

**TQM IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE AUSTRALIAN AND  
SWEDISH EXPERIENCE**

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**Abstract**

Institutions of higher education now operate in a global marketplace and, as a result, compete for both scarce resources and research funds within a market that is fast reaching maturity. Alongside of this 'globalisation' and saturated market is the increasing emphasis placed on the concept of quality and its impact on the providers of education programs. The aim of this paper is threefold: firstly, to look at the concept and meaning of the internationalisation of higher education; secondly, to explore the issues of quality in the higher education sector and their relationship to the internationalisation process; and, finally, to provide an overview of quality assurance systems within the Australian and Swedish higher education sector.

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# TQM IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE AUSTRALIAN AND SWEDISH EXPERIENCE

## INTRODUCTION

It seems that globalisation knows no boundaries. Its effects are exerting increasing influence over all facets of society. For example, Holton (1997) suggests that global issues increasingly dominate discussion on the direction of social change. The internationalisation of higher education, with students crossing international boundaries in search of learning and understanding, is not a new phenomenon. It has, however, been consolidated and promoted against a backdrop of 'globalisation'. It is both a response to and reflection of 'globalisation'.

As a consequence, Institutions of higher education now operate in an international market that is fast reaching maturity, competing for both students and research funds. As a result, there has emerged a significant change in education at both the international and national levels. For example, in Australia, encouragement of universities to seek commercial opportunities and align themselves more closely with industry needs is paramount to their survival. Internationally, there has been a move from elitist to mass higher education, along with greater diversity of institutions and programs.

Alongside of this 'globalisation' and saturated market is the increasing emphasis placed on the concept of quality and its impact on the providers of educational programs. While quality was once perceived to be purely the domain of engineering, manufacturing and production engineering disciplines, quality processes have now expanded to include both the service and public sectors of the economy. Feigenbaum (1994) believes that "quality of education" is the key factor in "invisible" competition between countries since the quality of products and services is determined by the way that "managers, teachers, workers, engineers and economists think, act and make decisions about quality" (p84).

Craft (1994:p viii) identifies the need for "...credible academic and professional awards" ...which has led "...national governments and tertiary institutions themselves to establish sophisticated mechanisms to .....improve the quality of the education offered and the awards granted." Cheng and Tam (1997) suggest that while there is strong attention paid to total quality management within institutions of higher education, the implementation of specific policies to achieve educational quality is often unsuccessful. This appears to be the result of a "lack of comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of education quality..." (p 21).

The aim of this paper is threefold: firstly, to look at the concept and meaning of the internationalisation of higher education; secondly, to explore the issues of quality in the higher education sector and its relationship to the internationalisation process; and, finally, to provide an overview of international trends and concerns related to quality assurance in higher education.

## INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When defining internationalisation of higher education, it is helpful to understand this process as opposed to 'globalisation'. Knight (1999) articulate the difference between globalisation and internationalisation. Globalisation is defined as:

*"...the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, ideas...across borders. Globalisation affects each country in a different way due to a nation's individual history, traditions, culture and priorities. Internationalisation of higher education is one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalisation yet, at the same time respects the individuality of the nation" (p14).*

Knight and deWit (1995) identified three stages of the internationalisation of education. The first or initial stage is often identified as Europe during the Middle Ages and renaissance. The second stage of internationalisation has been identified as the period between the 18<sup>th</sup> century and World War II and is characterized by the exportation of education by European colonial powers to their colonies (Knight & deWit, 1995). The period after WWII represents a final stage in the internationalisation process and follows the world's shifting political and economic realities (Knight and deWit, 1995). East and West sought to befriend these emerging nationals by investing in aid programs for higher education that both trained scholars in the host country and invested in universities of the hosted country. With the collapse of European communism and the increasing economic power of Japan and European Community the focus became one of a more open yet competitive international exchange in higher education.

Today, the internationalisation of higher education is viewed as an increasingly important factor, not only in the work of universities and other higher education providers but also as a direct result of increasing competition, globalisation and decreasing public funds for higher education (van der Wende, 1999).

From the above discussion, the internationalisation of higher education has come to play a major part in the survival of institutions worldwide. In fact, the international dimension of higher education is given more prominence within national economies than ever before. With this in mind, the question to be explored is the connection of quality and quality assurance programs that can transcend national borders as OECD member countries seek a 'commonality' within the quality of national awards.

## **QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The phrase "quality of education" is a difficult one to discuss in a concrete way, since it is almost always related to some specific goals (and can involve a related argument about whether such goals are legitimate or not). Quality is also a difficult word because it evokes a wide range of attributes, and the usual way of acknowledging the existence of quality is to appeal to observation and experience of a range of possibilities. The philosophy behind the quality movement is to convey the message that customer satisfaction is paramount, and, that through a process of continual improvement involving every member of the organisation; quality outcomes can be achieved with a structured, well-managed system.

During the 1990s, quality in higher education moved to being the foremost concern in higher education alongside funding issues. Harvey (1999) explains that national governments expect higher education to: "...be more relevant to social and economic needs; widen access; be more cost effective; ensure comparability of provision and procedures, within and between institutions, including international comparisons; and, be responsive to a range of stakeholders" (p2).

Rowley (1995) identifies the key elements necessary for success as: commitment and example from top management; awareness of the cost of quality; knowledge of the tools and techniques; understanding of customers' specifications and satisfaction; pursuit of continuous improvement; and, belief that everyone has a responsibility for quality. Can we expect that the systems, philosophy and principles that have been successfully applied in a manufacturing environment will translate effectively in a service organisation traditionally funded by government? Clearly, most governments, in particular, Australian governments, believe so.

Garvin (1988) identifies five approaches to defining quality: transcendent (innate excellence); product-based (some attribute); user-based (needs); manufacturing-based (conformance to requirements; and, value-based (costs and prices). While Garvin's (1988) classification mainly applied to industry, it has been widely used in relation to higher education. Harvey & Green (1993) discuss the nature of quality in the context of a university and identify five discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about quality in higher education: exceptional (quality as something special);

perfection or consistency (processing and setting specifications); fitness for purpose (relates quality to the purpose of product or service and its relationship to that purpose); value for money (you get what you pay for); and, transformation (issues of added value and empowering the participants).

On the other hand, Dawson and Palmer (1995) argue that there is some disagreement as to what constitutes quality and how best it can be achieved. Barrett (1996) raises a number of issues and arguments against the push for quality mainly on the grounds that students should not be considered as customers, since they are unlikely to be sensible judges of what they need in terms of education in order to be satisfied. Furthermore, Barrett (1996) contends that certain intrinsic principles and standards which are entrenched in academic life, particularly invention and creativity, as well as internally-derived standards and the motivation of academics, are unlikely to survive attempts to introduce changes such as quality, corporatism and market-based solutions.

Bolton (1995) argue that there exist marked differences between business organizations and their willingness to embrace TQM and those of higher education. For example, the language of "total quality" and "management" is regarded with hostility in institutions of higher education given the threatening nature of the objectives encapsulated in TQM programs and the priority given to customer needs over quality of output and reputation in academic research (Bolton, 1995).

Aspin and Chapman (1994) state it is important to recognise that it is not possible to have one single criterion of quality but rather several characteristics that, when viewed in total, can convey to the assessor a complete picture of the level of quality available in a particular product or service, in this case higher education. Several sites where quality may be discerned have been identified as: outcomes; curriculum, teaching and learning; resources, facilities and amenities; organization and administration of education institutions; and, character, tone and ethos.

Owlia and Aspinwall (1997) conclude from their survey of different professionals and practitioners in quality in higher education "...the problems that exist with TQM in higher education, however, should not overshadow the necessity for change in this area. Financial problems and market pressures, which are challenging many higher education institutions, appear to give the main impetus for change. They leave institutions no alternative but to offer "higher quality at a lower cost" – a primary aim of TQM" (p540).

To define what is meant by quality in higher education is somewhat different to that in industry and service production where the perception of quality is somewhat homogenous. Giertz (2000) states that since institutions of higher education have not seen the need to define quality, there is no specific definition that encompasses objectives within these institutions. However, it is argued that there exist many different perceptions on what defines quality in higher education. Giertz (2000) identified two reasons for this. Firstly, quality has many aspects and is often based on values. Those values are shared by a group of stakeholders, namely, academics, students, parents, future employers, the government and funding bodies. Secondly, higher education in general has undergone significant change and there exists many different forms and as a result if quality is seen as "fitness for purpose" then what counts for quality will be different (Giertz, 2000).

Woodhouse (1999) states that many of the concerns relating to the internationalisation of higher education have led to new interpretations of the concept of quality. The most commonly accepted is "fitness for purpose" as it allows the individual institution to define their purpose in their mission and objectives, so "quality" is demonstrated by achieving these (p29). On the other hand, quality assurance refers to the "...policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced" (p30).

While particular situations vary from country to country, it is generally agreed that quality and quality assurance is a distinctive feature of most higher education systems worldwide. As institutions of higher education adopt total quality management practices at the behest of national

governing bodies, they do so at the same time as becoming major players in the global marketplace.

The processes of internationalisation of higher education and total quality management appear to be a means to greater student mobility, while providing national governments an understanding of other countries' higher education systems and the comparability of qualifications. Knight (1999) suggests that as internationalisation matures, it is important that institutions of higher education involved in this process, must address the issue of quality assessment and quality assurance of their international dimension (p46).

van der Wende (1999) states that the internalisation of higher education " ...seems to be strongly related to the aim to improve the quality of higher education. The idea that internationalisation should not be seen as an end in itself but as a means for quality enhancement" (p1). In particular, a number of processes facilitating this expansion were identified. For example, the introduction of co-operation, exchange and internationalised curricular. Furthermore, the "de-nationalisation of higher education" refers to a number of processes that facilitate the expansion of higher education systems across national borders. These international strategies and activities usually exceed the restrictions of existing quality assurance systems. Finally, van der Wende (1999) raises the important issue of regionalisation, whereby cross-border co-operation between neighbouring states (e.g. the Nordic States) present different quality assurance systems which may need to be adjusted.

The need for institutions of higher education to address the issues of quality assessment and assurance of the international aspects of their operations is now part of a major project under the auspices of the OECD. Since 1994, the OECD Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education has led the Internationalisation Quality Review Process (IQRP) – a project in collaboration with the Academic Co-operation Association (ACA) in Brussels.

Knight & deWit (1997), describe the aim of IQRP as to "...help individual institutions of higher education to assess and enhance the quality of their international dimension according to their own stated aims and objectives"(p3). The underlying purpose of the IQRP is to support institutions to improve their work in the international field. It should be noted, however, that IQRP is not a comparative methodology nor does it award certification or accreditation. The two basic components of IQRP are self-assessment and peer review.

During the first phase of the project, 1995-1997, IMHE/OECD and ACA developed and tested the IQRP instrument in three regional areas, Namely Helsinki, Finland; Boston, U.S.A.; and, Melbourne, Australia. The second phase, 1997-1998, following feedback and revision, the instrument was piloted in a wider group of institutions and country/cultural contexts. For example, Mexico, Poland, Estonia, Kenya, Malaysia and Australia. The IQRP project identified above is seen as a major step forward in encouraging institutions to make their nationalisation strategies explicit.

As Craft (1994) points out "...'globalisation' and international migration mean that academic and professional qualifications need to be 'portable' across national borders, and so both institutions and national states are keen to learn more about each other's procedures for assuring the quality of tertiary education provision" (pviii)

The above discussion has attempted to highlight the importance of the relationship between the concepts of quality and of internationalisation of higher education. While researchers (van der Wende 1999; Knight 1999; Craft, 1994) argue that quality improvement may be seen to be a major aim of internationalisation, the process of internationalisation of higher education itself puts pressure on the present systems of quality assurance, which are usually based on 'domestic' policy. These, of course, are difficult to adapt to and do not adequately address the international dimension of higher education.

It is apparent that globalisation is emerging as an important force in higher education. As a result, competition for students, scarce resources and recognition now pose challenges for the efficacy of national quality and quality assurance controls within higher education systems. The next section addresses the final aim of this paper by discussing quality assurance programs from two different international perspectives, namely: Australia and Sweden.

## QUALITY IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

As in almost all tertiary education systems, it is true to say that Australian higher education institutions have always striven for quality. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any education institution, or any organisation which deals with people, not embodying at least some recognition that quality is important.

The Australian higher education sector experienced large-scale structural reorganisation following the Dawkin reforms in the late 1980s. These changes involved mergers of the advanced colleges with universities, or with each other, and the granting of university status by state governments to non-university merged institutions, provided they met minimum requirements relating to research, staff qualifications and related matters (Department of Education, 2000). The driving force behind much of the changes emanating from this period was economic rationalism, under which universities were expected to play a larger part in improving economic performance (Johnes and Taylor, 1990).

Australian universities had to contribute by improving efficiency and accountability, through amalgamations and growth intended to increase economies of scale, by directing their efforts more to wealth generating activities. These aspects eventually led the Commonwealth government to a realisation that quality was an important but neglected factor in the process of change. In its policy statement, *Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s* (Department of Education, 2000) the government sought to address the weaknesses of the discipline review approach to quality assurance.

A major initiative of this policy was the provision of funding, additional to institutional operating grants, to those universities able to demonstrate a high level of quality assurance in the context of their missions and goals (Department of Education, 2000). The Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education was established in November 1992 and, following three rounds of voluntary self-assessment, the Government, in early 1998, integrated quality improvement into its yearly funding negotiations with institutions. By March 2000, two proposals were approved, namely: the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes and the establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency. Both policies were integrated into the Australian quality assurance framework, which encompassed the roles of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), the universities, State and Commonwealth government and the Australian Universities Quality Agency.

The existing quality assurance framework for Australian universities has served the sector well but, of course, has limitations. As Anderson, Johnson & Milligan (2000) point out:

*“...Australian universities are self-accrediting. In the absence of a system of external examiners or an independent quality assurance authority, how can anyone know how good the degrees are? Several other countries – New Zealand, Britain, the USA amongst others – have agencies of different kinds which examine the quality assurance processes of their universities and, in some cases, the quality of students’ work”* (px).

In the past decade, competition, for both students and research funds, has increased significantly. The need for a more credible national system of independent external audit is required if Australian institutions of higher education wish to remain major players in this saturated market place. As a result the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (Department of

Education, 2000) commissioned two studies to consider several existing models of quality assurance and accreditation in higher education in Australia and overseas and to make recommendations for a 'modern Australian system'.

Harman & Meek's (2000) study suggests that separate arrangements for institutions which are self-accrediting and those which are non-self-accrediting. The report suggests that the new quality assurance agency "...be established as a joint Commonwealth, State/Territory, and higher education initiative, at 'arms length' from both government (Commonwealth and State) and from the higher education sector and whose central function would be conducting a program of institutional reviews or audits" (pxiii)

Anderson et al (2000:x) suggest a model "...building on the self-examination processes now common in Australian universities, with a minimally intrusive national agency, able to represent Australia internationally in the growing field of international accreditation". The central quality activity of the agency would be an audit of institutions based on a detailed self-assessment, including benchmarks of standards.

The establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency was endorsed in March 2000 as an independent national agency to monitor, audit and report on quality assurance in Australian higher education. The agency is responsible for conducting quality audits of self-accrediting institutions; providing public reports on the outcomes of these audits; and, reporting on the relative standards and international standing of the Australian higher education system and its quality assurance processes (DEST, 2001).

From the above discussion it is evident that the Commonwealth Government has recognized the increasingly important role of institutions of higher education to the future of the nation. The need to provide a transparent quality process attesting the quality and reputation of Australian universities is paramount to our continued success in a highly competitive market.

## **QUALITY IN SWEDISH HIGHER EDUCATION**

As with many other countries worldwide, higher education in Sweden is moving towards a system of massification with growing expectations for accountability, follow-up and evaluation from a variety of stakeholders. In the early 1990s, several arguments in favour of intensified demands were given. Of these, the concern for deteriorating national finances was considered especially important. Several groups began demanding evidence of quality (National Agency for Higher Education, 2001).

The Swedish model of quality assurance has gained a stronger level of autonomy since the 1993 Higher Education Reform. The responsibility, for example, of the organization of studies, appointments and internal allocation of resources was decentralised, devolving authority from the government to the universities and colleges (Talerud, 2001). Harvey (1999) describes the Swedish model for quality assurance as a "...rare example of improvement-led model."

The largely performance-based system of funding universities and colleges was introduced, based on student achievements as well as on student numbers, with each institution responsible for developing the quality of its own activities. Institutions are also responsible for demonstrating to the government the standard of its quality enhancement mechanisms. The system also encourages a variety of methods and mechanisms of quality assurance rather than one homogeneous model on all institutions and programs (Harvey, 1999).

The National Agency for Higher Education was established in 1995 and derives its authority from the government, with its agenda only partially set by government. The Agency's national system for quality evaluation involves the following processes: institutional reviews; subject and program reviews; and, accreditation (Talerud, 2001). In January 2000, a new system for quality

assessment was introduced with the object of evaluation being shifted to subjects and programs. An important aspect of the Higher Education Act 2000 is the recognition that quality and quality development is a local responsibility and the independence of the National Agency as an assessing body is safeguarded (NAHE 2001).

## **CONCLUSION**

From the above discussion it is evident that institutions of higher education around the world are all faced with the same dilemma – the universal impact of globalisation on higher education. This global environment, within which national higher education systems operate, is fraught with the same challenges for all players. Massification of higher education, decreasing government funding, and competition both within and outside of national boundaries for both scarce resources and students, all combine to present the higher education sector with the need to ensure that their systems are placed competitively in the international marketplace.

Quality and quality assurance systems are not a new phenomenon. What is new, however, is the recognition of the link between the influence of internationalisation of higher education and the functions of respective national quality assurance systems. In order to survive in a fast-maturing marketplace, institutions of higher education now need to provide formal, transparent and credible systems of quality assurance in order to allow appropriate evaluation for interested parties, be it prospective students or other domestic or international institutions.

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