



# Globalising Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Prof. Dr. Dirk Van Damme

Head of the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) – OECD

Keynote presentation at the NIAD-UE University Evaluation Forum 2011 –  
Tokyo, Japan – 26 October 2011

# Outline

1. Achievements of the global quality assurance movement in higher education
2. Emerging risks
3. Globalisation and quality assurance
4. Strategies for quality assurance



**1.**

# ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE GLOBAL QA MOVEMENT

# The Global QA Movement in HE

- Most higher education systems now have well-established quality assurance arrangements
  - From input-steering by governments to output-oriented quality assurance
  - Exchange of institutional autonomy with evaluation
  - Demand for more transparency and public accountability
  - Massification, liberalisation and fears of decline of standards and erosion of academic control
  - Increasing demand for cost-effectiveness

# Achievements

- Internal and external QA have a positive impact on the quality of education provision at programme and institutional level
  - QA has a crucial role in ensuring that most programmes meet threshold quality standards and sub-threshold provision has been addressed
  - QA has successfully reinforced the education function of HE, balancing the strong priority for research
  - Institutional leadership with regard to quality has been strengthened as part of general reinforcement of strategic management capacities

# Achievements

- The quality imperative has pervaded the higher education systems
  - Most institutions have established internal QA procedures
  - Most programmes/institutions are subject to formal external QA procedures based on peer review
  - Most academic staff are conscious of a stronger QA regime and comply with it
  - Most students do not actively participate to, but acknowledge the existence of QA systems

# Achievements

- A common approach to QA has been developed and institutionalised
  - General acceptance of some basic rules and ‘good practice’
  - Crucial role of INQAAHE and regional associations
  - Still too many national idiosyncrasies, endangering the automatic mutual recognition of QA decisions and, in turn, the automatic recognition of degrees
  - Development of meta-evaluation and registration procedures of QA agencies



# 2.

# EMERGING RISKS

# Risks

- **Bureaucratisation, formalism and ‘legalism’**
  - QA has been ‘captured’ in procedures and regulations, in which completing forms and ‘ticking boxes’ in standardised questionnaires becomes the norm
  - Legalistic procedures lead to extreme formalism and avoid risk-taking behaviour of evaluators
  - Formalising QA procedures often increase the difficulties for peers to ‘read’ the actual situation in programmes or institutions

# Risks

- **Window-dressing in the reputation race**
  - Many procedures still give ample space to window-dressing behaviour or superficial compliance
  - Institutions are increasingly relying on ‘professional’ quality managers who have to guarantee the smooth processing of reviews
  - Each new review or assessment has to cope with the collective learning process to better survive the test

# Risks

- **Balancing accountability and improvement functions has proven to be quite difficult**
  - Stringent external accountability functions endanger internal improvement functions, expose the academic professionals, and threatens the legitimacy of the QA regime in the academic community
  - Too much emphasis on improvement and enhancement functions takes the critical edge off the evaluation process

# Risks

- Cost and workload involved in QA may be very high indeed
  - Cost is an issue in many countries, but direct monetary cost is in most cases still acceptable
  - State funding for QA agencies is sometimes seen by institutions as diverting their legitimate resources
  - Non-monetary cost in hidden staff time and all kinds of ‘grey’ activities probably is very high

# Risks

- Most QA schemes still rely too much on input and process standards
  - QA standards and procedures defined from a supply-side or delivery perspective: is what is delivered to students of sufficient quality?
  - Tendencies towards learning outcomes still very hesitant: AHELO (OECD) projects needs more institutional and political support, because it could nurture QA with empirical evidence on actually achieved learning outcomes

# Risks

- Most QA schemes apply standards situated at threshold level
  - Little support and acceptance of attempts to diversify quality statements or labels above threshold level
  - Little incentives generated by QA for good programmes to further improve themselves towards excellence and to market themselves as such

# Risks

- **Limits of peer review methodologies**
  - Peer review is a very powerful method of inter-collegial assessment in professional environments
  - But it's also very sensitive to personal opinions and existing debates in a disciplinary field
  - Generational dimension: aged colleagues coming to assess younger colleagues/rivals
  - Independence of peers in some cases still is an issue, because of impact of networks, friendship or hostility, and competition and rivalry in academia
  - Use of international peers limited due to cost and language issues



# 3.

## GLOBALISATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

# Higher education systems

- **Main trends in higher education**  
(OECD, *Thematic review tertiary education*, 2008)
  - Continued expansion
  - Diversification of provision
  - More heterogeneous student population
  - New funding arrangements
  - Increased focus on accountability and performance
  - New forms of institutional governance and management
  - Global networking, mobility and collaboration

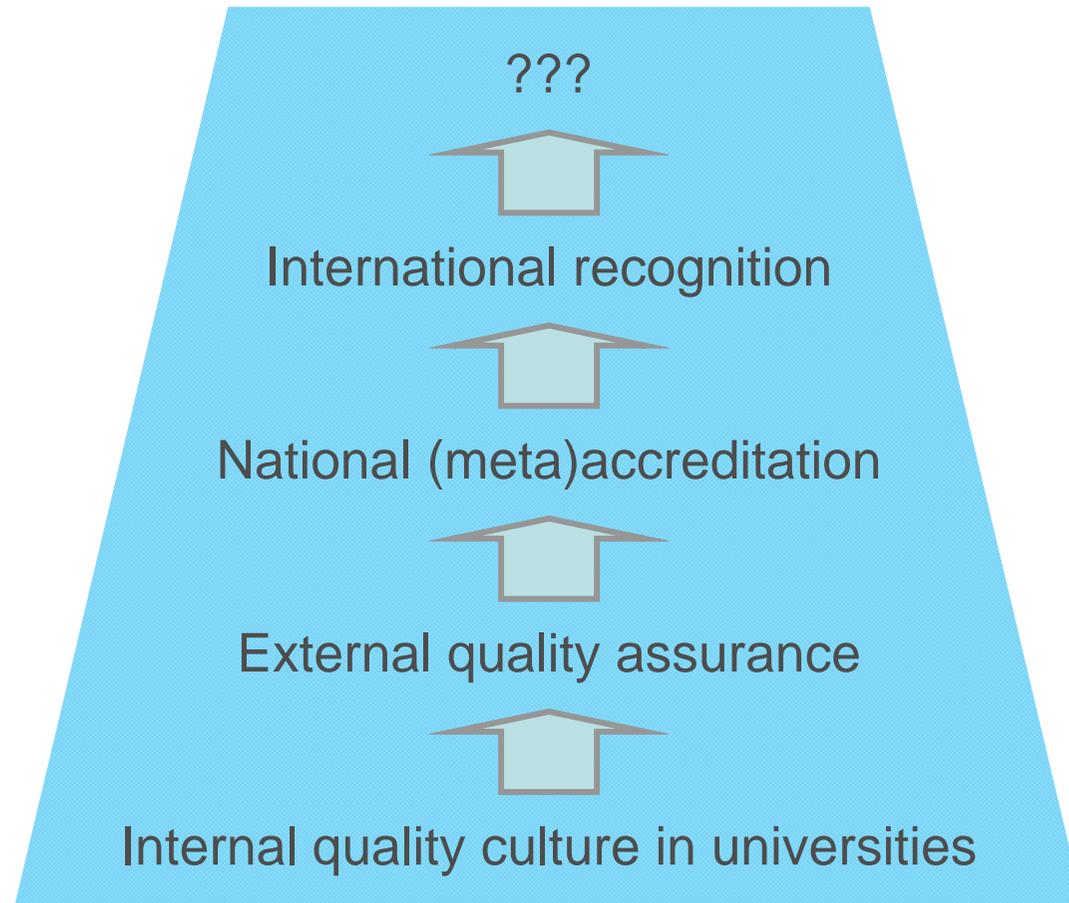
# Globalisation

- **Worldwide convergence and integration**
  - Integrated global system of scientific research
  - Increasing mobility of students, researchers, teaching staff and institutional leaders
    - Emerging market of academics and researchers
  - Technology-driven expansion of new delivery modes in teaching and learning
  - International labour market of graduates
    - Globalising organisation of professions
    - Migration of high-skilled labour is increasing

# Globalisation

- **Challenges and risks of globalisation**
  - International activities of higher education institutions ‘escaping’ the ambit of domestic quality assurance
  - Low-quality provision or even ‘diploma mills’ driven by commercial interests
  - Difficulties with regard to credit transfer from or to foreign institutions
- **Need to complement national QA systems with international arrangements**

# Levels of quality assurance



# Functions of internationalisation in QA

- Collaboration, exchange and professional development in networks and associations
  - E.g. INQAAHE
- Common guidelines and standards
  - E.g. European Standards, UNESCO-OECD Guidelines
- Mutual recognition of QA outcomes and decisions in view of credit transfer, recognition of qualifications, etc.
- Recognition (meta-accreditation) of QA agencies
  - E.g. European Register of QA agencies



# 4.

## STRATEGIES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

# Critical conditions

- QA in HE functions best
  - When it is at arm lengths of governments, while maintaining a strong public policy focus
  - When it supports institutional autonomy by demonstrating how QA can help to improve
  - When it enhances the transparency of and trust in higher education
  - When it is fundamentally trusted by academia as being part of their own sphere

# Strategies

1. Be a driver of *innovation* in the system
2. Focus on what is really *relevant* to academia, institutions, students and society
3. Positively recognise institutional *diversity*
4. Combine the *local* and the *global*
5. Invest in your main capital which is *trust*.

# Strategy 1. Innovation

- For quite some time, QA was one of the most powerful drivers of innovation in HE
- When institutionalising, standardising and mainstreaming, the risk of conservatism grows
- QA should again become one of the main innovation-oriented forces in the system
  - QA tools for innovative practices
  - Innovators belong in peer-review panels
  - Linking and networking with other innovation-oriented forces

## Strategy 2. Relevance

- After 20 years of QA, it is no longer necessary to check all standards and indicators of quality
- Focusing more on what really matters, will help to restore the balance
  - Outputs and outcomes, more specifically learning outcomes
  - Complementing and correcting reputation-oriented transparency tools by providing real information on achieved quality

## Strategy 3. Diversity

- It is critically important to escape the risk of standardisation, by tuning to the real diversity in students and institutional profiles
  - By critically making our tools and instruments more flexible and sophisticated (‘smart quality assurance’)
  - By accepting that ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches are not going to help in a diversifying world
  - This may involve a process of ‘de-standardisation’

# Strategy 4. Local & Global

- Recognise the increasingly important international roles and functions of quality assurance, accompanying the overall globalisation of higher education
  - Sharing good practice, recognising outcomes, developing agreed standards
- But also stay close to the academic work floor and the specific needs of the local situation

# Strategy 5. Trust

- Trust is probably the most important capital of the QA system and community
  - Invest more in restoring trust levels in academia and institutions
  - By demonstrating the added-value of being a ‘critical friend’
  - Convincing them that real openness and transparency based on evidence is at the core of the academic value system and that reputation races based on perception are not sustainable



**Thank you !**

[dirk.vandamme@oecd.org](mailto:dirk.vandamme@oecd.org)  
[www.oecd.org/edu/ceri](http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri)