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Approaches of quality assurance models on adult education provisions

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Abstract

The present paper aims at elaborating a comparative analysis on quality assurance approaches and their impact on adult education across European Higher Education Area. As soon as Quality Assurance was recognised as one of the major concerns of Bologna Process, the concept started being reflected in national legislation, policy making at national level and quality assurance agencies provisions. At a later stage, Quality Assurance managed to substantially influence institutional priorities and focuses, no matter if external quality assurance reviews had formal and financial consequences or not. We can only speak about good quality education if also the Social Dimension is of good quality. Ensuring equal opportunities in higher education is not only a question of social justice, but also about improving and strengthening the quality of higher education, therefore quality assurance must take account of the social dimension of higher education in making certain that institutions would operate with the goal of fostering equality within the academic world and ultimately in society. Quality Assurance should strengthen its role in regularly monitor and foster the access, success and completion rates of underrepresented groups in higher education (ESU, 2011).

Since social dimension might be defined as all obstacles to access, progress and completion in higher education (with the strongest emphasis on obstacles to access), we can state that ensuring access of adult population to higher education is a matter of social dimension as it was included in Bologna Process in 2001 (Prague Communiqué, 2001). Countries have different cultures and financial possibilities, universities are located in a specific social environment, often serve different groups in society. Some study programmes are more open to underrepresented groups. Students have different needs; they can come from different socio-economic backgrounds, can be mobile students, students coming from rural areas, adult students, etc. The main objective of this paper is to analyse to which extent do different models of Quality Assurance processes manage to reflect the provisions and practices related to adult education and the priority that is being given to adult education in institutional practices. Some models look at the internal quality assurance system and processes, while others look at the results of these processes – the quality itself, some models look at the achievement of Intended Learning Outcomes, while others look at the vision, mission and objectives of Higher Education Institutions. With widening access agendas gaining momentum and the recognition of the importance of

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support structures, quality assurance mechanisms need to pay closer attention to adult education as crucial segment of social dimension in higher education.

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1. Introduction

When speaking of social dimension in terms of higher education there are two main directions. According to the EHEA, social dimension has been defined as “functioning under the principle of equality and being able to respond to social needs as well as economic goals of the European societies” (ESU, 2011). This definition can be used to show the need for our graduates to be socially aware and able to contribute fully to the society. Another direction is the students’ social experiences during their studies, such as the effectiveness of student support. Through adequate support structures, students should be fully equipped to face the challenges of higher education - financial, psychological or practical (ESU, 2012).

Social dimension as a concept grasps a variety of issues which make up the student experience – access to education, effective participation and successful course completion, both studying and living conditions, student support in terms of guidance, financial support, participation of students in governance and student mobility.

Since 2001, when social dimension was introduced to the Bologna process, it is now considered to be an integral part of the European Higher Education Area. Furthermore, during the Leuven Communiqué (2009), a commitment was made to set measurable targets for widening the access and participation within education by 2020 (Eurydice Network, 2012). This shows how important the factor of social dimension has become within the European agenda.

In 2013, the European Council reached a conclusion regarding social dimension. It has been recognised that the best way to face the challenges of modern Europe, there needs to be more equality of access, participation and completion of higher education (Council of the European Union, 2013).

Adult Education, also referred to as Further Education or Lifelong Learning (preferred notion of European Higher Education Area) in particular, is one of the overarching themes of the Bologna Process. It first appeared on the Bologna process agenda in 2001, in the Prague Communiqué, where it was stated that lifelong learning is an essential element of the European Higher Education Area and strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life. Since then, at the following ministerial conferences, the messages regarding the importance of lifelong learning have continuously been reinforced.

The 1997 Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning defined adult education as the “entire body of ongoing learning processes, formal or otherwise, whereby people regarded as adults by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, and improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction to meet their own needs and those of their society”. The same declaration summarizes the objectives of youth and adult education as: “to develop the autonomy and the sense of responsibility of people and communities, to reinforce the capacity to deal with the transformations taking place in the economy, in culture and in society as a whole, and to promote coexistence, tolerance and the informed and creative participation of citizens in their communities, in short to enable people and communities to take control of their destiny and society in order to face the challenges ahead”. Government of Ireland defines Adult Education in a more concise way as “systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training”.

The concept of quality in higher education has become an increasingly important matter for institutions. As the demand for higher education has increased, so has the demand for its accountability, reliability and value for money (Harvey and Askling, 2003). Institutions are responsible for the internal management of the quality and the effective establishment of procedures which monitor this. Nationally, quality assurance agencies exist, which provide an external evaluation of the institution and/or its programmes. From country to country the mechanisms can vary and how quality is achieved and monitored can be very different. However institutions now face much larger

competition from other home establishments to international universities and colleges. In order to attract more students, institutions are under the constant pressure of having to maintain their quality, standards, reputation and especially the student experience they provide.

Basing itself on Recommendation CM/Rec (2012)13 (Council of Europe, 2012), the 24th Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (Helsinki, 26 and 27 April 2013), on the theme of “Governance and quality education” (Council of Europe, 2013), agreed that quality of education was closely linked to four inter-related purposes, namely:

- preparation for sustainable employment;
- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- personal development; and
- development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

Within the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2005) many aspects of quality assurance such as the quality of the academic standards, the relevance of assessments, involvement of stakeholders within the governance and the reliability of internal practices are addressed. The ESGs are currently being revised and the new updated standards and guidelines will become available later in 2014. Although currently still being drafted, it is evident that the revised guidelines will pay closer attention to social dimension. One of the proposed changes is the addition of a section on “student admission, progression and completion”, as well as a revision of the “Learning resources and student support” section (Hopbach, 2013).

Quality assurance agencies have the responsible position to regulate institutions and assure that the education and experience they provide is of a good standard, in order to maintain the trust in the education system nationally and internationally. Within this chapter, an analysis of several quality assurance models and how they look at adult education will be made.[†]

2. Quality Assurance and Adult Education

After defining the concepts and ideas that set and influence the context in which quality assurance operates, we can now analyse to which extent the different models of Quality Assurance manage to reflect all aspects related to adult education and the place that this concept as a policy occupies in quality assessment practices.

In its recommendation CM/Rec (2012)13 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on ensuring quality education, Council of Europe underlines that the right to education can only be fully exercised if the education is of adequate quality; ensuring that everyone can benefit from a quality education is a matter of individual justice as well as the best possible use of the resources of our societies. Ensuring quality education is a public responsibility, but while access to education is in itself an important right, the true value of this right can only be realised if education is of adequate quality and if learning opportunities and arrangements enable students to complete their education in reasonable time and under conditions conducive to quality education. In democratic societies, everybody should enjoy equal opportunities so that they can exercise their right to education and benefit from a quality education, commensurate with their aspirations and abilities (Council of Europe, 2012).

When defining “quality education”, Council of Europe states as first characteristic the education that gives access to learning to all students, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, adapted to their needs as appropriate.

The Recommendation (2007)6 of the Committee of Ministers to the Council of Europe member States on the public responsibility for higher education and research mentions the importance of adequate measures to ensure equal opportunities and financing.

[†]A similar version of the quality assurance models were used as research parameters in the paper „*The impact of quality assurance processes on student support services*” which I have a co-authored in the forthcoming Council of Europe volume *Student engagement in Europe: society, higher education and student governance*

When referring to “equal opportunities” the basic principle we stand for is that quality education should seek to be inclusive. Given the fact that public authorities have the responsibility for ensuring quality education also for those who are unable to make successful use of mainstream education, we will approach different models and systems of quality assurance, having a close look on the way in which they reflect adult education as a priority in higher education.

Therefore, in an attempt to streamline the analysis, we believe that the quality assurance systems in higher education across Europe can be grouped in four models:

3. Model 1: Review of the comprehensiveness, functioning and effectiveness of the quality assurance systems themselves – methods, procedures, instruments and processes

This model is usually based on an institutional review and might, additionally, include a sample of study programmes in the periodic evaluation procedure. Some countries across Europe have already implemented this model, while others are planning to abolish the programme level reviews and shift to institutional evaluation by 2020 (Slovenian Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, 2011).

One of the basic principles is the autonomy of HEIs, according to which each institution develops its quality system based on its own needs and goals. Secondly, the model looks at the way higher education institutions manage their responsibilities for standards and quality of the education they provide

The review focuses on the procedures that the institution uses to maintain and develop the quality of its operations. They are based on the principle of enhancement-led evaluation which has set the goal to help HEIs identify the strengths, good practices and areas in need of development in their own operations. The purpose is, thus, to help HEIs achieve their strategic objectives and steer future development activities in order to create a framework for the institutions’ continuous development.

The review evaluates how well the quality system meets strategic and operations management needs, as well as the quality management of the HEI’s basic duties and the extent to which it is comprehensive and effective. In addition, the review focuses on the institution’s quality policy and the development of the quality system, as well as on how effective and dynamic an entity the system forms. This enhancement-led approach firstly looks at whether the quality assurance system produces useful information and if the institutions use it to improve its activities. Then, this approach reflects if the internal quality assurance system covers all the institutions’ activities and all units. The most important particularity of this element is, maybe, its’ steering by information, not control, but assisting, supporting, engaging, producing qualitative information which institutions can use in developing their operations.

When looking at the intersection between this model and adult education, differences come between the countries.

In Finland audits evaluate whether the system meets the national criteria and whether it corresponds to the European quality assurance principles and recommendations for HEIs. To evaluate the quality system, the audit has several focuses out of which one section focuses explicitly on societal impact and regional development work (including social responsibility, continuing education, open university, as well as paid-services education). However, it is important to mention that the audit doesn’t evaluate the provisions on societal impact, nor the quality of the provisions on adult education, but the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system in relation to those provisions.

In the United Kingdom the system evaluates the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance mechanisms and the use of national reference points - the UK Quality Code. One of the main areas the audits look at is the quality of learning opportunities, while adult education is not directly looked at. Rather, the review looks at the institution’s ability to monitor the effectiveness of their processes and how they measure their success.

Given the fact that this model is a meta-level approach of the quality management system, it is not the task of the external review panels to provide recommendations on the introduction of some practices, nor on the improvement of improving existing provisions, but to focus on instruments, structures and mechanisms of monitoring data collection (and usage) in this area.

4. Model 2: Review of the quality itself, against fixed external standards, what is referred to as “the initial contribution”, what the education systems (should) provide to students

This model’s main purpose is to assure the academic community, the stakeholders and the public at large that the accredited institution satisfies the minimum quality standards of a higher education institution. At a later stage, it is also the aim of this model to consecrate institutional standards for a quality management and a quality culture and demonstrate their status through relevant evidence and documents.

The standards are formulated so as to stress the institution’s compliance with a predetermined or predefined set of quantitative and qualitative conditions. The role of the external evaluator is to acknowledge and evaluate the managerial and educational capacity of the education provider, in order to be able to state then validate or invalidate its functioning publicly and with documentary evidence.

This model of review covers a segment which looks at the institutional capacity, whether the institution is coherently organized, has an adequate management and administration and the necessary infrastructure and financial resources for a stable functioning on the short and medium term, as well as the necessary human resources for achieving its stated mission and objectives.

What makes the difference between this model and the other analysed ones is the level of detail that standards are looking at: the teacher/student ratio, number of students in a classroom, number of books in the library, percentage of students that get accommodated in institution’s dorms, number of classrooms and labs, number of computer in labs, square meters/student in different types of teaching rooms, percentage of the scholarship fund that comes from institution’s own income etc.

However, there is no direct standard looking at age distribution of students, nor at services/policies of the universities aiming at supporting and encouraging access of adult students to higher education. The indirect connection we can notice is encompassed by the standards aiming at assuring anti-discrimination policies in admission processes and in elections of the student representatives. Secondly, a second indirect connection is a standard looking at information systems of the universities and data collection about their students. As we can observe, both indirect standards are offering the institutions an option to focus on adult learners or not.

5. Model 3: Assessment of the quality of “results”, what is (should be) achieved through education, the performance of the educational system - Intended Learning Outcomes/Achieved Learning Outcomes.

Comparing to the other models, this type of evaluation has to be done at programme level.

It focuses on “results”, defined as the extent to which students in the programme achieve the outcomes specified for qualifications in the National Qualifications Framework (and, implicitly, the European Qualifications Framework), not on prerequisites and processes.

This model gives the higher education institutions greater self-determination over their operations; they must maintain a high standard and are allowed a greater degree of control over how this is ensured. This means, for instance, that their own internal quality assurance procedures as well as the prerequisites for the implementation of their programmes are discussed in relation to student attainment of outcomes. The degrees awarded in the system embracing this model are no longer seen as proof of participation and successful completion of a programme but as the recognition of having achieved certain predefined learning outcomes.

Given the fact that the object of this model is not evaluating the presence or quality of prerequisites and processes, we can conclude that present actions and regulations of the institution, including adult education are its own responsibility.

6. Model 4: Evaluation against the institutions' mission and objectives only, rather than against external established criteria, standards or targets - the quality of "governance" of the education system, the guiding principles and internal processes which (should) ensure that the education system can provide quality initial contribution.

The focus of this model is the institution as a whole rather than individual study programmes or units. It focuses on decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic management, as well as relevance of internal quality processes and the degree to which their outcomes are used in decision making and strategic management as well as perceived gaps in these internal mechanisms. As part of this larger framework the evaluations address the issues on internal quality assurance identified by the first part of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

Even if the principle of evaluating an institution against its mission and objectives is to some extent present in the other models as well, this particular example doesn't use any standards/target/criteria at all except for institution's view and ambitions. Therefore, an external review panel would not (or it is not likely to) recommend an improvement in a segment of activity which is not of high priority for the institution. Therefore, in this case as well, the institution's potential focus on adult education can only come from its own responsibility and willingness to keep the institution attractive.

7. Conclusions, hopes and thoughts

The object of the present paper was to focus and describe several models of quality assurance approaches and the way they reflect adult education provisions. However, given the great diversity of the national systems in Europe there are a lot of situations in which these models are combined so that to respond to the needs of the local contexts.

An important element in most of the models is the trust and responsibility given to universities for the quality and continuous development of their education and other operations. When we use the word *trust* we refer to several dimensions: reliance on the character, ability, strength and truth for the institutions, confidence and reliability in their actions, justified belief that commitments will be honoured and maybe also hope or aspiration. Trust is a key concept in many policy debates as it is crucial for the continuous development of our academic area. However, it needs to be built up over time, cannot just be decreed, but can be lost more rapidly than it can be gained.

A trustworthy system meets all major purposes of higher education, builds on and furthers sound values, allows for different institutional profiles, provides for transparent safeguards and is open about strengths and shortcomings. Also, when referring to the focus on student support services, the most important characteristic of a trustworthy system is that it provides quality for all, not only for the select few (Bergan, 2011).

The models above have two different paradigms:

- QA soft power - values and approaches which underpinned ESG at its origins, commitments to collegiality, respect for diversity, strong focus on quality improvement or enhancement, recognition of institutional responsibility and autonomy, stakeholder consensus.

- QA hard power - centralised regulation, quality assurance for regulation, outcomes regime based on institutional performance, consumer protection and consumer information at heart of QA, quantitative information (Singh, 2011).

We cannot say if one is better than the other, but we can surely say that it is strictly conditioned by the trust between the stakeholders at national level and by the responsibility that institutions have for the quality and continuous development of their education and other operations which is, in other words, the maturity of the quality assurance system. On the other hand, reviewing institutions against detailed pre-established external standards might be of better use for the adult education as this type of approach will at least ensure the compliance with provisions aiming at safeguarding social dimension provisions.

All in all, the indicative trends point to a hardening of QA in the direction of regulation, a move from a regime which at least included the notion of quality improvement based on collegial engagement and recommendations to a regime requiring judgements of compliance against set standards (EUA, 2011).

Adult education is not an addition but should be an integral part of a country's national education system. As an integral and organic part of every national system of education, it should receive within the system the attention and economic resources which this status justifies. Therefore, it is of major importance for the quality assurance systems

across Europe to reflect adult education provisions. It is the governments' responsibility to create the conditions, both financial and administrative, in which satisfactory adult education could be carried out. In the same time, active participation of civil society in adult education is essential and therefore should be recognized by governments.

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