are playing an important role in Europe. Despite the fact that the legal basis for Community intervention tends to be weak as education has always been considered an area of national sensitivity (Gornitzka, 2009), the Commission has been increasing its role, namely after the implementation of the Bologna process and the Lisbon strategy. The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), endorsed by the Ministers of Education assembled in Bergen in 2005, require that accreditation agencies be independent from governments and institutions. The European quality framework was completed by the establishment of EQAR, the European Quality Assurance Register that was endorsed by the Ministers assembled in London in 2007. The EQAR is a register of quality assurance agencies that demonstrate substantial compliance with the ESG.

However, not even the Register has been able to dispel the climate of mistrust that permeates the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). A 2009 report on progress in quality assurance in higher education, produced by the Commission, demonstrates this climate of mistrust (European Commission, 2009). The report not only argues that European quality agencies still need to demonstrate their independence and professionalism to build trust among stakeholders, being still unclear what being accredited in one country, even by a registered agency, means in another and how the misuse of such an accreditation could be prevented. The report goes even further by stating there is some concern that agencies’ membership in ENQA or even their registration in the EQAR might not generate the necessary level of mutual trust.

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). Therefore it is possible to argue that European higher education is in a kind of schizophrenic situation, as on the one hand there is a rhetoric of promotion of cooperation, trust and the European dimension and, on the other hand, quality mechanisms are apparently based on suspicion.

In what follows recent developments in U.S. and Europe are analysed aiming at finding out if developments indicate a movement back to trust or if the climate of suspicion is likely to be maintained or even reinforced.

Recent developments: the case of the U.S.

The U.S. has a long tradition of accreditation by private, non-profit organisations, the first agency dating from 1895. These organisations are voluntary, non-governmental membership associations of higher education institutions and would not be accepted in EQAR due to its lack of independence. This quality assurance system without government intervention, was regulated in the 1965 Higher Education Act, HEA (Eaton 2007). The HEA comes periodically to the Senate and the House of Representatives for reauthorisation thus providing opportunity for heated debates. Accreditation has been under fire as there are increasing
demands for public accountability and a shift from quality improvement to accountability.

At the time of the 1992 reauthorisation of the HEA, there were reports of fraud and abuse in federal student aid programmes and a large number of institutions with high default rates. As only students enrolled in accredited institutions are entitled to federal student support, the regional accrediting agencies were blamed for failing in their gatekeeping role (Crow, 2004). Therefore, the 1992 reauthorisation established stronger federal control over accreditation. By 1998 the number of fraud and abuse cases had dropped significantly, which reduced federal pressure over accreditation, and the 1998 reauthorisation of the Act returned some control and administrative discretion to the accrediting associations (Education Encyclopaedia, 2008).

In September 2005 Margaret Spellings, U.S. Secretary of Education, appointed a Commission on the Future of Higher Education that produced a very critical report about the accreditation system. The Commission recommended that accreditation decisions should be more based on evidence of student achievement and institutional performance, the final reports should be made public and comparisons of institutions or groups of institutions should be made available (Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2006: 14-16). However, higher education institutions and accrediting agencies used their lobbying capacity to block the process and the Congress introduced amendments that prohibited the Department of Education from promulgating regulations affecting postsecondary accreditation.

In the remarks provided to the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Integrity, Eaton (2011) considers the present public concerns about accreditation exist not because “accreditation is broken” but because accreditation is no longer aligned with changing expectations. And the new expectations are that accreditation’s primary accountability should be to the public and provide strong consumer protection, that standards should be explicit and summative in judging academic quality and that the public should play a stronger role in judging academic quality and successful performance of institutions and programmes. This adds to the current public distrust of any self-regulatory enterprise and current public sensitivity of conflicts of interest.

**Recent developments in Europe: from trust to rankings**

Some authors argue quality bears no longer a relation to the core activities of universities, namely knowledge creation and student learning (Harvey and Newton, 2006). At European level, the communiqué from the Leuven Ministerial Conference seems to indicate that both the Ministers and the Commission are inclined to develop rankings and classification tools that will be even further removed from the academic endeavour. European Ministers and the Community are determined to implement a fast and lean system to classify or rank universities, instead of relying on more traditional quality systems that may not produce a fast and clear answer.
In 2009 the Ministers assembled in Leuven for the biannual meeting of the implementation of the Bologna process, took the first steps for launching an official European ranking system of higher education institutions:

... 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. ... These transparency tools ... should be based on comparable data and adequate indicators to describe the diverse profiles of higher education institutions and their programmes. (Leuven communiqué, 2009)

At Leuven, the student representation saw that “transparency tools” were just an euphemism for “ranking tools” and proposed the inclusion of a phrase in the final communiqué that would make rankings unacceptable. However, they failed, being left alone by academics and their associations. Today it is known that the design of a ranking system is under way with the engaged interest and support of the Commission that provided funds for a report on a classification of European universities (van Vught, 2009) and two projects on the implementation of a multi-dimensional ranking system (U-Map and U-Multirank). As CHEPS explains:

... a logical next step for Europe with respect to transparency measures is the development of a classification of higher education institutions. ... 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 ...

(CHEPS, 2011)

In the 2009 ENQA General Assembly, a member of the European Commission informed that a multi-dimensional ranking system of universities would be implemented. The design would follow the “Berlin Principles on the ranking of higher education institutions” (CHE, 2006), which stress the need to take into account “the linguistic, cultural, economic and historical contexts of the educational systems being ranked”. The approach is to compare only institutions that are similar and comparable in terms of their missions and structures. The project is linked to the idea of a European classification (“mapping”) of higher education institutions. The feasibility study includes focused rankings on particular aspects of higher education at institutional level (e.g., internationalisation and regional engagement) on the one hand, and two field-based rankings for business and engineering programmes on the other hand:

The U-Map project aims at the building of a European classification of higher education institutions ... In this sense the classification is an instrument for mapping the European higher education landscape. ... In contrast to the U-Map classification project, U-Multirank is a ranking project. Taking an ‘input-process-output-impact’ approach to HEIs, U-Multirank pays attention mostly to output (performance) and impact (outcomes), whereas a classification is looking mostly at inputs (resources) and processes (activities). (Kaiser and Jongbloed, 2010)

An alternative: OECD and measuring learning outcomes

The OECD is taking a different approach, more related with student learning, which consists in measuring learning outcomes. Some authors argue the only valid approach to the
assessment of the quality of education consists in measuring the value added to student’s capabilities and/or knowledge as consequence of the education they receive in a higher education institution (Bennett, 2001). However, the complexities associated with the assessment of value-added – many dimensions, differences between institutions, time for consequences of education to fully unfold and cost – suggest the option for a second-best and more feasible strategy. This alternative consists 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.

OECD is developing the project Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) that aims at assessing outcomes, which can be cognitive, ranging from domain-specific knowledge to the most general of reasoning and problem-solving skills (Shalveson and Hunag, 2003: 13), or non-cognitive, including changes in beliefs or the development of certain values (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). AHELO was launched after discussions at the 2006 OECD Ministerial Conference in Athens and aims at providing results internationally comparable, regardless of language or cultural background (OECD, 2010). AHELO also aims at providing an answer to the lack of reliable international data on the outcomes of learning while avoiding the flaws of the available rankings, which reflect neither the quality of teaching and learning nor the diversity of institutions (OECD, 2011).

It is not yet possible to guess what the outcome of AHELO will be. OECD had financial difficulties and the feasibility stage has now a more modest scope than initially proposed. However, it is likely that AHELO will produce positive results, allowing OECD to assume a virtuous position by claiming that it provides a clear comparison of universities by looking at competencies of graduates, while avoiding much of the shortcomings of plain ranking systems.

Learning outcomes are present in the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). The ESG 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”. Student assessment procedures should “be designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives” (ENQA, 2005: 17).

Regaining trust? The Quality Enhancement movement

The quality enhancement (QE) movement being developed in several countries may be seen as an attempt of universities to regain trust by restating that quality is their major responsibility, the role of external agencies being limited to quality audits. This movement needs to count on the foreseeable opposition of external quality agencies while being likely to conquer the preferences of academics.

In UK QE remains a not well-defined concept. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has presented its official definition, but institutions are still looking for their own definition (Higher Education Academy, 2008: 6). There are, however, common patterns to institutional approaches. It is accepted that QE will repatriate the responsibility for the quality of learning
processes to within the institution and external vigilance will rely on institutional audits rather than on more intrusive forms of quality assessment, such as programme level accreditation (Higher Education Academy, 2008; Filippakou and Tapper, 2008). Institutions agree they have the main responsibility for the quality of education and QE can only be successfully implemented “in the context of a flexible, negotiated evaluative model” (Filippakou and Tapper, 2008: 92) and should be “by definition non-mandatory, and should be shaped by the actual participants in the teaching and learning process” (ibid: 94). Institutions show concern that external interventions, such as QAA led audits may damage or destroy QE and innovation.

Filippakou and Tapper (2008) suggest QAA is developing a strategy to reassert its own authority by using its definition of what QE means and how it is to be promoted. Sursock argues, “the quality assurance debate ... is really about power. It is a question of how quality is defined and by whom” (Sursock, 2002: 2). Filippakou and Tapper use a similar argument referring to “who has the power to determine the meaning of key concepts, how they are put into effect ... what the policy outcomes should be” (2008: 93). Another reason for concern lies in QAA’s idea that QE should be promoted using the model of “good practice”, which is considered “another function of the new public management model of governance” (ibid: 94).

**Final discussion**

The analysis of recent developments shows an increasing demand for accountability, both in U.S. and Europe. In Europe, the Ministers and the Commission although using a trust-based rhetoric (cooperation, the EHEA, the European dimension) are promoting measures based upon a circle of suspicion. The OECD is using a different and innovative approach although the resulting system may be very complex and expensive. So far, only the QE movement seems to be trying to restore trust in institutions. But will it succeed? The last UK White Paper on Higher Education, *Students at the Heart of the System*, raises serious concerns as the references to quality include a proposal of “a genuinely risk-based approach, focusing QAA effort where it will have most impact and giving students power to hold universities to account”. It is possible that trust in institutions is running the danger of being sacrificed to the aim of appeasing students that were recently asked to pay a larger contribution to the costs of education.

Martin Trow argues claims to professional and personal responsibility “were 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). However, Universities have rested too long on their claims for the specialism of their ‘unique’ attributes while their environment changed dramatically. 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 2001, 11). Society is no longer prepared to accept that academics are particularly able to run their complex institutions and instead is proposing
that private sector managers may do a better job. And universities failed to make politicians understand their case. As Lamar Alexander, U.S. Republican Senator for Tennessee explains *a propos* of the recent debates on the 2007 re-authorisation 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)

To regain trust, Universities must convince society that they deserve it by self-imposing “measures of quality, commitments to insuring access and greater transparency about financing” (Futures Project, 2001: 10) and by “developing outcomes-based approaches to judging institutional effectiveness” (Eaton, 2007) in answer to increasing demands for accountability.

Universities are not completely alone in this process. Although international organisations are in general strong supporters of market values and economic concerns, there are some political organisations that strongly support ideas based on values that every academic would like to defend (Amaral, 2008). One such organisation is the Council of Europe that has produced two 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 promote 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.

The big question is whether universities will succeed under the present context of suspicion? 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).

Questions:

Q1: How do the roads to quality of the Commission and OECD address the core elements of the core business of universities?

Q2: Do you consider that the AHELO will produce a feasible QA system?

Q3: How can the strategy of Quality succeed?

References


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