

*Renegotiating Institutional
Autonomy and Public Accountability:
the Future of Higher Education
Quality Assurance*

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1. Descriptive

- Achievements
- Risks

2. Analytical

- A governance analysis

3. Prospective

- Strategies

1. Descriptive **ACHIEVEMENTS**

Achievements

- The quality imperative has pervaded the higher education systems
 - Most institutions have established internal QA procedures
 - Most programmes/institutions are subject to formal external QA procedures
 - Most academic staff are conscious of a stronger QA regime and comply with it
 - Most students do not actively participate to, but acknowledge the existence of QA systems

Achievements

- A common approach to QA has been developed and institutionalised
 - General acceptance of some basic rules and ‘good practice’
 - Crucial role of INQAAHE and regional associations
 - Still too many national idiosyncrasies, endangering the automatic mutual recognition of QA decisions and, in turn, the automatic recognition of degrees
 - Development of meta-evaluation and registration procedures of QA agencies

Achievements

- Internal and external QA have a positive impact on the quality of education provision at programme and institutional level
 - Ensuring that most programmes meet threshold quality standards and sub-threshold provision has been improved or closed down
 - QA has successfully addressed the education function of HE, balancing the strong priority for research
 - Institutional leadership with regard to quality has been strengthened as part of general reinforcement of strategic management capacities

1. Descriptive **RISKS**

Risks

- Bureaucratisation, formalism and ‘legalism’
 - QA has been ‘captured’ in procedures and regulations, in which completing forms and ‘ticking boxes’ in standardised questionnaires becomes the norm
 - Legalistic procedures lead to extreme formalism and avoid risk-taking behaviour of evaluators
 - Formalising QA procedures often increase the difficulties for peers to ‘read’ the actual situation in programmes or institutions

Risks

- Window-dressing in the reputation race
 - Many procedures still give ample space to window-dressing behaviour or superficial compliance
 - Institutions are increasingly relying on ‘professional’ quality managers who have to guarantee the smooth processing of reviews
 - Each new review or assessment has to cope with the collective learning process to better survive the test

Risks

- Balancing accountability and improvement functions has proven to be quite difficult
 - Stringent external accountability functions endanger internal improvement functions, expose the academic professionals, and threatens the legitimacy of the QA regime in the academic community
 - Too much emphasis on improvement and enhancement functions takes the critical edge off the evaluation process

Risks

- Cost and workload involved in QA may be very high indeed
 - Cost is an issue in many countries, but direct monetary cost is in most cases still acceptable
 - State funding for QA agencies is sometimes seen by institutions as diverting their legitimate resources
 - Non-monetary cost in hidden staff time and all kinds of ‘grey’ activities probably is very high

Risks

- Most QA schemes still rely too much on input and process standards
 - QA standards and procedures defined from a supply-side or delivery perspective: is what is delivered to students of sufficient quality?
 - Tendencies towards learning outcomes still very hesitant: AHELO (OECD) projects needs more institutional and political support, because it could nurture QA with empirical evidence on actually achieved learning outcomes

Risks

- Most QA schemes apply standards situated at threshold level
 - Little support and acceptance of attempts to diversify quality statements or labels above threshold level
 - Little incentives generated by QA for good programmes to further improve themselves towards excellence and to market themselves as such

Risks

- Limits of peer review methodologies
 - Peer review is a very powerful method of inter-collegial assessment in professional environments
 - But it's also very sensitive to personal opinions and existing debates in a disciplinary field
 - Generational dimension: aged colleagues coming to assess younger colleagues/rivals
 - Independence of peers in some cases still is an issue, because of impact of networks, friendship or hostility, and competition and rivalry in academia
 - Use of international peers limited due to cost and language issues

Risks

- In general, still limited internalisation of ‘quality culture’ in institutions
 - Emergence of formal QA regimes may have eroded informal collegial control
 - Still relatively high internal tolerance for visible and sometimes acknowledged lack of quality

2. Analytic

A GOVERNANCE ANALYSIS

A governance analysis

- Need to look deeper into what really is happening in terms of the general governance of higher education systems
- In many countries, and in line with New Public Management concepts, external QA was introduced as part of the exchange between institutional autonomy and public accountability

A governance analysis

- New forms of steering replacing old control and command forms of public regulation
 - Steering on output and performance, incl quality
 - Guaranteeing level-playing field in ‘quasi-markets’
 - Trusting sectoral and institutional self-regulation
- Institutions gaining more autonomy
 - Strengthening internal governance, leadership and management
 - Increasing inter-institutional competition, also on an international level

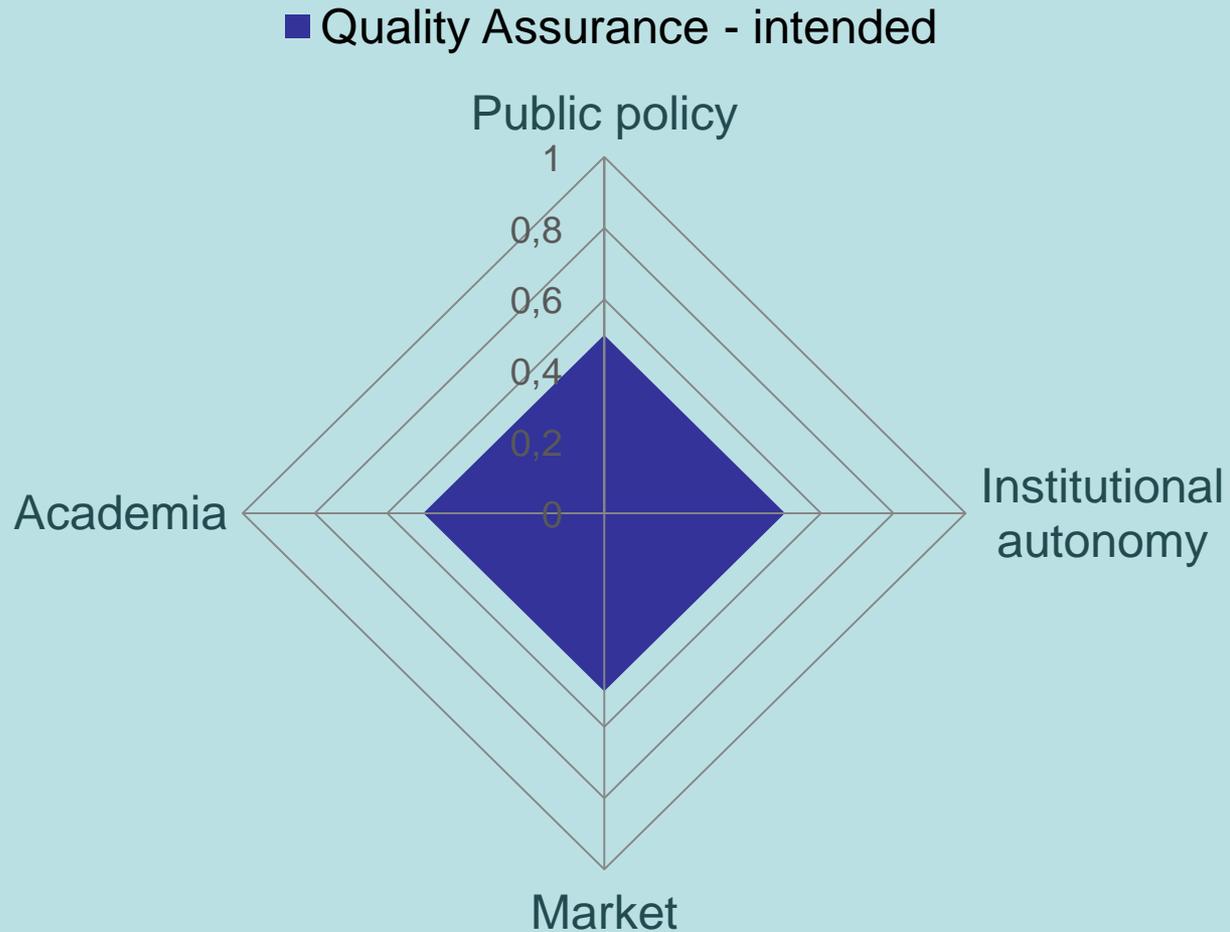
A governance analysis

- QA became situated at the crossroads of the main rationales defining the HE arena, each defining its dimension of *quality*
 - **Public policy rationale:** efficiency, rationalisation, access, relevance, productivity
 - **Institutional rationale:** autonomy, expansion, cohesion, market share, revenue generation
 - **Market rationale:** rankings, reputation race and competition, world-class status
 - **Academic rationale:** academic freedom, flexible networks, research driven, scientific quality

A governance analysis

- QA was seen as linking and integrating the various rationales into a coherent notion of quality
 - Serving public accountability (including public information function)
 - Supporting the internal quality culture of autonomous institutions
 - Increasing market transparency
 - Trusted by academia and researchers
- The emergence of QA rested on the assumption of a harmonious development of the system

A governance analysis



A governance analysis

- But, in reality, the assumed changes in the governance of HE systems did not happen as foreseen
 - The dimensions developed in antagonistic directions
 - Increasing tensions between the main rationales in the higher education governance system
- As a result, QA systems becomes increasingly vulnerable to these systemic contradictions

A governance analysis

- *Governments* have not really decreased their regulatory power
 - Many recent HE policies include an increase in intervention (e.g. UK)
 - Systemic considerations (‘Bologna Process’, ‘innovation’, ‘the knowledge economy’) are seen as a legitimate reasons for increasing regulation
 - New levels of regulation in a system of ‘multi-level governance’
- ➔ *Governments increasingly define QA as a tool of public policy and accountability*

A governance analysis

- *Institutions* have missed the opportunity to assume real autonomy
 - Defining autonomy almost exclusively as territorial ‘negative liberty’ (“free of”), and less so as ‘positive liberty’ (“free to”)
 - Leadership and internal management generally is not strong enough for real autonomy
 - Institutions wrongly perceive QA as something which makes them vulnerable
 - ⇒ *Institutions no longer see QA as a tool of self-regulated institutional development*

A governance analysis

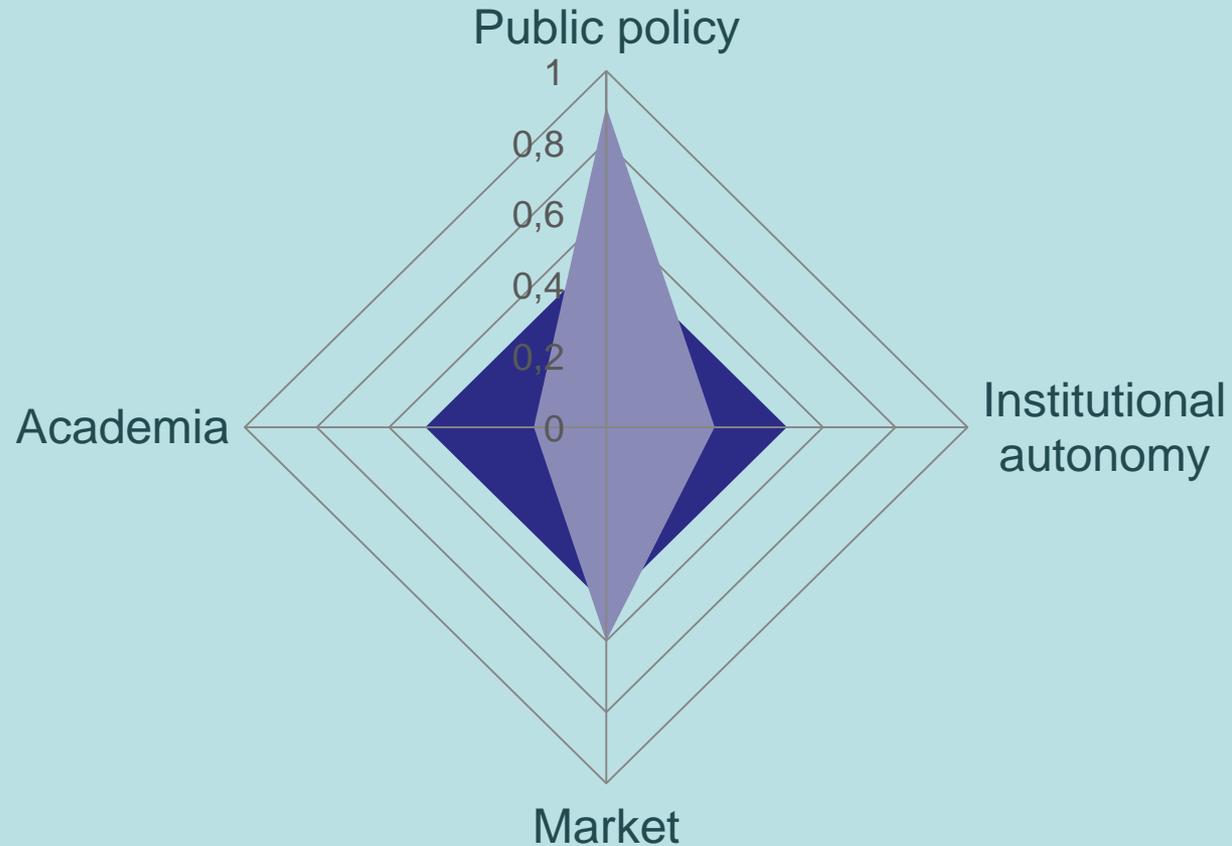
- *(Quasi-)Markets* have emerged, with (international) competition, but without some essential elements
 - Despite rankings etc., transparency has not significantly improved, but has suffered from the institutional reputation race
 - ➔ *QA has been increasingly taken-over by a desire of HE systems to function as markets but without real transparency*

A governance analysis

- *Academic and research rationale* is still very strong, even the backbone of HE systems, but increasingly self-centred and inward-looking
 - Difficulties in identifying the long-term public policy perspectives
 - Opposing marketisation and commodification
 - ⇒ *QA is no longer trusted by academia as belonging to their own realm (equivalent to peer review in research)*

A governance analysis

■ Quality Assurance - intended ■ Quality Assurance - realised



A governance analysis

- Instead of becoming a tool of transparency and public trust in a quasi-market supported by academia, QA risks to be captured in a deadlock between
 - Governments looking to increase their capacity to intervene and regulate
 - Institutions frustrated in their desire for autonomy
 - Market forces resisting real transparency
 - Academia distrusting the added-value

3. Prospective **STRATEGIES**

Restoring the balance

- QA in HE functions best
 - When it is at arm lengths of governments, while maintaining a strong public policy focus
 - When it supports institutional autonomy by demonstrating how QA can help to improve
 - When it enhances the transparency and trust at system level in a ‘quasi-market’ situation
 - When it is fundamentally trusted by academia as being part of their own sphere

Strategies

1. Be a driver of *innovation* in the system
2. Focus on what is really *relevant* to academia, institutions, students and society
3. Positively recognise institutional *diversity*
4. Invest in your main capital which is *trust*.

Strategy 1. Innovation

- For quite some time, QA was one of the most powerful drivers of innovation in HE
- When institutionalising, standardising and mainstreaming, the risk of conservatism grows
- QA should again become one of the main innovation-oriented forces in the system
 - QA tools for innovative practices
 - Innovators belong in peer-review panels
 - Linking and networking with other innovation-oriented forces

Strategy 2. Relevance

- After 20 years of QA, it is no longer necessary to check all standards and indicators of quality
- Focusing more on what really matters, will help to restore the balance
 - Outputs and outcomes, more specifically learning outcomes
 - Complementing and correcting reputation-oriented transparency tools by providing real information on achieved quality

Strategy 3. Diversity

- It is critically important to escape the risk of standardisation, by tuning to the real diversity in students and institutional profiles
 - By critically making our tools and instruments more flexible and sophisticated (‘smart quality assurance’)
 - By accepting that ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches are not going to help in a diversifying world
 - This may involve a process of ‘de-standardisation’

Strategy 4. Trust

- Trust is probably the most important capital of the QA system and community, but that capital is not at a reassuring high level
 - Invest more in restoring trust levels in academia and institutions
 - By demonstrating the added-value of being a ‘critical friend’
 - Convincing them that real openness and transparency is at the core of the academic value system and that reputation races are not sustainable

Thank you !

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