# QUALITY ASSURANCE AND RECOGNITION IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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Higher education occupied for years a restricted – and relatively encapsulated – social position. This is not meant to imply that it was unimportant, but rather that its importance affected only a small, albeit crucial, part of society. As such, it catered to an elite, both of students and faculty; commanded a portion of public funds which enabled it to operate successfully in teaching and research; and could easily operate far from the scrutiny that strategic social functions normally endure.

This is no longer the case. Today we see higher education at the center of what we tend to call the society of knowledge, or the information age. It is an essential part of national development, for almost all countries in the world, whether they are already developed, are on their way there or aspire to be.

As such, it is subject to close scrutiny, and its quality, effectiveness and efficiency are no longer taken for granted, but must be demonstrated and verified.

Together with moving to center stage in society, it has moved beyond individual societies, and entered the global arena. Knowledge, technological developments, services, people, are moving across national borders, and globalization has become the byword of the times.

There are many ways of looking at globalization. I would like to call your attention to its impact in terms of linking the local to the distant in a routine manner, that is, the way in which social relations become disembedded, i.e., "lifted out" of local contexts and restructured across "indefinite spans of time-space"[1]. Higher education has always been a case in point in terms of disembeddedness, but it has acquired a new dimension due to the rapid expansion of the internationalization of professional markets.

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[1] Giddens, A., The consequences of Modernity, quoted by Philip Cassell (ed.), The Giddens Reader, Stanford University Press, 1993

UNESCO recognizes that globalization is a multiple process with important consequences for higher education[2]: Access, regulation, mobility and the recognition of credentials are issues that have emerged with unprecedented force, and even if they have been present in the higher education debate for a long time, they have acquired new meanings and especially, new implications.

Thus, now nation-states are not the sole providers of higher education, and the academic community does not hold the monopoly of educational decision making.

We have been invited to discuss about quality assurance and recognition in a global perspective. Issues such as standard setting, capacity building, international trade or the role of institutions and academic staff are important if the Bologna process is really going to change European higher education and make it responsive to the demands of a European community placed at the center of a globalized world. They are essential, also, to other regions of the world, which look to Europe for inspiration and for new opportunities.

I come from a very different region of the world, a region that built its higher education on the European model at the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. At that time, the flow of European scholars to teach and do research in South America, and of South American students to learn in Europe and then return to their own countries provided a solid base which survives – at least in its basic architecture – until today.

We face similar problems, and  have also tried to build regional commitments in environments such as that of MERCOSUR, although without the support provided by political commitments such as those present at the European Union. Our work has been focused at the educational level, based on agreements among Ministers of Education or University leaders.

This experience is the basis for my comments here today. I thank the organizers of this meeting for giving me the opportunity to share them with you, and to learn from listening to your discussions.

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[2] Cf. Educación superior en una sociedad mundializada, UNESCO, Paris, 2004

**Three components of a globalized higher education**

I would like to argue that in order to be able to discuss effectively about ways to implement procedures leading to mutual recognition of credentials, or developing standards, there are some prior issues that should be taken into account. I would like to focus my comments on these: the issues of trust, quality and standards.

**Trust as a an essential social requirement**

The first one is that of **trust**. If we really want to make headways in recognition, want to enhance mobility and to assure the portability of higher education credentials, the most important factor is the ability to trust one another.

Trust is the expectation that grows within a given community that behaviour will be honest and cooperative, and is based on common norms, shared by all members of that community[3].

That is really what we are looking for, when we ask ENQA, or UNESCO, or INQAAHE, to come up with guidelines, or principles of good practice for quality assurance. Valid and reliable quality assurance procedures are not our true goal. What we really want is the ability to trust one another, in terms of being able to accept other country's credentials as substantially equivalent to ours, or, if that is not the case, as accurate descriptions of what an individual really knows and knows what to do.

But as many authors who have dealt with the issue of trust have taught us, trust is deeply dependent on culture. Culture is a matter of customs and habits, which have been translated into symbols over time. It is so deeply embedded in the way we do things, that we don't see it any more, as it has become **the** way of doing things. Therefore, what others do differently becomes doubtful. They obey different norms, set different priorities, and therefore, they are not completely to be trusted.

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[3] Fukuyama, F., Confianza. Las virtudes sociales y la capacidad de generar prosperidad, Editorial Atlántida, México, 1996. The translation is mine.

Higher education used to be a community with shared norms. When European scholars came to South America, they did not bring with them only their knowledge of science or philosophy. They brought with them customs and symbols, a complete ethos that pervaded traditional higher education. And the same happened in all countries. Higher education shared a common set of norms, and therefore, it could be trusted, within and across countries.

When did this trust begin to erode? When the boundaries of this community began to blur. When it attracted other providers, bound with different norms, and when it expanded beyond those that traditionally had been its constituents: the best and the brightest of a given generation.

We all agree that this was necessary, and essential in the way we currently perceive higher education as a social institution. But the growth of higher education, its diversification into different kinds of institutions, the emergence of new providers and the appearance of a new population of students suddenly made higher education look like an alien culture, or at least, a traditional culture invaded by barbarians, who crossed the boundaries of higher education and turned it into a world we could no longer recognize.

This was when quality assurance began to assert itself. It was necessary to develop new norms, as the task of 'educating' these newcomers into the higher education culture, was not really possible any more. A community where the old norms have stopped functioning, and has not been able to develop new ones is in a state of anomie, which generates a feeling of discomfort that must be reduced and eventually overcome. Quality assurance intended to rebuild the normative structure of higher education, or rather, to re-define it, assess institutions and programmes against it and provide a measure of assurance which would help society regain its trust.

The point I am trying to make is that the main issue is not quality assurance, but rather the development of new norms that take into account those aspects of higher education that should not change (and therefore, are part of the traditional culture of higher education) but are also able to accommodate the new aspects of higher education.

This same point can be found in the report recently released by he Commission of the European Communities on the mobilization of the brainpower of Europe[4]. This report recognizes a set of challenges, set in a context where indicators put Europe in a position of growth, but still behind the US, Canada, Japan or South Korea. The report calls these things 'bottlenecks'. I would argue that they are the result of an incomplete process of acculturation, where the clash between tradition and new approaches has not yet produced a new set of norms and habits which make higher education again a recognizable – albeit different – social institution.

The first bottleneck is uniformity. The report deplores the insufficient differentiation among higher education institutions, which tend to offer *the same monodisciplinary programmes and traditional methods geared towards the same group of academically best qualified learners[5]* (or, in other words, reproduce the traditional model without taking into account social changes). As a consequence, universities are all very much the same, very few are centers of world class excellence and most tend to exclude those learners who do not conform to the standard model. It also mentions insularity, and its corresponding fragmentation in clusters which need to become 'readable' in the world; this leads to over-regulation and under-funding, which further show the lack of trust each national society feels regarding its own higher education.

Since trust depends on culture, and cultural values and norms, it is slow to develop, because culture is very slow to change. It can be helped along, and it is here that quality assurance has a role, provided it is never forgotten that it is only a means towards an end, and never an end in itself.

This working group has been invited to touch on issues such as standard setting, quality assurance procedures, the definition of shared competencies. We must do all these things, but within a framework that emphasizes that the essential, long term goal is the revision of the boundaries of a higher education community, and within it, the ability to speak a common language.

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[4] Commission of the European Communities, Communication from the Commission: Mobilising the brainpower of Europe. Enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy, Brussels, 2005.
[5] Op. Cit. section 2.2

The most important aspect of the Bologna process, as seen from the outside, is not the architecture it proposes for courses of study, or the different projects dealing with the curriculum.  It is precisely the continuing effort to deal with these cultural aspects, developing a new set of values and norms which take into account tradition and innovation.  If this process is successful, it may provide an effective and stimulating example on ways in which to address these issues.

**Quality as the content of the cultural change**

The second issue has to do with quality.  If the goals are different and the target population is different, the definition of quality must also change.

We currently have many kinds of higher education institutions.  It  has been necessary to revise our statements about what 'normally' defines a university, as the traditional requirements they include may no longer be appropriate. Many universities are teaching institutions, and as such, are called to play an essential role in training the professionals who will enhance the quality of life in their respective environments.   So it becomes necessary to discuss the relative weight within higher education of the functions of teaching, research, services, scholarship.

Here is where standards come in, and they have a very important role in regaining trust.  But 'standard' is not an unambiguous concept at all.   The European University Association, when it defines its policy position in the context of the Berlin Communiqué, reminds us that some understand that standards, in that context, have been taken to refer to quality assurance procedures, while others argue that they refer to higher education institutions and programmes.  It concludes that the 'standards, procedures and guidelines' were meant to refer to quality assurance, and deals with them accordingly.

While this may be true in the context of the Berlin Communiqué, I would like to argue that before defining standards for quality assurance, it is necessary to have a discussion on standards dealing with what higher education institutions do, and with the outcomes of that education.

What we would like to trust is the *content* of a diploma, that is, we would like to know whether we can trust that an architect, or a nurse, or an accountant, are able to perform according to our expectations of such a professional, and whether the professionals that are trained in any given institution really have the required competencies.

Therefore, it is necessary to work on a definition of quality. Not a definition of the kind *one size fits all,* which we know would really fit no one, but rather a general definition that would provide assurance about the essential aspects of training summarized in a diploma.

I would like to share in this context our experience within MERCOSUR, the common market of the South. This agreement brought together six very different countries in South America: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay. We are different in terms of size, complexity, culture, language and just about every variable it is possible to think of. The task was quite daunting: we had to develop a scheme for making degrees comparable among the six countries, without interfering with national and institutional autonomy, and with the added complication that only three of the countries had some QA arrangement in place, although they were quite different from each other.

It took six years, of regular meetings, but we eventually agreed on a set of common standards for three professional degree programmes (medicine, agronomy and engineering). This meant the definition of a core set of contents, skills and attitudes that had to be included in the *graduate profile*, that is, the expected learning outcomes of each programme; it also demanded that we agree on a basic set of conditions for operation (management, human resources, curriculum development, scholarship, learning resources, etc.) that made it possible for those learning outcomes to be achieved.

Curiously enough, this was the easy part. Experts from the three professions readily agreed on this core, and on the basic conditions, with some minor adjustments to specific country characteristics. The hard part was to agree on procedures for QA, but I will go into that later.

Therefore, we were ready to agree on a definition of quality which involves two main components:

- External consistency, that is, the adjustment of a programme or an institution to the norms and requirements defined by its disciplinary or professional reference group. In this case, it included academics and practicing professionals, and it boiled down to a core set of contents, skills and attitudes that had to be developed by all professionals in order to obtain a given degree.
- Internal consistency, that is, the adjustment of what the program or institution does to the principles and priorities determined by its own mission statement or stated purposes. This makes it possible to differentiate between programmes and respond to different constituencies, cultural demands, social differences, and still comply with the essential outcomes defined above.

This is an important first step, which, of course, requires to continue walking in the same direction. It is necessary for key professions to get together and identify what is really essential (and not merely traditional) in order to be able to perform in different contexts. The work being carried out in the Tuning project, or the definition of European specifications for certain degrees, go in this direction.

A second step has to do with the readability of diplomas. In many cases, degrees look the same, but have significant differences. In others, different degrees actually mean the same. The diploma supplement of the ECTS is an important development in this direction.

If we want to be able to trust a diploma, or a degree, it is important that it fulfills both expectations: that it summarizes a set of competencies that are essential to a given profession, and that it is clear about what it really means.

A final point on quality: if we agree that differentiation is a positive development, and that therefore, higher education institutions will come in many shapes and sizes, the way in which we define quality is crucial. Universities no longer respond to a common model, and it will be necessary to find ways of dealing with that. Some countries have solved

the problem by accepting that institutions belong in different categories (research universities, doctoral universities, teaching colleges, and many others). But the important point about categorizing institutions is that there are standards of quality within each category, and while it may not be possible to compare institutions across categories, it is certainly possible to compare them within categories, and in each of them it is possible to be one of the best.

**The role of quality assurance in a global perspective**

The last issue is that of quality assurance. But quality assurance, as I mentioned earlier, is not an end in itself, but rather a means to support higher education achieve its goals, and make sure that these goals are appropriate. This is the reason for the first part of my presentation. I strongly believe that quality assurance standards and procedures are useful only when they are able actively to promote quality within higher education institutions, and help them take responsibility for the services they render.

This is particularly important in a globalized context, where the trading of higher education services constitutes an important segment of the whole trade of services. Cross border higher education is present and most countries have some experience with it, either as providers or receivers of transnational courses or institutions.

Thus quality assurance agencies face a double challenge: they must assure the quality of the higher education offerings within their own countries, but they must also find the way to provide assurance across borders – either of the education offered by the institutions from their own country or of that coming in from other countries.

As such, quality assurance agencies have an important role in the process that aims to build trust within and among higher education communities, but it cannot do so if it is not part of a larger effort, where higher education institutions, governments, professional associations and other stakeholders also play an important part.

The effectiveness of quality assurance processes rests on two different and complementary aspects:

- the standards they apply to higher education institutions and programmes, which, as stated before, must be developed with the participation of the main stakeholders: the academic, disciplinary and professional community involved.
- The standards that are applied to their own work, and that make their decisions reliable and acceptable to higher education institutions, employers, and other quality assurance agencies.

I have already mentioned the MERCOSUR experience. The interesting point about MERCOSUR is precisely the combination of both aspects: the development of common standards for selected programmes, and the procedural aspects that all agencies agreed to accept and apply.

Nevertheless, within the MERCOSUR, the agreement on quality assurance procedures was more difficult and created much more resistance than the discussion of essential learning outcomes. The initial proposal suggested a supranational organization, which was promptly rejected. The second stage was based on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions, but the discussion centered on the requirements for those decisions to be recognized. Finally, we agreed on a set of common procedures (all agencies had to base their decisions on a combination of self evaluation and external assessment; the basis for both had to be the agreed upon standards and criteria for each degree programme; external assessment had to be carried out with the participation of two reviewers from other MERCOSUR countries; all reviewers had to go through a training process approved by the MERCOSUR secretariat), which ensured that we could trust the decisions of each national agency and thus, validate them in the other five countries.

When external quality assurance agencies can show that they apply rigorous standards, that are consistent with the expectations of the disciplinary and professional community involved; when their procedures are able to ensure that higher education institutions and programmes fulfill those standards and have internal quality assurance processes of their own; and when they can show that they comply with the standards of good practice that have been developed for them, they provide a fundamental contribution to the development of that necessary trust on the provision of higher education.

It is interesting to look at the many developments in this respect. The INQAAHE developed and is testing its Guidelines of Good Practice; ENQA has recently published Standards and Guidelines for QA in the European Higher Education Area; ECA also has developed a set of Guidelines. The European University Association published its QA policy position in the context of the Berlin Communiqué. In Latin America, RIACES (the Iberoamerican Network) is also working on an adaptation of those, and in the US, CHEA has developed a set of standards for QA agencies. In addition, there are the Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross Border Higher Education, developed by UNESCO/OECD.

Most of them emphasize the need to make QA processes compatible across countries, while taking care not to intrude into national systems or interfere with institutional autonomy.

But the focus of most of these standards and guidelines is on the operation of the quality assurance agency, that is, the second aspect I mentioned above. There is very little on the kind of standards the QA agencies must apply, or on the process that should be followed for their definition. It is understandable if the goal is just to verify that there is a reliable process for assuring that higher education institutions live up to their stated goals and purposes. But it seems to be insufficient if it is necessary to advance towards recognition, that is, to the acceptance of education qualifications from abroad as fundamentally similar or at least sufficient compared to domestic standards.

Therefore, it is possible to imagine a situation in which a programme from a given country is accredited, closely following any of the guidelines or standards proposed for QA agencies, but where there is no way of learning whether the qualifications of the graduates are similar, greater or insufficient compared to those in another country. This suggests that unless they are combined with other requirements (such as those emerging from the Tuning project, or the development of specifications), they will be of limited use in terms of recognition. However, they are extremely important for the development of quality assurance processes, and especially for the establishment of accreditation procedures.

As such, they are important steps in the development of a coherent framework for the development of quality in higher education, and for the provision of procedures for

assuring that quality.  In a globalized world, this exercise should not be limited to the European region; together with making sure that the experience gained is shared and can support developments in other regions of the world, it is important to be aware of other experiences, in other regions.  Asia, the Pacific, Latin America, North America, are also regions where quality assurance processes have been in place for many years, and where interesting progress has been made.

**FINAL COMMENTS**

I want to finish this presentation with two final comments.

The first brings us back to the issue of trust.   In a context of globalization – i.e, of higher education and professional training which has become disembedded from local contexts and culture – trust becomes essential, mainly because full information on the processes and standards underlying degrees and diplomas is not available.

Trust operates in the absence of full information, and expresses a faith in the probity or love of another, or in the correctness of abstract principles (technical knowledge)[6].  As such, it is always a risk.

This risk may be reduced through the work of expert systems, which in our smaller universe of higher education is provided by the definition and application of formal rules for higher education institutions and QA agencies.

But there are two distinct aspects in rules:
- the semantic aspect, which relates to actual performance and to the meanings each agent gives to his own actions and to the actions of others;
- the regulatory aspects, which refer to the legitimate or appropriate manner in which actions may be carried out, as well as to the positive or negative sanctions applied to the agent's actions[7].

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[6] Giddens, A., The consequences of modernity, Cambridge Polity Press, 1990.
[7] Giddens, A., The Constitution of Society, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984.

The work on QA carried out within the Bologna process focuses mostly on the semantic and performative aspects, precisely because it does not want to interfere with national or institutional autonomy.

But therein lies the risk, of reducing these efforts mostly to a formal exercise, without going into the necessary regulations that would spell out which are the legitimate or appropriate manners in which to train professionals, at least in those fields that most societies have agreed to regulate.

The second comment is based on the work done by UNESCO and OECD regarding the Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross Border Higher Education.  One of the most significant contributions these guidelines make is the emphasis they put on the fact that quality is a joint responsibility, that must be taken on by governments, higher education institutions and providers, student bodies, QA and accreditation agencies, agencies dealing with qualifications recognition and credential evaluation, advisory and information centers, and professional bodies.

All these organizations have something to gain from the provision of quality higher education, be it that provided across national borders or within them.  When looking at cross border higher education the responsibilities are sharper, and more easily seen. It is a bit like those aspects of quality provision of face to face education that become apparent when they are demanded from distance education, and seem to be taken for granted when students and teachers are sitting in the same room.  But the important fact is there: quality, be it of national or cross border higher education is a shared responsibility, and as all parties have something to gain, all of them have to put something in.

By stating what each of these stakeholders is expected to do, and what their role is in improving higher education and helping it become more responsive to the emerging needs of changing societies, the Unesco/OECD Guidelines provide a useful navigation map for the initial stages of quality assurance of cross border education.  In a way, they are providing us with the basic conditions for the trust we have lost and that we wish to regain.