Subject	Maintaining Quality within the Institution
Module	Context and Approach
Topic	1.2 International and National Context

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1. Introduction

The internal approach to quality in many and varied institutions has been shaped by factors external to these particular institutions. This topic introduces the major social, political, economic and technological changes that are driving the quality agenda in higher education.

Objectives: International and National Context

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to
- describe the factors that influence the internal approach to quality

2. International and National Context

The internal approach to quality in many and varied institutions has been shaped by factors external to these particular institutions. These factors do not determine the within-institution approach but are common themes of which institutions need to take account. For example, in announcing the foundation of the Australian Universities Quality Agency in 2000, the then Minister Kemp suggested a number of such factors including massification, the increase in student diversity, information and communication technology and budget accountability. As subsequently discussed in the recent OECD Thematic Review of Tertiary Education (OECD, 2008), these factors have been influential in many parts of the world:

Factors Influencing the Approach to Quality

Massification

The growth of higher education in terms of student numbers, changing what was a privileged and minority part of the age cohort of students into an expectation that a much larger percentage of the population will experience higher education.

Diversity

With the growth in numbers comes the associated widening of the cohort with students from families with no experience of higher education entering for the first time; gender inequities being challenged; students from low socio-economic

backgrounds and under-privileged situations of all kinds struggling to support their education; increasing numbers of mid-career and older students studying part-time and through distance education; increasing access for students with disabilities and in some parts of the world, a rapidly increasing influx of international students creating the need to challenge national conventions.

Information and Communication Technology

A major global trend transcending international boundaries and changing the ways that students access learning materials, their interaction with the institution (e.g. admission, enrolment, timetable, results, course and extra-curricular activities) and their interaction with teachers (e.g. email, chat, discussion groups, video conferencing).

Budget Accountability

Budget Accountability refers to the increasing size of institutional budgets associated with the growth of higher education. A number of Australian Universities for example currently have annual budgets of between one and two billion dollars. Governments are the major provider of higher education funding in some countries, while in others, government funding has been replaced by student fee income to the point that the government is a minority funder. Even in this case, however, there is still a large amount of tax-payer revenue being used to fund institutions and so governments have increasingly sought assurances that this funding is being used effectively and that there are appropriate and responsible management structures and processes in place to assure financial accountability.

In addition to these factors some less explicit, but equally ubiquitous, factors are often mentioned in terms of external pressures for quality. First is the global trend towards market economies and the rise in power of the consumer. A caricature of this would see higher education providers of 40 years ago representing the ideology of a socialist production economy – we produce what we produce, we know what is best for you, we control and monitor its quality ourselves, this is the way it has always been and will continue to be. The production economies of Central and Eastern Europe and elsewhere disintegrated in favour of consumerism and consumer sovereignty – the consumer knows what he or she wants; by taking their consumption to other suppliers the consumer determines quality standards; producers need to take note and change their operations if they intend to remain in the market place; and the market place is a place of competing entities. In short, from the monastic to the liberal and scientific, higher education has always reflected its society and political economy, and the major trend in this area has been towards the market economy, competition and consumer sovereignty (although this should not be equated with an absence of government coordination, control and influence (e.g. Dill & Beerkens, 2010; Amaral et al., 2010; Paradeise et al, 2009)

Also associated with the growth of competition and consumer sovereignty is consumer protection legislation and use of the court system to challenge the failure of products or services. While this has not become as major an aspect of the student-institution relationship in higher education as some predicted, it is another factor suggesting that having specified quality systems and standards is something that the consumer/student increasingly expects as a matter of course.

Finally, in almost every country of the world, the politicians who determine the national approach to quality in higher education institutions, have stories from their own or their children's experience of poor practice in higher education. Mythic in

proportion and nature but never cited in legislation, such experiences have been powerful in driving national quality legislation.

3. Discussion

Discussion: Global Trends

Consider the following key questions regarding global trends in your own (or choose one) country:

- To what extent have the trends outlined above created a push towards a quality agenda in your country?
- What other extra-institutional pressures have been important in your country?
- How has your country gone about addressing these trends (what national quality mechanisms have been introduced)?

4. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- As discussed in the recent OECD Thematic Review of Tertiary Education (OECD, 2008), the factors that influence the approach to quality in many parts of the world are:
    o Massification
    o Diversity
    o Information and Communication Technology
    o Budget Accountability