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Has Higher Education Lost Control Over Quality?

May 23, 2013, 12:25 pm

By *Ellen Hazelkorn*

Educational quality is now a hot topic in higher education globally.

In recent months, I have been involved in institutional assessments and government meetings on the topic in Finland, Romania, Ireland, and the United States—and shortly I'll travel to Gabon on behalf of the European Union and the African Union to discuss quality issues.

While the discussions vary, what's clear is that quality is no longer solely the domain of higher-education providers or independent agencies, like accreditors. Many governments want to step up their role in assuring that educational programs are worthwhile.

In the United States, this point is recently illustrated by the Obama administration's [College Scorecard](#) and its 2014 budget proposal to examine "new quality validation systems that can identify appropriate competencies, assessments, and curricula." Greater accountability had previously been proposed in 2006 by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, established by the Bush administration. Its strong support for more federal involvement caused great controversy within higher education at the time.

There is little doubt in my mind that global rankings have played a big role in placing higher-education quality on the policy agenda. If higher education is the engine of the economy, then the quality of higher education and research are vital indicators of national competitiveness. Universities act as a magnet for students, business, and investment. The growth of a global labor market relies upon graduate and employer confidence in the quality and comparability of qualifications. Similarly, the increasing presence of for-profit and international branch campuses and programs requires internationally recognized regulation as a safeguard. These developments have transformed quality from something led by higher education into something driven and regulated by government.

Traditionally, academe relied on peer review and internal procedures of quality assurance at the individual program or institutional level. This would be the common approach of U.S. accreditation and European institutional reviews. The process relies on comparability of standards, and involves intense engagement that can take time and be financially consuming. However, the final report that comes from that process is usually written in opaque academic language, making it difficult to understand or compare performance between institutions, especially internationally. This has contributed to a breakdown in trust between institutions and students, policy makers, and others.

Rankings have prospered in this void. Despite all their limitations, they have exposed an information deficit. They have charmed audiences around the world by their crude simplicity. By equating inputs with outputs, rankings privilege age, size, and wealth. This makes comparisons between publicly supported systems and institutions with top-performing U.S. private universities, in particular, pernicious. The pervasiveness of focusing on the top institutions also obscures the fact that the majority of students attend higher-education

institutions that are not elite.

Today, government involvement in the process and the assessment of quality is everywhere. At one extreme is the light-touch institutional audit operated by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, which focuses on quality enhancement processes. In this approach, universities are assessed against their own criteria with the aim of helping them to improve their own efforts to bolster quality.

At the other extreme is the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, in Australia. It emphasizes standards and outcomes, with extensive powers to regulate and to evaluate the performance of higher-education providers against (teaching) standards set by the government. The “voluntary” or “enhancement” aspect of many processes hides the reality that confidential outcomes are no longer acceptable. Failure to participate can have significant implications for institutional legitimacy, financial support, or reputation.

[The Carnegie Classification system](#) sought to provide a framework to describe differences between institutions according to mission. That idea was copied by the European Union with its [U-Map project](#). Taking this a step forward, many governments have developed a qualifications framework as an educational road map for students and other stakeholders to explain what often appears to be a mystifying and fragmented landscape of [higher-education options](#). Even the European Union has gotten in [on the act](#). In the United States, the Lumina Foundation has promoted its [Degree Qualifications Profile](#).

Rankings have taken determination of quality beyond both the university and the nation-state. Open-source and social-networking sites go still further and put tools directly into the hands of students and other stakeholders, bypassing higher education and government altogether. For example, [Australia](#), [Britain](#), and the [Catalonia region of Spain](#) have made university statistics and performance open to public scrutiny. *The Chronicle* has even developed [its own guide](#) to college performance. And it is not too fanciful to image a TripAdvisor-type site for higher education in the near future.

Another paradigm shift is evident in efforts like the European Union’s [U-Multirank](#) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s work [to design a tool](#) for the assessment and comparability of learning outcomes. Both projects were started with great fanfare about challenging the powerful global university-ranking systems, but both have run into some difficulty—effectively demonstrating the complexity with measuring quality.

Nonetheless, all these developments demonstrate that a Rubicon has been crossed. While higher education has traditionally been the primary guardian of quality, its role has effectively been usurped. If it wishes to regain some degree of control, then it needs to ensure that it is involved in a more meaningful way than it was previously. Urgent action is required to agree on how quality can be demonstrated to the satisfaction of all stakeholders.

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dsarma 4 days ago

Seems like an opportunity to use the brilliant, accurate, and unquestionable system devised by the US News & World Report!

1 person liked this.

LIKE



11167997 4 days ago

Cite me one effect that rankings have had on the academic lives and learning of students! And of national qualification frameworks, show me one with real teeth, i.e. with the provision that students who do not meet stated demonstrations of competence will not be awarded degrees no matter what other attainments they have accumulated. The Scottish come close; and our own Degree Qualifications Profile, a work in iterative progress, could. When you read these documents carefully (and in their original languages) that's about it.

1 person liked this.

LIKE



manoflamancha 4 days ago

Quality can not be enhanced in the present dumbed down university. Because, to improve quality, you must give control of the classroom to the teacher, and not the bureaucracy. This means the elimination of mandatory student evaluations, which may be replaced with a voluntary system for teacher's "eyes only". Too many teachers play to the tune of students as "customers", and the evaluation required by the Dean's office is a job breaker if not highly positive, especially for adjuncts. All the forces currently in vogue in academe conspire to eliminate demanding teachers, and demanding courses. Required student evaluations, Title IX, high expectations (self-esteem indoctrination), and low abilities are woven into the crazy quilt pattern of our current education enterprise. To expect high quality learning to take place in these circumstances is a dream unrestrained by reality. It will get much worse before it gets better.

7 people liked this.

LIKE



leah_shopkow 4 days ago in reply to manoflamancha

Make that genuine student feedback, not evaluations as we currently have them. Kate Day and Charles Anderson of University of Edinburgh came up with an "experience of teaching and learning" survey that asks about classroom experience, not whether students "liked" their professors (it does ask about matters that students have reason to know, such as whether when they asked for help they received it) and it also asks about student inputs--how much of the reading students did and how they read it. I think I'd disagree with an "eyes only" survey, because if a teacher is not challenging students appropriately, it's important to know as part of the faculty evaluation. The Day and Anderson survey form is published in Noel Entwistle, *Teaching for Understanding at University*.

1 person liked this.

LIKE



dank48 4 days ago

Yes.

1 person liked this.

LIKE



joud3084 4 days ago

Given the pressures on public higher education, if a system can be devised that documents, tracks, and reasonably improves educational outcomes and that is disciplinarily specific, everyone wins. Students will be less likely to drift through elective menus that don't cohere into real educations. Universities will be able to concretely demonstrate their specific value without appearing to simply cherry pick success stories that might have happened anyway. And the taxpayers can be assured they are getting their money's worth. A key, which is enshrined in the American accrediting systems and their mechanisms for assessment, is that data collected is used to assess programs, not specific professors, a fact that in principle should sidestep some of the defensiveness so often articulated on campuses. Lumina advocates a lot I disagree with, but the Degree Qualifications Profile seems to strike a reasonable balance between quantitative and qualitative learning outcomes. Yes, it is expensive (especially in time lost) to do this work. But a lot of it can be embedded into classroom assignment and grading practices. And I fear it will be far far more expensive to public higher education *not* to do this work, as budgets are hit even harder by accountability pressures. System of higher education that are able to plausibly say, "If you sustain or increase your investments in us, then in exchange, we agree to be held accountable to produce smart graduates," have a much more compelling claim on public resources than those who argue that what we produce is lightning in a bottle that cannot be named or evaluated or assessed or improved.

LIKE



madamesmartyants 4 days ago

Hmmm...and how does one of the top-performing nations in education, Finland, feel about rankings?

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/...](http://www.washingtonpost.com/)

Finland: 1 Rankings: 0

LIKE



gavin_moodie 2 days ago

Australia's new quality and standards regulator was introduced not in response to league tables, but to try to stop the substantial failures of quality and standards that had grown in response to the expansion of markets in higher education.

LIKE



manoflan Mancha 18 hours ago in reply to gavin_moodie

My time in Australia, more than forty years ago, had the following conundrum: high quality students, low quality faculty. Nowadays, it is the reverse, but the international rankings have shot up to the stratosphere! What gives? I suspect such rankings are way off the mark, and are too heavily weighted toward research and publication. In my time down there, there was little high quality research, and few faculty published anything internationally. Many of my students from that era attained world fame. I doubt the current mob will be capable of that, based on a recent visit.

LIKE