



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

Comparing Systemic Quality Assurance and Evaluation in Higher Education: does the «best practice» really exist?

Gilberto CAPANO

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The rise of Evaluative State

More institutional autonomy but:

- Imposed Self-evaluation
- Accreditation
- Evaluation (of «expected» goals in research but also in teaching and in the third mission)
- HE world is changed because it is «constrained» or «addressed» or «steered» by Quality Assurance procedures and by Research (but also Teaching) Evaluation exercises.



Quality Assurance

Definition

- Quality assurance has been defined as a set of practices “whereby academic standards, i.e., the level of academic achievement attained by higher education institutions’ graduates, are maintained and improved” (Dill, 2010, p. 377).
- QA is a *set of policy instruments* through which the institutional behaviour of universities is coordinated/regulated in order to guarantee certain *expected systemic outputs and outcomes*.
- QA has been one of the policy strategies adopted to make HE institutions *accountable* for the quality of their academic product. In this sense, quality assurance and *accountability* are *strictly* connected. As Harvey and Newton have pointed out “*quality assurance is about ensuring accountability, which is an assurance that it is good quality*”



Types of instruments in QA

- **Specification of standards** (national qualifications frameworks; subject benchmarking; minimal requirements)
- **Programme accreditation and assessment** (subject assessments; subject accreditation)
- **Institutional accountability** (institutional accreditation; performance-based contracts)
- **Information provision** (national surveys; national assessment of courses; best practices; data on employability of graduates).



Quality assurance in comparative perspective (1)

- Pioneers: USA and in Europe UK, France, The Netherlands and Denmark
- Now all EU countries substantially have a national quality assurance framework under the control either of an Agency or a Committee
- Mixed content (always focus on teaching, sometimes also on research intended as teachers' productivity)



Quality assurance in comparative perspective (2)

- Main relevant differences

1. Bodies in charge:

- National Agency (appointed by the government, Italy, UK) or Council (usually with a large members composing the board, like in France). Denmark has both
- Independent (private foundation) from the stakeholders (like in Portugal or, sui generis, USA)
- many providers (like in Germany where various Accreditation agencies work after being accredited)
- Self-accreditation of «universities» (Australia, Taiwan, Hong Kong Malaysia)
- Agencies of other countries (Austria)
- *Some Agencies are «more powerful» than others*



Quality assurance in comparative perspective (3)

2. Types of accreditation

- Institutional (Denmark)
- Programme and institutions (most of the countries)
- Research units (France)

3. Procedures

- Varieties of indicators
- Assessment of the quality of the teachers
- Attention to the process of teaching (more than to the product)
- Different approaches to the quality of institutional governance (and this is a very «wicked» factor)



QA in comparative perspective: Emerging trends (1)

Continuous changes in the procedures and in the content of external assessment as well as of the frameworks for self-assessment (focus on the problem of QUALITY).

1. **The real content Learning outcomes (quality of the product)** more that «processes» are becoming the new focus of this process of redesign.
2. **Sweden has launched a new system** where EQA has been radically changed, and where the process-orientation has been replaced by a **product-orientation** where only the work of students is assessed. (Student work is collected, read by a nationally selected group of academics, and institutions are rewarded if the outcome is seen as being of high academic quality. In this system, what the institution is doing with respect to quality assurance internally is of no relevance – it is only the product that counts).



Quality assurance in comparative perspective: Emerging trends (2)

3. Making QA cheaper:

- Risk-based approaches (basic idea is to establish a procedure for identifying study programs or institutions at 'risk' more than assess "all")
- The development of national indicator systems or the launching of national student surveys (linking some indicators to «funding»)

4. Increasing «normalization» of QA agencies in terms of ordinary governmental bodies

5. Large room for agency entrepreneurship in QA processes



Quality assurance in comparative perspective: Emerging trends (3)

6. From *control-oriented* quality assurance approach, towards a rather *development-oriented* audit approach at the institutional level, which does not focus on single programmes or on standards as such but on the institutional capacity to assure and develop high quality

7. **The UK outlier: Teaching Research Framework** (Teaching on my course, Assessment and feedback, Academic support, Non-continuation, Employment or further study, Highly skilled-employment or further study)

But is this real or does it belong to the rhetoric of quality assurance?



Quality assurance in comparative perspective. Emerging Questions (4): the usual ones

- Is QA vague and arbitrary?
- Is Transparency from QA really working to address individual behaviour or families' choices?
- Is QA an instrument to evaluate, to assess or to monitor?
- Is QA capable to drive «true» institutional learning or, all in all, it produces institutional isomorphism or opportunistic learning?

Are we killing too many birds with one stone?



Evaluation of Research (1)

- Research is evaluated everywhere
- Different systems of evaluation
- Different goals of evaluation (but always some *financial dimension!*)
- Although there is always a financial dimension, only in few countries research assessment is linked to a consistent amount of public funding



Evaluation of Research (2)

Ideas behind Evaluating Research:

- Increasing productivity
- Replacing traditional command-and-control systems with market-like incentives
- Stronger service orientation
- Enhanced accountability



Evaluation of Research (3)

1. Types of research evaluation

- *National Research Exercises* (Italy, United Kingdom, Australia; Hong Kong, New Zealand, Slovak Republic)
- *Evaluation of research units* (Portugal, France)
- *Individual Evaluation* (then aggregated) (Spain, New Zealand)
- *Parametric evaluation* (Poland)
- *PhD positions* (the Netherlands; Austria)
- *Excellence Competition* (Germany)
- *Federal Research Chairs* (Canada)



Evaluation of Research (4)

In few countries the % of public funding based on the Research Evaluation it is higher than 6-8%:

- United Kingdom: 25%
- Italy: 22% (but it should reach 30% in the next years)
- Slovak republic: 15%
- So in few countries ER has a real «distributive» role.
In most of the countries it has a «control»
«exortatory» role



Evaluation of Research (5)

In many countries there is an increasing focus on evaluating the «impact»:

- Third Mission
- Public engagement

As well to push universities to find a specific «profile» for their activities



Evaluation of Research: Emerging results

- Increased level of internationalisation of research outputs (in many European countries)
- Increase of «quantity» of research products
- Increasing «stratification» of the academic profession
- Opportunistic behaviour both at the institutional and at individual level
- No real changes or improvement in relative terms in those countries with a National Exercise



Does the best practice really exist? What can we learn in comparative perspective (1)

- Different ways to do QA
- Different ways to do ER
- Governments adopt these policy strategies/instruments according to their own national goals and to the national consolidated perception of the role and the relevance of HE (and here the level *social trust in HE institutions* matters, a lot)
- The problem: rhetoric or instrumentality of QA and ER
- Principal/agent problem (moral hazard): the risk of regulatory capture of agencies or of their excessive “autonomization”



Does the best practice really exist?

What can we learn in comparative perspective (2)

- In many countries QA is a rethoric activity and the real reaction is formalistic compliance/mimetic isomorphism more than LEARNING
- In many countries ER is a way to address universities towards more accountability and awareness of their social role (while in few countries, fortunately, it is a way to distribute funding)

But:

1. There are some few countries where QA is problematized and it is challenged by a more “specific/differentiated” perspective



Does the best practice really exist? What can we learn in comparative perspective (3)

2. There is an emerging consciousness that QA should focus on the goal/objective/mission more than on the process (*and this is testified by the increasing use of performance agreements/contracts in many countries*)
3. There is an emerging evidence that ER, when not used only for distributing funding, should be used in a fair way to avoid academic frustration, and many unintended and undesired effects

So there is not the Best Practice, but only the Practice that, by using the most suitable methodological tools, works according to clear political/policy ends.





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MANY THANKS
for your attention