A3ES and Cipes Conference

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Recent Trends in Quality Assurance

1. Introduction

The main objective of this conference is to provide a critical debate on recent changes and trends of quality assessment systems that will be useful both for those responsible for quality agencies as well as for those that are periodically under the scrutiny of quality agencies.

Neave argues that "quality is not 'here to stay' if only for the self-evident reason that across the centuries of the university's existence in Europe, it never departed" (Neave 1994, p. 16), evaluation being "an intrinsic part of policy making" (Neave 1998, p. 265). Indeed, quality has been a permanent concern of universities from the early days of their foundation.

In the Middle Ages it was already possible to distinguish three major models of quality assurance. The old universities of Oxford and Cambridge were self-governing communities of scholars that had the right to remove unsuitable masters and to co-opt new members using the equivalent of peer review mechanisms. The University of Paris, where the chancellor of the cathedral of Notre Dame had the power to decide about the content of studies, might be seen as the archetype of quality assessment in terms of accountability. And the model of the University of Bologna, ruled by students who hired the professors on an annual basis, controlling their assiduity and the quality of teaching, might be seen as an extreme example of the present *en vogue* principles of customer satisfaction.

However, it has been after the early 1980's that quality became a public issue, giving rise to what Neave (1996) denominated the emergence of the evaluative state. This development can be explained as consequence of a number of convergent factors such as massification – that created much more heterogeneous higher education systems in terms of institutions, students and professors –, the increasing role of market regulation, the emergence of new public management, and loss of trust in higher education institutions and their professionals.

Being initially an almost exclusive concern of the academics, quality progressively became a matter of public concern in the 80's and 90's, the two main objectives of quality assessment being quality improvement and accountability. The balance between these two objectives lies more to the side of improvement whenever academics has a strong voice, and more to the side of accountability when the will of the government predominates.

Quality systems albeit in a number of different forms (quality assurance, accreditation, licensing, etc.) are today an intrusive reality of every national higher education system and will remain an important regulation and steering tool for many governments. It is possible to detect that trust in institutions has not been restored, as there is an apparent movement from quality assessment as a tool for improvement to accreditation as a tool for customer protection and accountability. At the same time a number of new developments are visible, using different approaches to quality with diverse consequences both for agencies and institutions. In this Conference we intend to analyse these recent developments.

2. Trust

The level of trust between higher education institutions and the state and society plays an important role in determining the major characteristics of quality assessment systems.

Neave (1994, 1996) proposed the law of anticipated results to explain the behaviour of institutions that try to guess what will be required by government policy and act in anticipation, making it difficult to determine whether change is actually imposed top-down. The conduct of institutions frequently gives "the impression of autonomous institutional action to what is in fact an institutional reaction to actual or anticipated external forces, directives or events" (Meek 2002, p. 250). However

the success of institutions depends strongly on the level of trust they enjoy from the government.

In the Netherlands the strong trust between government and institutions allowed Dutch universities to claim for themselves the major responsibility for quality, convincing the Ministry they should control the quality assurance system through an *independent* agency, the VSNU. Neave (1994, p. 127) presents the case of the Flemish universities as "a remarkable example of the Law of Anticipated Results". Flemish universities anticipated the government movements in quality by initiating a quality assessment system in collaboration with the Dutch VSNU. This resulted in entrusting the VLIR (Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad) with the responsibility for quality assessment. Portuguese universities followed the same road, and the Evaluation of Higher Education Act (Law 38/94 of 21 November) entrusted the ownership of the quality agency to 'representative institutions', similar to the Dutch VSNU (Amaral and Rosa 2004).

On the contrary, in the UK, where the government had largely withdrawn its trust in institutions (Trow 1996), the pre-emptive strike of the British Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals by establishing in 1990 the Academic Audit Unit failed, and did not forestall the implementation of the Higher Education Funding Councils with 'primary status', that is, with powers of financial allocation and regulatory enforcement (Neave 1992).

In Europe there are at present 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 with all recently implemented quality systems being 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 and approval of all university programmes. In Finland there was also a change towards more detailed programme level accreditation.

The specialised literature reveals also a general decline of the level of trust in public

institutions and in professionals. For a long time regarded as disinterested guardians of knowledge and producers of new knowledge, academics are facing a gradual proletarisation of their professional status (Halsey 1992), and the academy no longer enjoys the prestige on which higher education can build a successful claim to political autonomy (Scott 1989).

Under new public management, students become customers or clients, and in most higher education systems quality assurance and accountability measures were put in place to ensure that academic provision meets client needs and expectations. The transformation of students into clients also transformed academics from disinterested professionals into service providers. As such, academics are no longer recognised by their almost monastic qualities, becoming venal contractors whose activities should be inspected. When the academic becomes a contractor his inherent qualities of altruism and probity are no longer taken for granted and his self-regulation capacity is questioned for having interest in institutional decisions. This opens the way for professional managers and a reinforced presence of external stakeholders in the governance bodies.

3. Markets as instruments of public policy

Governments are increasingly using market-like mechanisms as instruments of public policy (Dill *et al.* 2004). For a market to work efficiently, producers and consumers need to have 'perfect information'. However, in many cases, the relevant information is not available (imperfect information) or the producer has a much more detailed knowledge than the consumer (asymmetric information).

To make rational choices consumers need good knowledge of the price and characteristics of goods and services to be purchased and of the market conditions. Therefore, governments use tools such as licensing, accreditation, sets of performance indicators and the public disclosure of the results of quality assessment for increasing consumer information (Smith 2000).

In many countries governments have been experiencing with market-type mechanisms to force higher education institutions to compete for students, for funds, for research money. In Europe, the Bologna Declaration "redefining the nature and content of academic programmes is transforming what were once state

monopolies over academic degrees into competitive international markets" (Dill *et all* 2004: 330).

The emergence of the market in higher education gives legitimacy to state intervention to avoid the negative effects of market competition and to create conditions for their efficient operation, which includes the need of consumer information.

The information problem is particularly acute in the case of higher education, which has three simultaneous characteristics. Firstly it is an experience good, meaning that their relevant characteristics can only be effectively assessed by consumption, as it is only after a student starts attending a study programme that he gets a real idea of what he has purchased in terms of quality, professors, and the general value of its educational experience. Secondly it is a rare purchase, as in most cases a student enrols in a single study programme throughout his professional life and cannot derive market experience from frequent purchases. At last, opting-out costs are high, as it is in general rather expensive to change to a different study programme or institution (Dill and Soo 2004). The simultaneous presence of these three characteristics makes a strong case for government intervention to protect consumers by providing information (Smith 2000), which justifies the increasing role of quality assessment in market regulation.

Dill argues that from the strict point of view of "rational economic choice", "students lack sufficient information about the quality of academic institutions or programs to make discriminating choices" (1997: 180) as what they needed was the measure of prospective future earnings provided by alternative academic programmes and not "(...) peer review evaluation of teaching processes, nor subjective judgements of the quality of a curriculum" *(ibid).*

However, even if this kind of data were available, many students (or their families) would not use it, which questions the validity of the hypothesis of rational economic choice (Tavares *et al* 2006). Although students were free to choose any study programme, choices were made – as Bourdieu (1989) argued – using criteria learned and inherited at social level. Students usually associated choice with accessibility (Gottfredson 1981: 548), which relates to obstacles or opportunities in a social or economic context that affects possibilities of integrating a particular job. That is why Bourdieu (1982) advocated that the educational system reproduces the social structure.

David Dill refers to the problem of immature consumers, which provides the ground for "the implementation of quasi-markets, rather than consumer-oriented markets, for the distribution of academic programs" (Dill 1997: 181). The state or a state agency, acting on behalf of the final consumers, can get a better bargain from the providers as it has a much stronger power of the purse than any individual client, a logic that is reinforced when (immature) clients do not make rational choices. The state is no longer a provider of higher education but assumes a role as principal, representing the interests of consumers by making contracts with competing institutions, which creates a quasi-market in which independent providers compete with each other in an internal market (Le Grand and Bartlett 1993).

When quasi-markets are implemented, government agencies engaged in passing contracts in the name of consumers face the classical principal-agent dilemma: "How the principal [government] can best motivate the agent [institutions] to perform as the principal would prefer, taking into account the difficulties [the principal faces] in monitoring the agent's activities" (Sappington, 1991: 45 cited in Dill and Soo, 2004: 68).

Delegation problems can be analysed using the principal-agent theory (Kassim and Menon, 2002). Delegation problems become more acute when agents have considerable autonomy, as it is the case with universities. Autonomous institutions competing in a market may decide either upholding the primacy of public good or promoting their own 'private good', in the later case not performing, as the principal would prefer.

This may lead to a contradiction in neo-liberal policies. On the one hand institutions should be allowed to operate freely under the rules of market competition. On the other hand, governments ensure institutions behave as governments want them to, by introducing an increasing number of compliance mechanisms, including performance indicators and measures of academic quality, under the guise of quality assessment or accreditation, transforming quality assurance into a compliance tool.

4. Recent developments

I will now refer to a number of recent developments that will be analysed in more detail during the Conference.

4.1 The European Commission, ministers and rankings

The Bologna process has been a very important tool for change. The Ministers of Education assembled in Bergen in 2005 gave their blessing to the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG), drafted by the ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) (2005), in co-operation and consultation with its member agencies and the other members of the "E4 Group" (its members are ENQA representing European accreditation agencies, EUA representing universities, EURASHE representing polytechnics and ESU representing European student associations). In 2007, the 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). More recently (28 and 29 April 2009) the Ministers of Education held another conference in Belgium. The final communiqué states:

> *… 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 the danger of the communiqué opening the way to a ranking system and proposed the inclusion of a phrase that would make rankings unacceptable. However, they failed, being left alone by the representatives of higher education organisations such as EUA (European University Association), EURASHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education), the Coimbra group, or other partners such as ENQA. The Commission not only commissioned a report on the possibility of establishing a classification of European universities (van Vught, 2009). It also funded two projects to analyse the implementation of a multi-dimensional ranking system (U-Map and U-Multirank projects). European Ministers and the Community are apparently determined to implement a fast and lean system to classify or rank universities, having realised that using quality systems will not produce a quick and clear answer. CHEPS provides additional explanation:

> *… 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; develop a final organisational model for the implementation of the classification ... (CHEPS, 2011)*

The design of the ranking system intends to 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 approach is to compare only institutions similar in 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), and two field-based rankings for business and engineering programmes. As Kaiser and Jongbloed (2010) explain "… 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. … U-Multirank pays attention mostly to output (performance) and impact (outcomes)".

The convergence of the Bologna process and the Lisbon strategy is giving the European Commission an increasing influence over European higher education (Amaral and Neave, 2009a), despite the weak legal basis for Community intervention as education has always been considered an area of national sensitivity (Gornitzka, 2009). The activities and policies of the European Commission apparently 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.

4.2. The student experience and the evaluation of learning outcomes

Douglas Bennett (2001) considers the only valid approach for assessing the quality of education is based on the value added, meaning what is added to 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 recognises, the assessment of value-added is difficult for a number of reasons such as its many dimensions, differences between institutions and time for consequences of education to fully unfold, and complexity and cost. Alternatively, a second-best and more feasible strategy is 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 (2008) produced a report providing an international perspective on current practices in standardised learning outcomes assessment in higher education, drawing on examples from a number of countries. The assessed outcomes include both *cognitive outcomes* and *non-cognitive outcomes.* The OECD report 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?

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 considers a division of cognitive learning outcomes into *knowledge outcomes* involving the "remembering, either by recognition or recall, of ideas, materials or phenomena" (Bloom and Krathwohl 1956: 62) and *skills outcomes,* both 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 of certain theorised stages of identity development (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005) and may be developed both through classroom instruction and out-of-class activities organised 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 related to social maturation, generational effects (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005) or "significant life events" (Glenn in Pascarella and Terenzini 2005: 272).

OECD following discussions at the 2006 OECD Ministerial Conference in Athens launched a new programme, "Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes" (AHELO). In the presentation leaflet OECD proposes 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".

For OECD, AHELO is a ground-breaking initiative to assess learning outcomes on an international scale by creating measures valid for all cultures and languages (OECD, 2009a). OECD initially proposed that a large number of higher education students in

over ten different countries 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.

The initial plan was that the "feasibility study" would 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.) would be based on an adaptation of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) developed in the U.S. For the discipline-based strands the study would concentrate on the approach used in the Tuning Process for Engineering and Economics. The fourth value-added strand would not be measured, as it would not be compatible with the timeframe of the study. Therefore, "the feasibility study would only explore different methodologies, concepts and tools to identify promising ways of measuring the value-added component of education" (OECD, 2009a: 10).

OECD considers the importance of context, although recognising the difficulty of context measurement. 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 may include student characteristics related to learning, such as gender and socio-economic status (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005) and environment consists of the setting in which learning takes place, curricula and pedagogies and student learning behaviours (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Kuh, 2008).

Funding of AHELO had several financial difficulties and the feasibility stage assumed a more modest scope than in the initial proposal. The results of the feasibility study will soon become available making possible to decide if AHELO can move into a full-scale phase or if it is too complex and expensive to survive its feasibility phase.

Learning outcomes are also 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).

4.3. Regaining trust and the quality enhancement approach

Massification and the emergence of markets as instruments of public regulation and the influence of new public management have resulted in loss of trust in institutions and academics, reinforcing the accountability component over the improvement component in quality processes. Within this context a new approach seems to be emerging, the quality enhancement approach. Quality enhancement may be seen as an attempt of universities to regain trust by restating that quality is their major responsibility, the role of outside agencies being limited to quality audits.

A report from the Higher Education Academy (2008) considers the increasing relevance of quality enhancement is promoted "to an extent, by contextual changes in, for example, the concept of 'student', the relationship of the student to the HE provision and the perception of the role of the HE sector in society" (Higher Education Academy, 2008: 6).

However, quality enhancement (QE) still remains a not well-defined concept. The HEA report, although presenting QAA's definition as "the process of taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities", recognises that institutions are still looking for their own definition as it emerged from several institutional replies to the questionnaire used to collect information for the report.

Even without a widely accepted definition of QE, there are a number of common patterns to institutional approaches. From the HEA report and a paper by Filippakou and Tapper (2011) some ideas about the characteristics of QE emerge, taken from institutional replies. It is accepted that QE will repatriate the responsibility for the quality of learning process 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. Institutions agree with the idea that they have the main responsibility for the quality of education and quality enhancement 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).

Filippakou and Tapper (2008) question whether QE is effectively a new discourse leading to a different interpretation of the higher education quality agenda or if it merely is "part of the developing discourse of quality assurance with its potential for change threatened" by the way it may be implemented (*ibid:* 91). Filippakou and Tapper argue "… assurance and enhancement are concepts with distinctive meanings, with enhancement promising more than assurance, and although apparently giving greater space to academics, also making more demands of them." (Filippakou and Tapper, 2008: 92)

Sursock argues, "the quality assurance debate … is really about power. It is a question of how quality is defined and by whom", which "can induce distortions that are not necessarily in the best interests of students, graduates, employers or society at large" (Sursock, 2002: 2). And Neave considers "evaluation systems are not independent of what a government's intentions are, nor from what its policy is" (Neave, 2004: 224).

Filippakou and Tapper (2008) argue QAA is developing a strategy to reassert its own authority using its own definition of what quality enhancement means and how it is to be promoted. They question, "who has the power to determine the meaning of key concepts, how they are put into effect … what the policy outcomes should be" (Filippakou and Tapper, 2008: 93). For them, a reason for concern lies in the idea that quality enhancement should be promoted using the model of "good practice", which is considered "another function of the new public management model of governance" (*ibid:* 94). And institutions show concern that external intervention, namely under the guise of QAA led audits may damage or destroy quality enhancement and innovation: "External scrutiny could hinder QE. Especially when QE is so rigidly defined". (Higher Education Academy, 2008: 29).

4.4. Risk management

Risk management is a process imported from business. It aims at identifying, assessing and prioritizing risks in order to create plans to minimize or even to eliminate the impact of negative events. Risk management is widely used by actuarial societies and more recently government and the public sector are also using it.

In Scotland, the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) was introduced in 2003. The

QEF emphasises "the simple and powerful idea that the purpose of quality systems in higher education is to improve student experiences and, consequently, their learning" (QAA Scotland, 2008: 1). It is interesting to notice that the QEF introduces the notion of risk:

> *Enhancement is the result of change and innovation that will frequently involve risk. Institutions are expected to manage this risk in a way that provides reasonable safeguards for current students. The review process will continue to recognise and support effective risk management and adopt a supportive and not punitive role in this context. (QAA Scotland, 2008: 4)*

The 2005 Quality Risk Management Report (AQDU, 2005) refers that as early as 1998 there was a reference to academic risk and its management:

> *Delivery of higher education programmes is becoming increasingly diverse and complex, not least through the rapid growth of collaborative arrangements…. Complexity adds risk, and risk must be managed (QAA, 1998)*

In 2000 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) required higher education institutions to demonstrate "compliance with the principles of corporate governance, including the application of the effective risk management techniques, by July 31st 2003" (AQDU, 2005: 4). The HEFCE already proposed that institutions able to demonstrate they were following best practices would face a lighter touch audit (*Higher Education: Easing the Burden,* July 2002, § 6.1) and in 2001 HEFCE published a good practice guide on risk management (HEFCE, 2001).

More recently the White Paper on Higher Education made public in UK (BIS, 2011) introduces the concept of risk management with a different emphasis:

> *… a genuinely risk-based approach, focusing QAA effort where it will have most impact and giving students power to hold universities to account … in which the frequency – and perhaps need – for a full, scheduled institutional review will depend on an objective assessment of a basket of data, monitored continually but at arms length (BIS, 2011: 37).*

Although the White Paper considers "all higher education providers must continue to be part of a single assurance framework" (BIS, 2011: 37) it proposes that the risk of each institution must be assessed and the level of risk will determine the frequency of QAA's reviews. Institutions with low risk, with a demonstrable record of high-quality provision will be subject to less frequent full institutional reviews than new providers or institutions offering lower quality of provision. At the same time, the document proposes the implementation of a set of *ad hoc* triggers that will determine the intervention of QAA for conducting an immediate partial or full review whenever there are concerns about compliance with quality standards.

The White Paper (BIS, 2011), raises serious concerns. On the one hand 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. On the other hand the risk-based approach raises concerns that the new system will no longer address quality enhancement of the whole system. Instead of quality enhancement robust quality assurance procedures will be focused on detecting and eliminating those cases where quality standards are at risk. That is why both "trust – building on staff's professional values and their aspirations – and dialogic accountability are themselves preconditions for enhancement, risk assessment and the effective local management of risk" (Raban et al., 2005: 50).

5. Other themes for debate

The Conference will also offer the possibility of comparing developments in Europe with those of other regions, namely Latin America and the United States and to take stock of the opinions of different stakeholders (agencies, academics and students) about changes taking place at the level of quality. In particular developments in US should be carefully observed due to their long tradition of quality processes that dates from the XIX century.

The answers of academics to surveys on their perceptions about the impacts of internal quality management show they support the idea that quality systems should promote quality improvement and innovation in higher education (Rosa, Sarrico and Amaral, 2011). And the promotion of innovation and flexibility and reliance on internal quality systems is compatible with the quality enhancement approach.

Students are also playing an important role in the developments of European higher education, namely through the activities of the European Students Union. The attitude of students that had the courage to openly criticise the Leuven Communiqué while the representatives of higher education institutions kept silence should be seen as an example of the capacity of the younger generations to shape and improve European policies.

6. Conclusions

Harvey and Newton (2006) argue that traditional quality assurance systems do not address the core elements of academic endeavour, knowledge creation and student learning. Members of the higher education community consider quality assurance has nothing to do with quality enhancement and may even damage quality. There are presently several developments taking place in different contexts. We propose

to analyse these different developments: multi-dimensional rankings promoted at European level, the OECD AHELO project, the quality enhancement approach and the risk management approach. Unfortunately some of these developments seem to takes us even further away from the core elements of academic endeavour.

What the future will be is just another guess. Options for the future of quality systems are not separated from considerations on the type of higher education system the relevant authorities want to foster. Recent developments show there is a trend for replacing quality assessment agencies owned by universities or by organisations representing universities, using instead independent accreditation agencies (the Netherlands, Flanders and Portugal), while agencies based on quality audit have been replaced by agencies based on accreditation (e.g. Denmark and Norway).

At European level, the objective of Brussels puts apparently more emphasis on competition and the creation of a stratified European Higher Education Area than on cooperation and quality improvement. There is increasing emphasis on market mechanisms, new public management and competition, accompanied by the loss of trust in institutions. This reinforces the possibility that a highly stratified European Higher Education Area will develop, following developments of the Bologna process and supported by the Commission (which does not trust academics and their market aloofness) and with the help of Ministers (that see the virtues of cost saving and easily digestible information). This will produce a ranking system of European universities, albeit under the more palatable guise of U-map classifications, multi-dimensional global university rankings or focused institutional rankings, field based rankings or even using the official nickname of multidimensional transparency tools.

An interesting alternative may develop from OECD's decision to move forward the implementation of a system for measuring learning outcomes that is much closer to notions of the quality of the students' learning experience that to ranking or classification systems. However, it will take some time for the OECD system to produce results, if it will produce results at all. And such a system may prove to be both complex and expensive. The AHELO project has an irresistible strategic value for OECD as it is a very important instrument for reinforcing the influence of the Château de la Muette over higher education. Indeed much of OECD's influence is based on opinion forming which is a clear expression of "…the capacity of an international organization to initiate and influence national discourses." (Martens *et al*, 2004: 2) And evidence suggests that the ability of OECD to shape and influence

opinion on education is at least partly based on the regular publication of cross-national and comparative educational statistics and indicators, one of the most important being the *Performance Indicators of School Achievement* (PISA) (Amaral and Neave, 2009b).

A third development is the quality enhancement approach, more palatable for academics, corresponding to the restoration of public trust in higher education institutions, a most challenging objective for university leaders. Quality enhancement will offer academics an alternative compatible with academic norms and values, creating a bridge with quality, provided that intrusive external interventions under the guise of rigid audit systems are not implemented.

At last, risk management is being introduced in some quality systems, allowing for a more flexible, effective and less expensive approach, although being questionable for focusing on detecting and eliminating those cases where quality standards are at risk while ignoring quality enhancement of the whole system.

We hope that this Conference will offer an opportunity for open and enlightening debates and that all participants will find it a rewarding use of their time.

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