Quality Assurance and Assessment in Higher Education: recent trends

Alberto Amaral

21 de Maio de 2009

Research Seminar – Oxford Learning Institute

Oxford University
Introduction

At European level we observe the emergence of a supra-national policy level following the implementation of the Bologna process. Other factors have contributed to this development such as the Lisbon strategy and the “creeping competence” of the European Commission (Amaral and Neave 2008).

Quality assurance has been on the agenda of Bologna since its very beginning, and it has evolved from a mere recommendation that quality agencies of nation-states should cooperate to develop comparable criteria and methodologies to the establishment of a European system and a register of accredited agencies. To be in the register, agencies need to be independent of higher education institutions, which would exclude the U.S. regional accrediting agencies.

Meanwhile, in the US there were failed attempts to promote the role of the federal state in the higher education accrediting system, criticised for not promoting institutional quality and accountability.

In this paper we compare the developments in Europe and the US to understand how far they are converging and to analyse the reasons for their different behaviour.

European developments

National quality assurance systems

In Europe the development of quality assurance activities started much later than in the U.S. The emergence of the “Evaluative State” (Neave 1988: 7) was observed in the late 1980s, with increasing public relevance given to quality. A number of factors contributed to this emergence, such as the massification of higher education, creating very heterogeneous systems (Trow 1996); the increasing role of the private sector in replacing the state as the main employer of graduates (Neave 1996) and the increasing use of markets as instruments of public policy (Dill et al 2004). Instead of equality of provision to ensure a fair competition of graduates for public positions, institutions had to adapt to a more heterogeneous and less regulated private labour market while market regulation made urgent a higher degree of autonomy to adjust to market competition.

Higher education systems became more complex and were forced to become more flexible and adjustable to change, which was incompatible with centralised systems of detailed oversight and control. The rise of the Evaluative state corresponded to an “alternative to regulation by bureaucratic fiat” (Neave 1988: 11), by looking for more
flexible, less heavy and faster guidance mechanisms that would allow for increased capacity for institutional adaptation to change and shorter “administrative time” (Neave 1998: 273). Instead of the traditional a priori authorization the state awarded institutions more autonomy while creating a posteriori control mechanisms via quality assessment.

The development of quality assurance in Europe was fast. Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004) report that in the early 1990s less than 50% of the European countries had initiated quality assessment activities at supra-institutional level, while in 2003 all countries except Greece had entered into some form of supra-institutional assessment.

The European quality assurance systems share important procedural elements – internal self-evaluation, visit by an external expert review panel, external evaluation and public reporting (Thune 2002). However, there are important differences in political discourses (Neave 1998, 2004) that range from a mainly European and political discourse, with universities assumed as a public service (e.g. France and Sweden) to a mainly economic discourse, market-based and inspired in the U.S. (e.g. UK and the Netherlands) with the role of the state seen as excessive (Neave 2004). There are also differences in the ownership of the system and in the consequences of quality assessment – with or without direct consequences to funding.

There were even cases where of trust between government and institutions allowed for the ownership of the quality agencies to be entrusted to organisations linked to the universities (the Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad – VLIR – in Flanders, the Veriniging van Universiteiten – VSNU – in the Netherlands, and the Fundação das Universidades Portuguesas – FUP – in Portugal). These agencies were similar to the US accrediting organisations, in that they also had a guild character.

*Loss of trust, new public management and changes in evaluation systems*

Recent literature shows a decline of trust in public institutions in general, and in higher education institutions in particular, as well as in professionals. Academics have been facing a gradual proletarisation of their professional status – an erosion of their relative class and status advantages (Halsey 1992), and the academy no longer enjoys the prestige on which higher education can build a successful claim to political autonomy (Scott 1989).

One of the causes for the loss of trust has been the emergence of New Public Management and related concepts, such as new managerialism and reinventing
government (Osborne and Gaebler 1992), which dominated public sector reform over the last decades. New public management aims at replacing the slow, inefficient decision making processes of academic collegiality by fast, aggressive and efficient management processes imported from the private sector (Ball 1998). Under new public management, students became customers or clients, and systems quality assurance and accountability measures were put in place to ensure that academic provision meets client needs and expectations.

The attack on public services has destroyed the trust of society on institutions and increased demands for more accountability while new micromanagement mechanisms were put in place that contributed to the proletarianisation of the academia, progressively pushed from a position of professionals into that of employees, the new professionals being the managers, academic or not.

Other factor decreasing trust was the massification of higher education which created a large heterogeneity of the quality of both students and professors, and the emergence of new institutional forms, much different from the elite university (Trow 1996).

All this resulted in declining trust in the higher education systems, their institutions and their professionals. The loss of trust had obvious consequences for quality assurance. 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.

In the Netherlands, a meta-evaluation system run by the Inspectorate for Higher Education was supposed to ensure that the assessment procedures were properly run. In Portugal, a commission was set up to coordinate the quality assessment process and to issue recommendations for the rationalisation and improvement of the higher education system; i.e. to meta-evaluate the system. However, this has not been sufficient to protect the quality assurance agencies. In Flanders “…policy makers, employers and journalists questioned the vagueness of the visitation reports and the lack of a clear overall conclusion” (Van Damme 2004: 144) and in Portugal “…the Minister has publicly complained …that the conclusions of the reports of quality evaluation agencies were quite obscure…” (Amaral and Rosa 2004: 415-416). These three national quality
assurance agencies were extinguished by government and replaced with “independent” accrediting agencies (Amaral 2007).

**Supra-national developments**

The early 1990s saw a development of quality assessment initiatives at the level of the European Union. Under the Dutch presidency, the Ministers of Education and the Council initiated steps to create a European quality assessment system. The conclusions of the 25 November 1991 meeting of the Ministers of Education with the Council proposed that “arrangements for quality assessment in higher education on a national level could be examined at Community level, with a view to reinforcing national quality assessment systems...” (Council 1991).

The Ministers and the Council further proposed that the Commission should undertake steps to strengthen the evaluation of higher education in Europe, including a comparative study of the evaluation methods used in the Member States, the development of a limited number of co-operative pilot projects in this area and the creation of mechanisms for strengthening European co-operation, taking into account the concrete evaluation experience that had already been established. The comparative study was published in October 1993 and a European Pilot Project on quality evaluation was carried out in 1995, including 17 countries and 46 institutions.

On 24 September 1998 the Council agreed on recommending that Member States establish transparent quality evaluation systems and that the Commission promotes cooperation amongst the authorities responsible for quality in higher education and promotes networking (Council 1998). This resulted in the establishment of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

The Bologna Declaration (1999) has contributed to encourage European cooperation in quality assurance of higher education with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies. Schwartz and Westerheijden (2004: 36) refer to the Bologna process as an important “driver for change with regard to quality in steering mechanisms”. The EU discourse supporting a European system of quality assurance is mainly economic and market-based, a neo-liberal model that occasionally becomes visible in European policies that emphasise the importance of the efficiency of the systems.

Although none of the successive communiqués from the biannual meetings of the European Ministers of Education (Prague, Berlin, Bergen, London) has given primacy
to accreditation, the fact is that accreditation has been pushed forward against the opposition of a large number of European universities, as documented by Amaral and Magalhães (2004). In 2004 the Commission presented a proposal for a recommendation of the Council and of the European Parliament proposing, “Institutions must set up rigorous internal quality management and develop an accreditation strategy”. The Commission suggested the implementation of multiple quality assurance and accreditation agencies, public and private, national and international, and a European Register of accredited agencies. Higher education institutions should be allowed by their governments to choose any agency listed in the European Register. This is consistent with a stratified European Area of Higher Education, as some agencies will address excellence at an international level, others will be more appropriate to regional or local institutions, some will accredit research universities, while others will specialise in teaching-only institutions.

The efforts of the Commission in the area of accreditation may be interpreted as aiming at making visible an array of European higher education institutions with different missions and quality, emphasising the importance of efficiency and mimicking the American higher education model.

The European Ministers of Education adopted in 2005 the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), drafted by the ENQA (2005), in co-operation and consultation with its member agencies and the other members of the “E4 Group” – ENQA, European University Association (EUA), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and European Students’ Union (ESU).

The European Ministers of Education established the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) based on a proposal drafted by the E4 (ENQA 2007):

The register 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. (European Ministers of Education 2007)

The Register was set up on 4 March 2008 as the first legal entity to emerge from the Bologna Process. The register provides information on quality assurance agencies that are in substantial compliance with this common European framework. One of the criteria set in the European Standards and Guidelines for accredited agencies is their independence “to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the
conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.” (ENQA 2005: 24) This would exclude the former quality agencies in Flanders, Portugal and the Netherlands as recognized in the ENQA’s review report of the Portuguese Quality Assurance system (ENQA 2006) as well as the US Regional Accrediting Agencies.

The case of the United States

In the US there has been a long tradition of accreditation by private, non-profit organisations, the first agency, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, having been established in 1885. These organisations are voluntary, non-governmental membership associations of higher education institutions.

This system of self-governance and self-regulation by institutions and accrediting organisations, with quality being assured without government intervention, was regulated in the 1965 Higher Education Act and its features have remained without much change until today (Eaton 2007). This arrangement is known as the Triad, based on the principle of distinct and mutually exclusive roles of its components:

States were responsible for establishing requirements for and granting institutional licensure. Accreditation agencies were responsible for making judgments about institutional quality. And the federal government was responsible for allocating and ensuring that federal funds for student aid were used for their intended purpose. (Rainwater 2006: 108)

On the whole, the States are the weakest leg of the triad, since they limit themselves to the licensing of (state) institutions; nevertheless they have gradually increased their oversight of for-profit schools (vocational and technical schools).

The Higher Education Act goes through a reauthorisation process every five years. This has created the opportunity for strong criticism of the accreditation system, which was seen as not responding to demands for increasing accountability, as “...the symbolism of assessment increasingly has moved from instructional improvement to institutional accountability” (Ewell 1987).

Several authors have questioned the effectiveness of the system and its independence. McGhee (2007) refers that almost 40 years ago “J.J. Collins found a significant ‘accountability gap’ existed between the rhetoric that touted the
‘benefits of accreditation,’ and how these supposed ‘benefits’ or claims for accreditation were actually perceived in the field”. William Trout (1979), after analysing publications of the six regional accrediting associations could not find evidence that the criteria used would assure institutional quality.

There were also critical views on the self-evaluation process, described by Doerr as “ritualistic chores” (1983), or as “burdensome, descriptive, mechanical efforts, largely unrelated both to the real problems and to the major successes and opportunities of the institution or program in question” by Kells (1988), or as “not very analytical; they describe but they do little to evaluate, compare or judge a program” (El-Khawas 1993).

David Dill (1996), questions the adequacy of the current processes and standards of the U.S. academic accreditation, and refers to the failure of voluntary accreditation in improving the inadequacy of collegial mechanisms of educational quality assurance, while for Martin Trow:

... accreditation has been irrelevant to the improvement of higher education; in some cases it has acted more to shield institutions from effective monitoring of their own educational performance than to provide it; in still other cases it distinctly hampers the efforts of institutions to improve themselves. It encourages institutions to report their strengths rather than their weaknesses, their successes rather than their failures - and even to conceal their weaknesses and failures from view. (Trow: 1996: 316).

A major difficulty of the system is its “accommodationalist” approach to accreditation (El-Khawas 1993). Accreditation is based on a fitness for purpose approach, related to each institution’s declared mission, which precludes the use of common standards. This aims to protect diversity and to “accommodate” a wide range of institutional differences within the same regional agency.

**Attacks on the accreditation system – Part I: The 1992 reauthorization**

The accreditation system has been under strong fire at the time of the 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, following 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 are the gatekeepers to federal funds by ensuring that students have a good opportunity to complete their studies. In the words of Steven Crow “… accreditation decisions on institutions have been accepted by the federal government as sufficient evidence of educational
quality to warrant disbursement of federal student financial aid and other federal
grants to those institutions”. (2004)

With accrediting agencies seen as having failed in their gate-keeping role, the
1992 reauthorization established stronger federal control over the accreditation
process. Congress authorised the establishment of State Postsecondary Review
Entities (SPRE) to deal with institutions with high default rates, reinforcing the
state and the federal components of the Triad. Plans and standards defined by
the states had to be submitted to the Department of Education (DEO) for review
and approval and the DEO was to require that all accrediting agencies should
assess a number of specific criteria in their reviews, including default rates in
student loan programmes and curricula, admission practices and student success
(Rainwater 2006: 110). The new legislation for the first time disturbed the
equilibrium of the Triad by allowing for federal interference in postsecondary
education and led to an overlap that “violated the long-standing principle that
roles should be distinct and mutually exclusive” (ibid.).

The new legislation was met with strong opposition from a number of
constituencies. Many states felt that SPRE were a federal interference impinging
on their roles of coordinating, planning and policy setting (Morril and Adamson
(1977), referred by Rainwater (2006: 113)). Some people were critical of the
accreditation system, such as Kay McClenney who stated “…people from the
outside have always perceived accreditation as being a closed circle of good old
boys winking and nodding – a mutual back-scratching society” (1995). However,
the academic community was in general against the provisions of the law. The
independent sector was against the SPRE, as they extended the intervention of
the federal level to curricula, faculty and tuition (Warren 1993). The proprietary
sector, initially in favour, soon became concerned that it “could be faced with
more stricter standards than the other sectors” (Rainwater 2006: 114).
However, the SPRE were killed off primarily by the accrediting agencies that
viewed this as an affront and an attack on their monopolies, but even more so by
the outcry of the institutions themselves. As McGee recognises “the institutions
and the accrediting guilds they support yield massive political clout, and will be
able to fend threats such as this almost effortlessly”. (Rainwater 2006: 112).

The SPRE were abolished after only two years of implementation work and
those opposing them had strong political support when the Republicans
assumed a dominant position in the House of Representatives after the elections.
Newt Gingrich, leader of the Republicans in the House, introduced the “Contract
with America” promising to reduce government regulation and this included the
SPRE. “In March 1995, Congress withdrew funding and ended implementation, thereby eliminating SPRE.”

The problem of standards has also been a matter of debate as “accrediting associations suggest that imposing any common measure of institutional quality would destroy institutional diversity” (Troutt 1979: 202). However, the Secretary of Education backed away from 34 CFR 602 (12 actual standards of HEA 1992), leaving only “minimalist” (i.e., process-based) accrediting agency standards (see Federal Register, Nov 1992). This left institutions with the responsibility for establishing and policing their own standards – which is still the case today.

The higher education community imputed blame both to the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA), responsible for recognising and coordinating accrediting activities, and to the proprietary sector responsible for most defaults. COPA was considered unable to present a credible version of accreditation to Congress and was dissolved in 1993 (Gliden 1996). Heads of major college associations and leaders of the accrediting agencies formed the National Policy Board on Higher Education Institutional Accreditation (NPB), to examine how accreditation could be improved to re-establish its credibility and avoid governmental control. The NPB proposed reforms to make accreditation a more uniform process with a predominantly public involvement, including rigorous standards for the assessment of quality to be used consistently throughout the system, a reinforced attention paid to measuring students’ achievements and the public disclosure of relevant information on the effectiveness of affiliated institutions and certified accrediting agencies (David Dill 1996).

These proposals were received with strong opposition by the academic community and were abandoned in 1995. The proposals were defeated because they raised fears about a loss of autonomy. Robert H. Atwell (1995), president of the American Council on Education and a supporter of the proposals claimed “People saw this thing as national, Washington, bad”, and Peter Wood, associate provost at Boston University, explained “The substance of the proposals was to create another Washington-based agency that would have far-reaching powers over the institutions of this country”. (Wood 1995)

A more moderate proposal has finally been endorsed in a national referendum of college presidents; a new national board, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), replaced the former COPA in the task of recognising and co-ordinating accrediting agencies. Instead of a set of rigorous common
standards to be used by all the regional accreditors, the new board merely required they adopt the same “threshold” standards.

Five years later, when a new reauthorisation of the Higher Education Act was due, the number of fraud and abuse cases had dropped significantly which reduced federal pressure over the accrediting associations. “The 1998 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act reversed some of the 1992 requirements, thereby returning some control and administrative discretion to the accrediting associations” (Education Encyclopaedia 2008). All the actors of the US higher education system were then tired of the intense debates and assumed these lukewarm measures would be sufficient to protect institutional autonomy from more federal and state interference.

**Attacks on the accreditation system – Part II: The 2007 reauthorization**

Stephen Weiner, head of the college commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges had a very accurate vision of what was waiting in the future:

> A lot of college and university presidents believe, with the election of the Republican Congress that the threat of federal intrusion into higher education is over. I think that is a very superficial reading of history. (Weiner 1995)

As Weiner had prophesised, the present reauthorization of the Higher Education Act reopened the debate on accreditation. In September 2005 Margaret Spellings, US Secretary of Education established a Commission on the Future of Higher Education. The Commission’s final report is again critical of the accreditation system considered to have significant shortcomings: inadequate transparency and accountability for measuring institutional performance; no comprehensive strategy to provide either adequate internal accountability systems or effective public information; can impede innovation (Commission on the Future of Higher Education 2006: 14-16). The Commission further recommended the transformation of the system; 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.

The DEO has reacted at different levels. It used the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), a body established in the law to advise the secretary of State on which accrediting associations should be recognized at federal level. NACIQI pressured the accrediting associations to
make public all information gathered in the reviews, eliminating the confidentiality discretion area allowing for details of the reviews to be withheld to avoid adversarial relationships and, thus, to protect data acquisition. NACIQI also demanded that accreditors submit to its approval a set of minimum standards for student achievement to be applied to all institutions, thus replacing the traditional “fitness for purpose” methodology based on each institution’s mission.

The DOE also initiated a process known as “negotiated rulemaking” that “convenes individuals from the department and the higher education community to address changes that the government would like to see in current regulations” (Eaton 2007: 20):

_The department proposed rule changes that would position accreditors to replace quality indicators developed by colleges and universities with ones developed by accreditors and, most important, subject to federal control through NACIQI._ (Eaton 2007: 20)

...If successful, this effort will fundamentally undermine key features of higher education, especially its long history of self-governance and self-regulation._ (ibid: 23)

However, the lobbying capacity of higher education institutions and accrediting agencies seems apparently to have once more won the fight. In the reauthorization process the Congress introduced amendments that limit the powers of the federal administration. In 6 February 2008 the White House released a statement criticising the College Opportunity and Affordability Act of 2007 (H.R. 4137, House of representatives) “because it would restrict the Department of Education’s authority to regulate on accreditation... In particular, the Administration strongly opposes provisions that prohibit the Department of Education from promulgating regulations affecting postsecondary accreditation”.

(White House 2008)

The State Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, was more acid in her comments claiming that Congress had dug a moat around the “ivory tower”.

_In a blatant infringement of executive branch authority, Congress is proposing to strip U.S. Department of Education of its authority to issue regulations holding accrediting agencies accountable for ensuring the quality of programs and instruction at higher education institutions... (Spellings 2008)_

Glen McGhee recognises “…federal agencies often find numerous ways to get around congressional mandates if they want to. The propensity for ‘agency
capture’ by powerful special interest groups is the main reason behind congressional oversight committees as well as a growing judicial presence in negotiated regulatory schemes” (2006: 8). It is possible there will be an ongoing fight in the future, as “the federal government will continue to place greater emphasis on evidence of student learning and institutional performance, improved information for the public, comparability among institutions, and learning standards” (Eaton 2007: 23).

Analysis and Conclusions

In the US there is a long tradition of distinct and mutually exclusive roles of the federal government, the states and the accrediting associations that are private membership associations of higher education institutions. This is presented as an independent system of self-evaluation and peer review without government intervention and is the basis of self-governance and self-regulation by institutions and accrediting organisations. This system has been under fire as there are increasing demands for public accountability and a shift from quality improvement to accountability. As stated by McGhee, “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).

The system has been the target of fierce criticism, including its behaviour as institutional guilds (not very different from the medieval guilds) protecting the privileged market positions of their members (McGhee 2006), irrelevant to the improvement of higher education (Trow 1996), failure for improving the inadequacy of collegial mechanisms of educational quality assurance (Dill 1996), a mutual back-scratching society (McClenney 1995), inadequate transparency and accountability, impeding innovation (Commission on the Future of Higher Education 2006), etc.

Several attempts were made to change this situation by shifting the balance of power of the Triad in favour of the federal level. So far all of them have failed, although it is difficult to clearly ascertain its causes due to the extreme complexity of the network of interests, influences and cultures. Some refer to “agency capture” by powerful special interest groups (McGhee 2006), others point to states disliking increased federal control on their traditional roles of coordinating, planning and policy (Rainwater 2006), others consider that an eventual federal movement to take on the accrediting role would not survive
institutional, state and constitutional challenges (Education Encyclopaedia 2008).

However, these periodic attacks on the accreditation system also had a positive effect by forcing higher education institutions and accrediting agencies to improve their operations in order to meet the challenges and ensure the public support that is the basis of their capacity to avoid increased government interference. As stated by Judith Eaton:

_A great deal has been done by institutions and accreditors in recent years that is innovative, far-sighted, creative, and effective in responding to the call for enhanced accountability. These efforts, while various, share important features: They are voluntary, emphasize institutional mission as the basis for determining quality, engage faculty, and preserve institutional responsibility for academic quality._ (Eaton 2007: 22)

The value of the contribution of higher education institutions and the voluntary accreditation system has been recognised by influent politicians. In her testimony to the Senate on the debate of the recent reauthorization act Judith Eaton emphasised the statements of Senator Alexander that “the autonomy and independence of the higher education system is a precious asset” and of Senator Clinton that “higher education and its quality assurance serves our country well and should not be upended”. (Eaton 2004: 4)

In Europe the situation is quite different, even if some European policies apparently aim at emulating the US. The European Union is very far from a federation of states, each nation-state still keeps strong power despite the creeping competence of the Commission and the level of European funding of higher education is not comparable with the level of US federal funding. However, there is a democratic deficit in the Eurolandia, with increasing separation between Brussels and the European citizens. The decision to ratify the Lisbon treaty (a failed European Constitution in disguise) by parliamentary vote to avoid consultation of national citizens through a referendum is a telling example of such deficit.

Despite the opposition of many university leaders, the EU steamroller advanced towards a system where accrediting agencies similar to those in the US would not be recognised as bona fide institutions. 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 by “independent” accrediting agencies complying with the European standards and guidelines.

Not being a seer makes impossible to guess what will be the future. In the US the Education Encyclopaedia suggests “the federal government will continue to use the associations as part of the triad but will continue to try to intervene in the accreditation process to ensure that federal interests are protected” (2008: 4).

In Europe the emphasis has shifted from the social and cultural towards the economic function of the university. The new knowledge society might offer a new opportunity to universities, by assuming knowledge and innovation as an indispensable ingredient for economic competitiveness and social progress. But to seize this opportunity the academia needs to draw a new contract with society, and academics need to put forward a new case in favour of higher education.

The recent rhetoric of the Commission favouring an increased autonomy of European universities should be met with caution. The recent OECD Thematic Review of Tertiary Education (2008) recommends strengthening the ability of institutions to align with the national tertiary education strategy and reconciling academic freedom with institutions’ contribution to society. Unfortunately, despite the new rhetoric of increased autonomy these recommendations remind us of the words of Mahony (1994: 125) “The ‘new’ autonomy is then a paradox: it is the autonomy to be free to conform”.

**Latest developments**

There were two very recent developments that need to be taken into account. The first was the 3rd April 2009 IMHE/OECD board meeting in Paris, where the launching of the AHELO feasibility study was further discussed. The second was the 28th - 29th April 2009 Bologna meeting of European HE Ministers at Leuven, both of which can have considerable consequences for the European Area of Higher Education (EAHE) and its institutions. In both cases 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)

The AHELO project

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 (Neave and 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.

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. In the words of Martens and Wolff:

...[natio-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).

In the words of 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)

According to OECD sources 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. 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). In the words of OECD there is an evident threat 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 calming words 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)

The Bologna project

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. We have to recall that quite recently the Commission has 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 universities, having realised that using quality systems will not produce a fast and evident answer.

Again what the future will be is just another guess. Apparently there will be a ranking system. It is possible that the ranking system will be produced by Bologna and the Commission. Then it is possible that the OECD will assume a very virtuous position by claiming that the PISA 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.

**References**


ENQA (2005), Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (Helsinki, ENQA).


http://www.chea.org/research/crossroads.cfm


McGhee, G.S. (2007), “A Rare Look Behind the Accreditation Curtain”, Florida Higher Education Accountability Project,
http://home.earthlink.net/~fheapblog/id16.html


OECD (2009).
http://www.oecd.org/document/22/0,3343,en_2649_35961291_40624662_1_1_1,00.html

OECD (2009a).