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International Trends

Global Trends in Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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The decade of the 1990s has begun and will likely conclude with "quality" as a major theme. The assessment and enhancement of quality, and attempts to define and measure quality, are major issues for higher education in many countries.

Why such a concern for quality? Globally, there is a growing demand for better higher education with fewer resources. Because a primary source of institutional support is derived from taxation, society is calling for greater accountability in the use of public funds to preserve the cultural heritage through higher education, to assure that professional competence is achieved and to serve the general welfare of society, including matters of national labor needs.

Definitions:

For purposes of this brief global tour of practice, quality assurance in higher education is defined as a process by which an institution is evaluated at least in part by an external body for a level of quality in its educational offering.

In most countries, this process is carried out by the government. Two or three countries worldwide have non-governmental processes, and several countries have none.

Common elements of quality assurance processes would include: educational standards, a self-critical process by the institution, an external assessment and a final decision which

typically is made public. Even with these common elements, it is generally agreed that quality can finally only be assured by the institution itself.

Trends and Practices:

At the same time as the United States faces the prospect of fewer gaining access to its institutions of higher education, other countries are moving toward or have entered a period of mass education.

While the American process of non-governmental quality assurance, accreditation, stands against formidable state and federal governmental challenges to its self-regulatory posture, many other countries are creating quality assurance processes independent of government.

Hong Kong and France now count themselves among those with independent processes, the former having shed its formal evaluative ties with the United Kingdom in 1990 and the latter having created its first national process in 1985.

In preparation for its takeover by the People's Republic of China in 1997, Hong Kong is rapidly expanding its

publicly funded tertiary education system. In response to both growth and governmental transition, the quality assurance process in Hong Kong currently focuses on

the validation and revalidation of individual degree courses with periodic institutional reviews. Unique to the Hong Kong process is the use of an international pool of educational specialists and the appointment of an international council with final accreditation decision-making.

France has a government-appointed autonomous body with responsibility for quality assurance in higher education. Emphasizing qualitative peer judgment based on quantitative indicators, the French process does not have formal sanction over institutions; however, the government is likely to take its findings into account for funding purposes.

With the dissolution of their binary systems, the United Kingdom and Australia are both moving rapidly toward alternative processes to centralized governmental evaluation. In each country, the university sector has developed its own approach to quality assurance, involving external scrutiny but controlled by the institutions themselves.

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The UK's Academic Audit Unit provides independent assurance that sufficient internal processes exist to assure quality. Although the reports are confidential to the institution, it is anticipated that they will become more public as the need demands.

In Australia, the use of subject panels has emerged from a concern about apparent variations in standards and criteria for the award of degrees. The Academic Standards Panels are an alternative to an external examiner system and have extended their process on a trial basis to cover all undergraduate programs in the country in a limited number of disciplines.

In its attempt to give greater autonomy to higher education, the Netherlands has encouraged its institutions to develop their own external quality assurance systems. Accordingly, two

levels of quality evaluation have emerged. One is encouraged by the Dutch government but carried out through an association of institutions which coordinates comparative quality assessment by peers of similar academic disciplines in the universities. The second level, administered by the government, takes into account the various discipline assessments and makes an overall determination of educational quality.

Sweden is also a proponent of institutions developing and ensuring their own internal evaluation processes to improve quality rather than for purposes of accountability and control.

Developing countries such as India, Nigeria and Kenya also are creating processes of quality assurance in order to improve higher education.

In Japan, an institution is chartered at its outset (and then only if it is on Japanese soil) but is not systematically evaluated again internally or externally. However, Japanese institutions of higher education are beginning to feel the pressures of a national (if not international) market-led call for quality and accountability and are currently exploring their options before their government chooses for them.

American Response to Globalization:

Almost a year old, the Council on Quality Assurance in International Education is a collaborative organization of American higher education associations and accrediting bodies located at the National Center for Higher Education. It serves as a focal point for discussion and collaboration both within the

United States and between the United States and overseas bodies concerned with issues of quality and fairness in the international mobility of students, scholars and professionals, credential evaluation and recognition of programs, and international educational linkages. It further facilitates the comparative study of national quality assurance mechanisms in higher education in order to strengthen and improve efforts within each country and to promote exchanges between national systems.

To these ends, the Council has been active in promoting improved practices as American higher education continues to export itself. In addition to its secretariat services to the biennial global conference of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, it has been

instrumental in teaching the fundamentals or helping develop processes of quality assurance for other countries, such as Japan and Bulgaria.

International Network Forms:

As the globalization of higher education intensifies, there is a call for improved communication and flow of information among countries.

The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education was born in Hong Kong at a July 1991 global invitational conference on "Quality Assurance in Higher Education."

Currently composed of 32 quality assurance agencies from 25 countries, the International Network will hold a global conference on "Quality Assurance in a Changing World" in May 1993 in Montreal.

Co-sponsors of the conference are the Council of Rectors of Quebec Universities and the US Council on Quality Assurance in International Education. Further information on the conference can be obtained by writing to the latter at One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 370; Washington DC 20036.■

Dr. Marjorie Peace Lenn, Executive Director of the Council on Quality Assurance in International Education, is the sole American to have been appointed to the Hong Kong Council on Academic Accreditation. She speaks and writes extensively on comparative quality assurance systems.

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