

## **NEW APPROACHES TO QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE CHANGING WORLD OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

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We continuously speak about change. And there is no doubt that the world is changing. After living for 500 years in the shadow of Columbus and his discovery that the world was round, we have been told that it is now flat.

Changes of that magnitude evidently imply changes in higher education, and these should also mean that quality assurance processes and procedures should also change. This is what we expect to discuss during this conference: How can QA keep its relevance, and how it can effectively make a difference in the quality of higher education institutions, their operation, their programs and in general, in the capacity of higher education to answer to the current and future needs of society, at the local, national and regional levels.

Some of the main social forces that have made the world a flatter place also have an influence on higher education. The most significant ones are the growing need for highly skilled and educated workers and the widespread view of the link between educated manpower and economic development (Gibbons, 1998); the expansion of secondary education systems; increasing links to the international system, with mobility and outsourcing becoming important factors in the perceived attractiveness of higher education (Friedman, 2008) and “global institutional changes linked to the rise of a new model of society: increasing democratization and human rights, scientisation and the advent of development planning (Schofer and Meyer, 2005).

### **Trends and challenges of higher education**

Higher education has experienced significant changes from a social perspective. From a relatively encapsulated situation, centered in universities, focused on theoretical and conceptual teaching and learning in the arts, sciences and humanities and in advanced research and scholarship, it has moved to center stage in most countries. It is offered by different providers, to a large and diversified student population, in a wide range of teaching, research, consultancy and service functions.

A review of over twenty countries carried out by OECD identifies a number of major trends in higher education, which are briefly outlined in the following pages. One of the more significant one, however, is summarized in the name of the report: Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society. The expansion of higher education systems, the diversification of provision and the increased heterogeneity of the student body has made it necessary to open the field from the traditional view of higher education to the wider one of *tertiary education*, which is meant to reflect the growing diversity of institutions and programs. (OECD, 2008; Vol 1, 25). While this widening view of tertiary education is necessary, it is also important to distinguish tertiary education from post-secondary education, which covers a far wider range of programs, with very different requirements and characteristics.

The main trends and contextual developments identified by OECD are the following:

- **Expansion of tertiary education systems.** The student population has doubled between 1991 and 2004, from 68 million to 132 million students, with the most significant increases in East Asia and the Pacific, Sub Saharan Africa and South and West Asia. North America and Western Europe are the only regions of the world where growth is below average, but this can be explained because of the high coverage already achieved in those regions. Most OECD countries show participation rates of over 50% for a single age cohort, and in other countries, participation rates are also increasing, although at a slower pace. An interesting comment in the OECD report is that enrolment seems to increase more slowly “in ethnically and linguistically diverse countries, suggesting the competition between different status groups leads to under-representation of particular groups”.
- **Diversification of provision.** Diversification has different faces: emergence of new institution types, multiplication of educational offerings within institutions, expansion of private provision and the introduction of new modes of delivery. Among these, the growth of non university sectors is recognized by OECD as one of the most significant structural changes in recent times. This in part comes as a more innovative response to the increasingly diverse needs of the labor market, but also as the result of regional development strategies for increasing access to tertiary education, or as a way to educate a larger proportion of students at a lower cost, through the introduction of short programs. However, not all these new programs are offered in different institutions. In many cases, provision is diversified within institutions; thus, traditional universities are expanding their range of programs, including short cycle or vocational programs.

Private provision has also expanded, and some countries (such as Korea, Japan or Chile) have over 70% of their students enrolled in private institutions.

Finally, more flexible modes of delivery are emerging everywhere. Distance learning, online delivery of standard courses in face-to-face programs, small seminars and interactive discussions, part-time courses and module based curricula, continuing education and non-degree courses are all new means to address the new needs and demands of students and the labor market.

- **More heterogeneous student bodies.** The expansion of the student body means not only more students. It certainly means different students: Age, gender, qualifications, cultural capital and expectations are diverse and make it difficult for many tertiary education institutions, used to dealing with traditional students (mostly male, young, highly qualified and aspiring to an academic or professional career) to adjust to new needs and demands. A large proportion of these students are the first generation in their families to reach tertiary education, and the lack of social networks to support them poses also new challenges for tertiary education institutions. These students have different learning needs, which mean new curricular and pedagogical requirements, but also the need to provide a different learning environment, which must take into account the different perspective these students bring to their educational experience.
- **New funding arrangements.** Increasing demands for public funding from multiple sectors (health, environment, primary and secondary education, others) make it

necessary to prioritize the allocation of resources and reduce the amount that governments are willing to dedicate to higher education. In this context, public funding tends to be linked to policy objectives, through program based targeted funding, competitive bidding or performance-based funding. In many cases, the allocation of public funding is linked to indicators of effectiveness or efficiency, or to the outcomes of self assessment and external review processes. At the same time, many countries are increasing the proportion of resources allocated for student aid programs, through grants but increasingly through repayable loans.

The need for new sources of funding means a significant increase in the proportion of resources coming from private entities, primarily through the introduction or increase of tuition fees and also through the commercialization of research and institutional facilities or staff.

- **Increasing focus on accountability and performance.** Most countries have witnessed the development of formal quality assurance systems. The decline in public credibility of higher education identified by Peter Ewell (CHEA, 2008) as a significant change in the environment of higher education is not just a US occurrence, but something that is apparent in many countries and that is closely linked to external mechanisms for accountability. The expansion of tertiary education systems, their increased diversification, the need to legitimize the use of public funds and increased market pressures are all factors that subject higher education to close scrutiny, and its quality, effectiveness and efficiency are no longer taken for granted, but must be demonstrated and verified.

Of course, concerns for quality as well as the quality assurance of higher education by state authorities, institutional leaders or higher education institutions themselves are by no means new practices, but they were traditionally restricted within the higher education system itself. What is new is the social relevance granted to the quality of higher education, and therefore, the need for higher education institutions to find new partners and develop links the social and productive environment, to be able to identify and find answers that are relevant vis a vis societal needs.

- **New forms of institutional governance.** The OECD report recognizes changes in the leadership in TEIs as one of the significant changes: the need for improved management and for a clear demonstration that institutions effectively offer ‘value for money’ means that leaders are increasingly seen as managers or entrepreneurs. While managerialism is strongly criticized in some contexts, it seems unavoidable to develop governance schemes that increase the capacity of the institution to take into account internal and external stakeholder needs, to develop new partnerships and find new sources of income, to enhance the prestige of the institution and to be able to compete in an increasingly complex sectoral context.
- **Global networking, mobility and collaboration.** The increasing internationalization of tertiary education has different aspects worth mentioning. One of them is the mobility of academics, students and professionals, which in turn is often related to the internationalization of curricula, at least in some areas such as engineering, business and management studies, information technology and biotechnology. Another is the mobility of education itself, in the guise of transnational or cross border tertiary education, either in face-to-face programs or through e-learning mechanisms. Finally, international collaboration and networking

between institutions in different areas of teaching and research is also a significant factor in the organization of tertiary education in many countries.

## **Some challenges for higher education**

It is therefore easy to see how tertiary education is subject to strong pressures for change. It is still required to bring in and work with highly qualified students (*the best and the brightest* of a social generation) and train the high level professionals, researchers, scientists each society needs. And while this poses some difficulties, and certainly requires adjustments, this is what universities know how to do, and do well. At the same time, it is required to accept and train a much larger population of students, which bring different life experiences, new aspirations, usually lower academic qualifications, and need to develop areas and skills that have not been part of the usual university curriculum.

Most of these changes and challenges impact on institutional management. The need to identify clearly the purposes and priorities of each institution, to find sources of funding and at the same time protect some measure of institutional autonomy, the pervasive requirement for accountability and the impact of globalization are all aspects that require a strong managerial capacity and in many cases, a revision of common practices and procedures.

If we focus on teaching, it becomes clear that this is a function that must be redefined in order to answer to the needs of a varied population of students. While there are important ways in which the demands of highly qualified, elite students press on institutional decision makers and require adaptations and change, the following section will focus on the new population of students, those that are mostly a new generation, with less skills and new needs (which they are not always able to translate into demands).

In the first place, there is a need to redefine the organization of teaching. This means changing the structure of academic offerings, to provide courses that take into account different needs: short cycle programmes, modular arrangements, teaching linked to labour market requirements, together with traditional programmes in new packages, which make it possible to answer to these different needs while maintaining the quality of the learning process.

A second aspect that must be taken into account is the need to adjust to new curricular requirements. These take many forms, of which we shall mention only two:

- Many of the students that enrol in higher education come from the poorer schools in their educational systems, and have a reduced cultural family and social background (or at least, a non traditional cultural background). This means that in many cases, they do not have the expected basic qualifications in terms of communication skills, reading, writing and numeracy proficiency, knowledge of a foreign language or even a basic knowledge of historical or social events. The curriculum for a given programme usually takes these aspects for granted, and does not pay attention to their development, but they can no longer be ignored and must be factored in at the moment of designing and developing new curricula if admission is to be expanded.

- The changes in the labour market and in the career paths of professionals emphasize the need to develop the curriculum taking into account the actual competencies that graduates will need to master at the time of graduation. At the same time, it is essential that the curricular arrangements provide for greater flexibility, the capacity to re-define career paths and continue learning through life and the development of general and transferable skills. These are not quite compatible requirements and therefore, require an important effort to balance them and to determine their relative weights in the curriculum.

Thirdly, new pedagogical approaches must be developed. On the one hand, the traditional approach, which implied that teaching meant mostly the transmission of knowledge and the provision of information, has been superseded by the wealth of information readily available even to underprivileged students. Current requirements focus more on the need to provide a basic structure for the available information, which makes it possible to select (and discard) information on the basis of a critical judgement on its relevance to the needs at hand. Students with lower qualifications require teaching addressing their more pressing needs, in order to enable them to carry out a more autonomous learning process later on. Unfortunately, in many cases, these students are subject to a traditional and secondary school methodology, more concerned with helping them memorize certain contents than to develop their capacity for independent learning. All this means a pedagogical recycling, which many institutions are not in a position to offer and which is not easily accepted by many teachers in higher education.

From an institutional perspective, the need to accommodate increasing numbers of students changes the balance of their functions and makes teaching the central business of the institution. This has been the case in many higher education institutions for years, but the traditional ideology insists on the pre-eminence of research over teaching. While this is still the case in selected institutions in most countries, the majority of tertiary education institutions are really first and foremost teaching institutions. Therefore, there is a need to re-value teaching as a critical function, and adjust accordingly the methods for the development, assessment and promotion of the academic staff. If teaching occupies a central role in a TEI, then the academic organization – traditionally focused on the development of disciplines – must take this into consideration. The way in which resources are distributed must also reflect this emphasis, as well as the mechanisms for their allocation. This includes hiring and investment policies, academic development strategies, the content of research and studies, and the methods and criteria used for the evaluation of academic staff.

Most of these challenges affect the management decision within TEIs. One of the first issues that need to be addressed is the specification of the institutional mission: most mission statements look quite similar, even when they refer to very different institutions. For example, the growth in the enrolment means that in most countries, a large proportion of the TEIs will actually be teaching institutions, at the undergraduate level, reserving research and graduate programmes to a small number of more consolidated universities. But this is hardly acceptable to the more traditional academic community, and therefore, most mission statements replicate those of these consolidated institutions and assign great importance to the production of knowledge and to the development of high level researchers and scholars, even when they have no human, financial or academic resources to do so.

Thus, it is important that each institution is able to determine which are its main functions, and then match its organizational processes to the adopted decisions. This includes the identification of the ways in which these functions will be carried out, who are the beneficiaries and users of the services that the institution will provide, and how the institution will be able to determine whether it is adequately fulfilling its mission.

Management must also consider the impact of its funding sources. For years, many higher education institutions enjoyed the 'privileged autonomy' that comes from guaranteed public funding, and very little – if any – regulatory actions from the part of the government. The reduction in public funding, plus the demand for teaching larger numbers of students, makes institutional managers highly dependent on a variety of funding sources, which may affect the autonomy of their decisions. In fact, the need to obtain the necessary funding may direct institutions towards decisions that not only are outside their stated purposes, but in some cases, detract from them. In those countries where tuition paid by students covers a significant part of the institutional budgets, the interests and demands of students may strongly affect the decisions on what programmes to offer. This may be necessary, but in order to make it a positive influence on the development of an institution, it must be put in perspective within a long term vision and mission, which may, in some cases, even lead to the rejection of a proposal that is contradictory to the stated purposes of the institution.

This of course has a strong impact in the growing requirement for accountability. Assessment is moving from a revision of institutional inputs to an evaluation of outcomes against stated purposes, and from a mostly external exercise to the development of internal quality assurance mechanisms. These internal quality assurance mechanisms must become a part of the management and decision making schemes within an institution, in order to help them work constantly towards increasing levels of quality – understanding quality as both the achievement of the institution's stated purposes and the ability to meet national (and sometimes international) quality standards.

Institutional management must also take into consideration the issues that come from the blurring of national borders, the increasing mobility of students, academic staff and professionals, both from the point of view of developing cooperative mechanisms and establishing effective alliances and partnerships both within the country and with foreign institutions, and also from the need to compete not only with national offerings, but also with international or transnational higher education, which comes into the country sometimes with very little regulation.

## **Implications for quality assurance**

We constantly repeat that quality is the responsibility of tertiary education institutions, and that quality assurance arrangements only make sense when they contribute to the quality of tertiary education. We also agree that all effective quality assurance arrangements must take into account the context, the needs and the stage of development of the tertiary education system within a given country.

Quality assurance systems have an added advantage over individual tertiary education institutions: they have a cross sectoral view, provided by their constant interaction with programmes and institutions across the country, and by their exchanges with other quality assurance agencies in other countries. Thus, it is easier for them to detect trends, both positive and negative within a TE system.

At the same time, most quality assurance systems are extremely conservative. This is, in part, a consequence of their need to work with the more consolidated and better institutions within the country, and with the selection of the more prestigious academics to act as their external reviewers. It is also a consequence of the prevailing ideology, which tends to identify the more traditional features of higher education with quality (more academic staff with doctoral degrees, more full time faculty, more books in the library). But in many cases this makes it difficult to operate in a diverse system, which must change the focus or the approach of tertiary education towards a less traditional view.

There are many reasons why increased diversity is seen as a positive development: it makes it possible for tertiary education institutions to address a wide range of student needs and demands, as well as the varied requirements of the labor market through institutional specialization; it stimulates social and professional mobility, and it is assumed that it will provide opportunities for innovation. However, Frans van Vught argues that there are strong forces against diversification, mainly those arising from centralized and uniform governmental policies, imitative behavior by lower status institutions or academic conservatism (van Vught, 2008).

All these factors may act through QA mechanisms, which – reasonably enough – establish strong entry barriers to the tertiary education system when trying to make sure that even the worst tertiary education institution or program in the country meets basic quality standards.

Therefore, it can be said that there is a real and present danger that QA systems, while ostensibly working towards assuring quality, may in fact, be making it difficult, if not impossible.

This is certainly a provocative statement. In the following section, we will look at some approaches that may reduce the risk of interfering with the development of better processes or decisions.

### **Quality assurance mechanisms are a means, not an end.**

All QA practitioners know that the actual goal of QA is to help TEIs improve their processes and their outcomes. They also know that all assessment and accreditation processes should support and promote the developmental needs of higher education.

But QA practitioners and TEI members also know that in many cases, QA gets misled and tries to build tertiary education systems in its own image. QA is about evaluation, and evaluation is about power. It is easy to be tempted to define quality from a top-down position, and it becomes intoxicating when TEIs do as they are told, because they need to have a good report.

This does not help institutions to improve, or to take responsibility for the quality of their work. If the main concern of QA is really the quality of the service rendered, it needs to develop a much more humble approach.

It becomes essential to learn about the system, its features and the ways in which it is perceived by a wide range of stakeholders; to be in touch with international developments and learn both from the similarities and the differences, find out about the ways in which other QA agencies have dealt with similar problems, and be able to learn about good practices, without using them as 'recipes' to be adhered to.

It is necessary to recognize and validate different institutional models, and learn about the features that make them effective.

It is important to use a wide range of consultants and reviewers, in order to keep in touch with diverse disciplinary and professional approaches, to learn about innovative practices and not to lose contact with the more traditional and effective aspects of institutional practice.

### **Standards and criteria must recognize different types of institutions**

As has been previously stated, standards and criteria tend to reproduce a traditional view of higher education, without recognizing that there are other quality indicators that can be used more effectively in different types of institutions. A typical example is that of academic staffing: many QA agencies insist on academic qualifications as a measure of quality, forgetting that in many cases (such as professional programs or new fields of knowledge) other qualifications may be much more effective. The quality of teaching staff is essential – the point is that there may be many different ways to identify this quality.

At the same time, some quality assurance processes are very rigid and apply the same standards and procedures to very different programs or institutions. A certain degree of homogeneity may be necessary (probably limited to the issues they cover), but it is important to adapt the procedures and the application of the standards to the actual purposes and characteristics of the programme or the institution. At the same time, the diversity of tertiary education makes it necessary to develop different definitions of quality, or at least, a definition that can be adapted to different circumstances<sup>1</sup>.

### **Standards should focus on expected outcomes, rather than on prescribing actions or focusing on the formal compliance with quantitative indicators**

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting approach is provided by the following operational definition of quality, which focuses on two main aspects: **external consistency**, that is, the adjustment of the programme to the standards and criteria determined by the disciplinary or professional community in a given context. External consistency must be linked with **internal consistency**, that is, the way in which a programme adapts these external criteria and requirements to the priorities and the principles derived from the institutional mission statement. External consistency corresponds to the more common definition of *fitness of purpose*, which then becomes embedded in the institutional purpose, and is translated into quality as *fitness for purpose*. The combination of both makes it possible to ensure, on the one hand, the compliance with external demands, and on the other, the necessary specification provided by the characteristics of the institution that offers the programme.



The way in which standards are defined also may interfere with quality and the response from TEIs. When they are too prescriptive, they impose a preferred way of doing things, which does not generate a feeling of ownership from the institution. Prescriptive and/or homogeneous standards may not pay sufficient attention to significant differences among institutions, in aspects such as their target population, institutional principles, or disciplinary approaches, thus making it impossible for those institutions to develop responsibly in accordance to their stated purposes. A second risk is that of excessive formality or adherence to quantitative standards applied across the system.

Of course, it seems easier and more objective to determine a set of common indicators: x hours of math, x% of full time teachers, y% of PhD holders, etc. But formal indicators tend to push TEIs to make formal decisions, comply with the required number of hours of math, with the number of full time teachers or with the proportion of PhD holders, without paying sufficient attention to the underlying substantive issues. These – the need for students to acquire certain competencies, the availability of teaching staff and their commitment to the teaching tasks, or the need to ensure the appropriate qualifications in the academic staff – may be achieved in many different ways, but there is no room to discuss these other options, because the indicator is what ends up being measured, even if it does not apply to the specific programme being evaluated.

### **QA processes require a continuous learning process**

Some quality assurance schemes tend to define their standards and procedures and then act as if they never needed to change and adjust to new conditions. A quality assurance process needs to be able to learn from its experience and, sometimes, to un-learn things that it used to do well.

If we recognize that higher education is an essentially dynamic operation, its quality cannot be assured with a static process. This means that close attention must be paid to possible changes, in the definition of quality, the criteria, the procedures, the mechanisms for self and external review.

Learning comes from a variety of sources: academic staff, external reviewers, disciplinary or professional stakeholders, technical staff within the agency, international exchanges, and this means that it is necessary to keep open eyes and ears at all times. In spite of everything that is done, mistakes will be made, and they should also be made a part of the learning process.

### **Quality is the responsibility of TEIs, not of the external QA agency.**

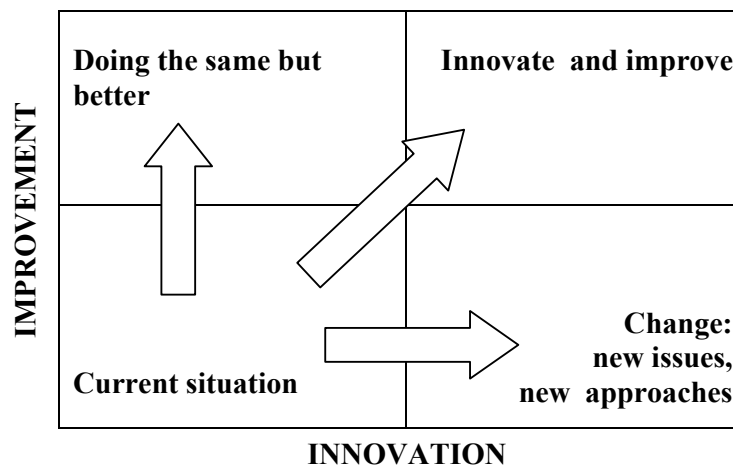
Finally, all this comes to the realization that, as principles of good practice for external QA agencies stress unequivocally, quality can only be assured from within. Effective processes are those that, even in new and developing institutions, strive to help them establish self regulating policies, mechanisms and procedures. Work done *with* TEIs, rather than *to* TEIs, is what in the end will be most conducive to quality and, most important, to its continuous improvement.

## So, what is a QA agency to do?

In the situation we have been describing, there is a strong need to develop a different approach to quality. Quality and quality assurance processes have focused on the need to improve the way in which things are done: better academic qualifications for teaching staff, stronger selection procedures for students, better laboratories, improved teaching and evaluation strategies. The time has come to do different things, and to do them in different ways: new modes of teaching, new types of programmes, new arrangements for part time students and part time academic staff, new alliances with external partners ... there is a need for innovation, which is usually difficult for QA agencies to accommodate.

In graphic form, we can say that QA agencies are quite good at developing and promoting the left hand side of the table. They have difficulty operating on the bottom row, and of course, moving from the bottom left cell to the top right cell is a real challenge:

### A different approach to quality<sup>2</sup>



There are many things that an institution or program must improve, and self assessment usually provides good information about that. This moves the institution from the left hand bottom cell to the left hand top cell. There is improvement.

At the same time, self assessment may show that there are new issues to address, or that the current approach to some issues is not working properly. It is necessary to innovate, and to change the way of doing things. In many cases, there are no precedents within the

<sup>2</sup> Diagram adapted from Yorke, 1994

institution, and even if other institutions are working along the same lines, each institution must find its own way.

In most cases, trying out something new means that there is a period of temporary incompetence, in which even very proficient managers or academic staff do not perform as well as in the 'old' way. Most people have experienced this, when they switch from a car with manual gear to automatic gear, or when they have to use a new word processing program. It is probably much more likely to happen when a new curricular structure is being tried, or a new mode of teaching.

One of the most frequent questions asked of QA agencies is how they deal with changes: how to deal with a new curriculum? How to assess new admission policies? How to tell whether new pedagogical practices are effective?

When an institution or program which has just carried out such an innovation is externally reviewed by a QA agency, it is highly likely that it will be sanctioned, either because things are not working as well as they used to, or because it is still too soon to show effective results. Therefore, an institution wanting to receive a good report will most probably refrain from trying an innovation, unless it is certain that there is no external review in the horizon!

The new approach to quality that seems most appropriate takes this into account, and promotes innovation in spite of the fact that results may not be as good, or as effective as no change. It is not easy to do, but if an agency is aware of this problem, it will be able to find ways to do it. The important thing to keep in mind is that change is necessary, and that QA cannot limit it.

### **Developing institutional capacity for self regulation**

In practice, it means promoting the institutional capacity for self regulation. Without this, there is a significant risk of reducing QA to an exercise in compliance: TEIs do what the QA agency demands, and then continue with business as usual. But if the goal is to promote quality, and help the institution not only to improve its operation, but also to be able to review its operation and make any necessary changes, then its ability for self regulation becomes crucial.

Thus, the quality assurance agency can begin by asking the institution about its purposes and goals: are they clear enough, and susceptible to translation into guidelines for decision making? Are the departmental and program's goals consistent with the institutional priorities? Does the institution know whether it is advancing towards achieving the stated goals and purposes? Are the changes being proposed based on sound assessment and planning?

The self assessment process should also be reviewed: participation, involvement of internal and external stakeholders, the degree of consensus on the identification of strengths and weaknesses, are all important indications of the level of commitment of the institution and the programme with its improvement. Reports not always manage to register accurately the richness of the self assessment report, and site visits are a useful way of going beyond the formality of the report.

Finally, a well developed improvement and development plan, realistic and verifiable, shows the capacity of the institution or the programme for self regulation – and that, in the end, is the most important outcome of the quality assurance process.

## Final comments

Higher education is changing, and quality assurance processes and quality assurance agencies must change with it, or become irrelevant. If agencies don't pay attention to the signs of the times, they will be left behind. For many institutions, quality assurance is just a requirement that must be met if they are to receive public funding, get a better position in the marketplace, or be eligible for student aids. QA processes must develop in such a way that they are embedded in the day to day management of the institution, and essential to support decision making. QA must work with the institutions, with those responsible for the development of programmes, and help them establish larger alliances and partnerships. Then it will be really helping tertiary education to fulfil the role society has given it: to ensure that an ever increasing proportion of the population develop the skills that are essential for national development, which go far beyond those that used to be responsibility of higher education. QA agencies need to understand that there are different things to be done, and that these need to be done well – the point is to learn how different, and what it means to do them well.

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