

Editorial

World Quality Register

Moves are afoot to establish a world quality register (WQR) of 'trustworthy' quality assurance and accreditation agencies. The implication is that only institutions and programmes accredited or quality assured by a recognised agency would have international standing.

The leadership of the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP) supports the scheme and they are trying to persuade the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) to join them in a consortium to establish the WQR. A proposal by Jef van Der Perre, Secretary General of IAUP, and Dirk van Damme, author of the paper setting out the proposal, was put to members of INQAAHE at its Workshop in Jamaica in May 2002. As the President of INQAAHE, Maria José Lemaitre del Campo, made clear in her concluding remarks, a paper outlining the network's response will be circulated to all members for consultation and debated at the INQAAHE Conference in Dublin in 2003.

The IAUP proposal to INQAAHE, which is supported in principal by John Daniel of UNESCO, would involve a paper-based, expert panel review of agencies seeking registration on the WQR. There are sufficient, well-established agencies to begin the process of registration, which, IAUP claims, would also have a developmental element, through a candidacy status, aimed to help newly-developed agencies, and to progress to full status those not up to standard.

Although an attractive proposal at first glance, there remain questions about the purpose of such a register. The IAUP approach is as much founded on fears of not providing some kind of international kite mark as it is on the positive reasons for doing so. 'If the quality assurance world doesn't address internationalisation then others will step in. We have opportunity to do it properly, others may not be so scrupulous', said van Damme. He argued that there is a need to take the WQR forward because of the rapid development of 'borderless education', the expansion in trade in higher education as a result of GATS trade agreements, the potential explosion in diploma mills and rogue providers, possible protectionist approaches by national authorities and a lack of transparency for learners.

However, the purpose of a publicly accessible and authoritative register is not clear. Is the identification of trustworthy agencies intended to ensure that the qualifications of accredited or assured institutions have international currency? Or, is it to overcome what van Damme called 'the silly bureaucracy' inhibiting student mobility? Or, is it an attempt to control the activities of (profiteering) transnational providers? Although qualifications and mobility seemed to be the primary reason behind the register two alternative conceptualisations emerged.

First, the WQR is a staging post in the professionalisation of quality assurance in higher education. 'I sincerely believe that quality assurance is a profession', said van Damme and something like the WQR will be necessary for the long-term survival of quality assurance in higher education. Apart from unease about inertia and lack of flexibility characteristic of professionalised activities, it is a moot point whether we want quality assurance to have a long-term future. Rather than persistent and professional quality assurance agencies, it

might be preferable for them to wither away as they increasingly pass the responsibility for quality back to institutions. Instead of continuing to burden high-performing and well-established public sector systems, quality assurance might be better directed to controlling private, for-profit, undertakings, which constitute a more significant problem in areas such as the Americas, Eastern Europe and South-East Asia.

Second, and potentially more sinister, is the legitimization that the WQR would give to higher education exporting countries, keen to by-pass local controls in the search for new markets. Linking the need for the WQR to the GATS agreements, van Damme argued that academia is in danger of being overwhelmed by trade agreements and should not surrender responsibility to the trade negotiators. The WQR is about enabling trade in higher education, but for whose benefit? This reflects a broader concern about quality imperialism. Would the WQR be a North-West European–American club that would allow in other agencies only if they came up to standard? This is a view refuted by Jef Van Der Perre, who claimed that at a recent IAUP meeting in Mexico there was more interest in the WQR expressed by developing countries than those from Europe. Nonetheless, the proposed criteria and expected agency assurance methodology clearly reproduces a model to be found in North-West Europe and America.

Eligibility to join would be restricted to agencies whose primary task is audit, assessment or accreditation of higher education at either programme or institutional level, undertaken on a regular and systematic basis. While this is designed to include the major US subject assessment agencies, such as ABET, the intention is not to encourage participation by the hundred or so professional and regulatory bodies involved in UK higher education. Eligible agencies would have to be operating for a minimum of 2 years and be able to demonstrate stakeholder reliance on their published reports. In addition, to be eligible, agencies would also need to be able to demonstrate that they undertake independent reviews. The independence of an agency, though, is not simply circumscribed by its legal constitution and terms of reference. The Quality Assurance Agency in the UK is clearly used to ensure compliance with government policy. Similarly, the long-established regional accreditation agencies in the US were established for the benefit of the institutions and, despite being voluntary, accreditation is locked into state support for higher education.

The criteria for establishing trustworthiness would be a clear commitment on the part of the agency to advancing high academic quality in the institutions it reviews through both accountability and improvement functions. The methodology used by the agency must be public, transparent and applied fairly. Although IAUP is claiming that there is no fixed methodological requirement, its published proposal clearly identifies self-assessment and peer review. The agency would also have to satisfy an expert panel that it has an internal quality assurance policy that includes a process of continuous assessment and improvement. Although van Damme stressed diversity, rather than a uniform model, he claimed that there are 'basic agreeable standards for quality assurance', which he conceded would lead to 'harmonisation' of practices if not standardisation.

Where joining the consortium would leave INQAAHE is a moot point. Currently, the network is inclusive and designed to encourage the sharing of practice and mutual support. Involvement in the consortium would result in organisational schizophrenia. As registration is conditional, INQAAHE would be involved in making judgements that might discriminate against members. The likely outcome would thus be a fundamental shift in the network, from support to a super-accrediting function. This may be a step in the wrong direction, especially for those who want to see the withering away of quality assurance bureaucracies rather than their international legitimisation.

Since the proposal to the INQAAHE meeting, and following a meeting of the European Network (ENQA) General Assembly, which discussed the WQR, Séamus Puirseil produced a draft position paper, on behalf of the INQAAHE Board. This was put to the IAUP triennial conference in Sydney along with full copies of the IAUP Commission proposal at a general business meeting of all IAUP members present. The topic had previously been discussed at one of three parallel conference sessions, which attracted about 80 people. The discussion was based on a position paper presented by the former Chair of INQAAHE, David Woodhouse, which was written before the INQAAHE draft position paper drawn up by Séamus Puirseil. It was evident from the discussion in the parallel session that not only did most IAUP delegates have little knowledge of INQAAHE, the WQR was a new idea for those present. According to a report back by David Woodhouse, 'the reaction ranged from interest through to positive support—with a warning that it would be neither easy nor cheap'.

The INQAAHE Board continue to discuss the draft position paper, which is to be put to the membership. However, the main thrust of the paper is as follows.

INQAAHE was set up to ensure mutual support for quality assurance agencies and the development of a world quality register clearly implies some form of judgement about which agencies qualify for inclusion. Furthermore, while the autonomy and independence of quality assurance agencies is an essential element in the development of quality assurance, the engagement and involvement, support and confidence of higher education institutions and other stakeholders are also important parts of this development. INQAAHE recognises the different constitutional and legislative bases involved in the establishment of quality assurance agencies in different jurisdictions. The establishment of a quality register on a global basis can only be done with the support and voluntary co-operation of the agencies and, in many cases, of the governments of the respective countries. Support of working sub-networks and regional networks as well as international organisations, such as UNESCO, is also necessary.

While recognising the *bona fides* of the International Association of University Presidents in this matter, INQAAHE is conscious that much of higher education does not come under the remit of the universities and that the extra-university sector has an important role to play. The engagement of representative bodies of institutions of higher learning in the extra-university sector would be important.

It is the intention that a committee, consisting of representatives of the INQAAHE Board along with representatives from IAUP and other appropriate organisations, would establish essential and elective criteria for a quality assurance agency in higher education. The essential criteria will represent the minimum standards and procedures required for the recognition of judgements of the agency by other quality assurance agencies and by stakeholders generally. The elective criteria will represent additional standards and procedures that are regarded as good practice by the international quality assurance in higher education community. UNESCO will be approached to provide funding for the project. In developing this project, INQAAHE will take into account existing projects, such as mutual recognition projects in MERCOSUR and the Nordic countries.

A 'quality mark' could be introduced to indicate that the agency has reached minimum standards and also indicate which elective standards have been reached. An on-going verification process would be necessary once such a system is in place.

If the proposal is adopted by the General Assembly of INQAAHE at its meeting in Dublin in April 2003, it is intended that the project will be completed before the INQAAHE General Assembly of 2005 and also before the triennial meeting of IAUP in 2005.

The Quality Process: international issues

The articles presented in this issue of *Quality in Higher Education* highlight the problems that confront the quality process in different countries.

Flávia Vieira argues in her study of the Portuguese higher education system, that the implementation of external and internal evaluation systems over the last 10 years has focused attention on issues such as organisational models, academic achievement, adaptation processes and transition to the workplace, while neglecting matters that are directly related with pedagogical practices, an area still in need of development. In a paper that was born from research carried out at the University of Minho in 2000–01, Vieira investigates teachers' and students' conceptions of quality in pedagogical practices. She argues that the reality of pedagogic quality is thought to be far removed from the idealised conception of a process of emancipatory transformation. In particular, the key elements of relevance, reflectivity, self-direction and creativity/innovation are thought to be absent.

The effectiveness of the quality management process is weakened by the absence of agreed standard models. Gitachari Srikanthan argues that there is a case for separately addressing the service and academic functions in higher education with their own appropriate sets of criteria and that it is possible to develop an appropriate generic model. The typical current culture in higher education, argues Srikanthan, is, however, bureaucratic in nature and more prone to conflict than collaboration.

Jacky Holloway, exploring the process of development and implementation of the British Quality Assurance Agency's subject benchmark statements, argues that the nature of 'benchmarking' is far removed from benchmarking as recognised outside the higher education sector. Holloway discusses methods that could be used to encourage acceptance of the notion of benchmarking as a route to improving processes and continual development and the implications of a crude adoption of 'subject benchmarking' as currently defined within the new academic review process.

In Britain, the government's principal intention to achieve mass participation in higher education has inevitably had its effect on higher education institutions. Teaching over the summer is, potentially, one of the ways in which resources can be released to help meet the government's widening participation target. Within this context, Richard Harris and Stephen Fallows review the University of Luton's experience of operating a summer semester as an integral part of its teaching year. Altogether, the experience appears to have been a positive one, and likely to continue, but as the authors stress, appropriate conditions exist at Luton for such an initiative to take place without too much upheaval.

The changes that have occurred in higher education have not, however, been without their impact on teaching staff and students. In the Australian system, argues Margaret Robertson, teachers and students have been deprived of a voice because of an increasingly managerial approach to higher education. In her examination of changes over the last 20 years, Robertson argues that three things are essential in the current conditions for 'knowledge workers to regain some leadership to restore optimism and a voice for themselves and their students in the political decision-making of university education'. First is the importance of departmental leadership. Second, genuine recognition of achievements and an encouragement to succeed are vital for the learning organisation to build trust. Third, there is a need to seek a balance in all the tasks of being an academic in a modern university.