

VIII. Standards and Indicators in Institutional and Programme Accreditation in Higher Education: A Conceptual Framework and a Proposal

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Purpose and Structure of This Study

The main ambition of this study is to provide an analytical, and, to a certain extent, a comparative review of standards and indicators for quality assurance and accreditation in higher education. It does not provide an extensive comparative overview of the standards and indicators that are used in the many existing quality assurance and accreditation systems in all regions of the world. Rather, it builds further on the regional analyses and illustrative case studies, written by other experts, to map and to analyze some of the crucial issues at stake.

A second ambition of this study is to move from a mapping and analytical perspective to a more programmatic and policy-oriented level of discourse. The idea is to propose a short list of quality assurance and accreditation standards and indicators (mainly) for programme accreditation, which is comprehensive, minimal, and communality-oriented. The standards and indicators so listed should be those that are considered to be necessary in many existing systems and schemes around the world and on which agreement seems feasible among international actors and stakeholders as a kind of hard core.

A first task is to provide and explore certain basic definitions. Thus, the quality definitions and approaches at work in quality assurance and accreditation systems over time and in various parts of the world are reviewed. Figure 1 graphically integrates the various quality approaches in one conceptual framework. Section 2 discusses certain important aspects of the contemporary development of quality assurance and accreditation, including the drive towards minimalist but effective quality assurance systems, the emergence of accreditation systems, and the internationalization of quality assurance and accreditation. The author then proposes a multi-level model in which the various levels going from the internal quality culture to the supra-national (meta-) accreditation systems have their specific place and role. Figure 2 graphically illustrates this multi-level model.

The fifth section of the study opens with a discussion of standards and indicators for quality assurance and accreditation. After a consideration of

certain issues regarding the use and the quantity of standards and indicators in quality assurance and accreditation, the author proposes the CIPOF-model, including a list of standards and indicators that are necessary, in his approach, to quality assurance and accreditation. The final paragraph of the section considers the relative weight and relevance of each of the categories of standards and indicators in the CIPOF-model regarding the various levels of the multi-level model mentioned above. A concluding section closes the study.

1.2. *A Note on Definitions*

Despite the growth of evaluation practices and systems in higher education and the increasing public interest in quality issues, a generally accepted set of concepts and definitions suitable for use at international level does not exist. Concepts and terms such as quality assurance, assessment, accreditation, validation, licensure, certification, approval, evaluation, etc., are used in divergent and often inconsistent ways. Even within particular systems, such as those of the United States and of Europe, there is great confusion as to the exact meaning of the concepts used. Conceptual differences are even greater among various regions of the world.

In order to facilitate communication, exchanges of opinions, and critical debate, an agreement is needed on a basic set of terms and definitions. For this reason, certain organizations have embarked on the development of glossaries¹. Not surprisingly, also, the regional papers produced in the framework of this project apply terms and concepts in different ways. For the purposes of this study, a basic set of definitions is necessary. The author has attempted to adhere to the definitions developed by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), a professional association in this field, to the proposal of Knight and van Damme (2004), and to *Quality Assurance and Accreditation: A Glossary of Basic Terms and Definitions* (Bucharest: UNESCO-CEPES, 2004). The non-European reader will excuse the author for an unavoidable European bias in the following definitions.

Evaluation is, in the author's view, a very broad, generic term that refers to a broad range of practices and procedures whereby the performances of students, professors, programmes, departments, institutions, and even entire systems are measured and appreciated. Evaluation is not necessarily focused on quality, but can have other dimensions of performance in focus. Because of its broad and general nature, this concept will not be frequently used.

¹ Associations and organizations, such as the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), INQAAHE, UNESCO, etc., have embarked on similar attempts to develop sets of definitions suitable for international debate. Knight and van Damme (2003) have tried to formulate a set of very elementary definitions for the OECD-CERI project on international quality assurance.

Quality assurance is referred to as the processes and schemes that have the objective of assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, and maintaining and/or improving quality in higher education institutions and/or programmes. These can have the functions both of accountability (including information provision) and improvement.

Many systems make a distinction between *internal quality assurance* and *external quality measures*. Internal quality assurance refers to the intra-institutional practices used to monitor and improve the quality of its processes, both institutional and programme-oriented. These practices are completely the responsibility of the institution or department. The term, *quality culture*, refers to the integration of internal quality assurance procedures into the organizational culture and management systems of the institution, so that its members share a core set of academic quality values and approaches. *External quality assurance* concerns the inter- or supra-institutional schemes of assessing, maintaining, and improving the quality of institutions and/or programmes. These practices fall under the responsibility of a specialized agency that has the authority and the legitimacy to engage in such activities. In the American system, the term, quality assurance, is narrowed to those review processes, executed by independent bodies, of an institution or programme to determine and “assure” that standards are maintained and enhanced.

Related to the internal-external dimension, the ownership of quality assurance schemes is of crucial importance. Theoretically, two poles of a continuum can be distinguished, with, on the one hand, “self-regulatory” systems of quality assurance, whereby the ownership lies with the institutions – individually or collectively – and systems of quality assurance whereby an outside agency is entrusted with a capacity of quality control. In its purest mode, the last case can be labeled as *inspection*, but, in practice, even such evaluation agencies seek to establish trust in the higher education community.

By *quality assessment* or *quality review*, the actual processes of reviewing, measuring, and judging quality aspects in programmes or institutions are indicated. In most systems of external quality assurance, the process of assessment of quality involves a combination of self-assessment and assessment by peer review and site visits. The term, *quality audit*, is appropriate when the assessment is focused on the institution or programme (internal) quality assurance procedures or on the overall (internal and external) quality assurance procedures of the system.

Accreditation is defined here as a particular form of quality assurance, with, as the distinctive characteristic, that it leads to the formal approval of an institution or programme that has been found by a legitimate body to meet predetermined and agreed upon standards, eventually resulting in an accredited status granted to that provider or programme by responsible authorities. For international purposes, it is not very meaningful to distinguish accreditation from (state) “approval” or “certification”, as is

done in the American system.² Accreditation can be awarded by an external quality assurance agency, such as in the United States, or both can be separated, as in the Dutch-Flemish accreditation system. As in the Australian system, accreditation can also be given by the institution itself, which is then “self-accrediting”. It is important to narrow the use of the term, accreditation, and to separate it conceptually both from the quality assurance activities that can feed into the accreditation decision-making processes, and the consequences or rights resulting from an accredited status. Furthermore, the following conditions have to be fulfilled in order to use the term consistently:

- It is a formal decision of a binary (“yes”/“no”) or ternary (adding “conditional”) nature;
- It is based on predetermined standards or requirements, used as benchmarks, to which the relative position of assessed quality aspects of an institution or programme is determined;
- The formal decision has a time-limited validity.

The body or agency that has the power to accredit institutions or programmes can itself be subject to such schemes or procedures, as is the case in Germany, for example. For international use, it is appropriate, then, to speak of *meta-accreditation*, for which, in the United States, the term, *recognition*, is used.

In many systems, quality assurance and accreditation are closely linked to various kinds of consequences, such as the capacity to operate and to provide educational services, the capacity to award officially recognized degrees, or the right to be funded by the state, etc. Accreditation also entails consequences and rights for individuals studying in or graduating from institutions or programmes, such as licensed entry into a profession, the right to financial support, etc. Given the variety of these capacities and rights for institutions, programmes, and students deriving from quality assurance and accreditation in different higher education systems, specific terms will not be proposed for them.

In general, accreditation implies the use of *standards*, *i.e.*, basic quality requirements and conditions that have to be met by an institution or programme. Standards function as *benchmarks*, *i.e.*, reference points against which the performance of institutions or programmes is checked. Often neglected is that standards also necessitate decision-making *criteria*, *i.e.*, rules which govern the decision-making processes in accreditation that allow determination, for example, of how standards should be weighted, of how many negative marks regarding quality aspects result in refusal of accreditation, etc. The term, *indicators*, is used to denominate specific empirically measurable characteristics of institutions or programmes on which evidence can be collected that allows a

² In fact, the American approach to accreditation is close to what is defined here as *quality assurance*, with the American concepts of *approval* or *certification* lying close to what is meant here by accreditation.

determination of whether standards are being met. Usually, each standard is related to a set of indicators, but the same indicator can also be linked to several standards. Additionally, indicators vary from standards in accreditation systems by the fact that only when standards are evaluated as being below certain threshold levels can accreditation be refused. A negative mark at the level of an indicator is generally not sufficient to withhold accreditation.

These concepts have led to the elaboration of a basic terminological framework that allows for a comparative analysis of accreditation systems and their use of standards and indicators.

2. CONCEPTS OF AND APPROACHES TO QUALITY

One of the most difficult concepts to define is *quality* itself. Despite the widespread use of the term, a more or less agreed upon definition has not yet materialized. Rather, a multitude of meanings and conceptual confusion are the result. Each definition implies different consequences regarding standards and indicators.

A very common association is, for example, that between the quality and level of difficulty of a programme. Among many higher education leaders, there is a strong tendency to identify quality with the *level* of curricula and course contents, with *level* usually defined as the degree of complexity and weight of the content involved in the curriculum and the seriousness of student testing involved. The notion of quality, then, is very close to *distinctiveness*, *exclusivity*, and *excellence*. Only the best possible standards of excellence are understood as determining the quality concept. One can call this approach the *excellence standards* approach. With regard to indicators, this approach leads to the somehow strange consequence that a programme is viewed as being of better quality the lower the number of successful students is. Also, it drives institutions to selective intake procedures in order to uphold their “quality level”.

Partly as a reaction to this conservative and elitist notion of quality, considered inappropriate in a context of mass higher education in a rapidly changing society, a notion of quality has been developed in the quality assurance community that is usually labeled as “fitness for purpose”. Today, this definition is the most widely used one. It links quality to the purposes and objectives of an institution or a programme and brings quality assurance procedures to check and to improve the degree to which the actual operation of the institution or programme helps to realize those objectives.

The focus is on the processes at work in an institution or programme and their relative efficiency in achieving the stated objectives. Therefore, it is sometimes also labeled as the *value for money* approach, because of its concentration on the effective use of input and context indicators by the processes involved. Stressing the change realized by the processes, *e.g.*, the teaching and learning processes, between input and output, the label, *value-added approach*, is also used. The prevalence of this notion in the

quality assurance movement of the 1980s and 1990s, in many parts of the world, has stimulated an attention to explicit objectives and process characteristics as quality indicators.

The *fitness for purpose* approach has great attractiveness because of its ability to cope with increasing diversity and change in higher education systems and its concern for the achievement of objectives with the most effective use of resources. It has also led to a growing interest in the process characteristics of institutions and programmes and their complexity. Finally, it is closely linked to an improvement-oriented approach to quality assurance, that is that quality assessment could provide the critical insights and recommendations to stimulate an improvement of the processes at work in institutions and programmes and to induce a more optimal use of resources.

However, the hegemony of the *fitness for purpose* approach seems to be coming to an end. Its focus on the objectives of the institution or programme is sometimes viewed as implying a lack of concern for minimal standards and external expectations. If the focus is on the fitness of processes for the objectives defined by the programme itself in a sovereign way, then there is no check of the fitness of the purpose itself in regard to external objectives and expectations.

Two alternative approaches that, despite their different origins, seem to have a great deal in common, are threatening the hegemony of the *fitness for purpose* approach.

The first is closely linked to the emergence of accreditation. In many parts of the world, governments increasingly feel that the relativistic concern with the degree of realization by institutions or programmes of self-defined purposes has given way to a neglect of *standards* in higher education. This feeling, although not often empirically supported, of a decline in standards is a very powerful policy ideology and has driven governments and other stakeholders, such as employers' organizations, to lobby for new forms of regulation. In an increasingly diverse social context and context of higher education systems, accreditation is viewed as a mechanism to protect minimal quality safeguards, called *standards*, in order to reassure the political world and the wider society that, anyhow, basic quality requirements will be met. Against the relativistic stance of the *fitness for purpose* approach, a more absolutist definition of quality as the obligation to meet these basic quality standards is being put forward. Furthermore, the assurance that basic quality is guaranteed has to be provided by agencies independent of the higher education institutions themselves, so that social trust can be secured. This approach, that is closely related to accreditation, can be called the *basic standards* approach.

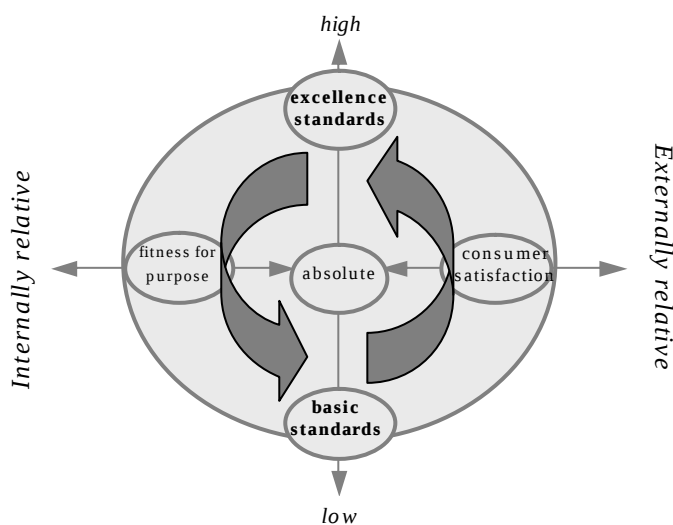
A second approach that criticizes the hegemonic fitness for purpose approach is the *consumer satisfaction* approach. In the context of the growing importance of market forces in higher education, a notion of quality is emerging that stresses the importance of the expectations of direct and indirect consumers, namely students, families, employers, other

stakeholders, and society at large. Quality then becomes synonymous with the ability of an institution or a programme to satisfy the demands of these *customers*. The *fitness for purpose* approach is criticized for encouraging inward-looking attitudes in institutions and for neglecting the legitimate expectations of the outside world. In contrast, the *consumer satisfaction* approach aspires to force institutions and programmes to pay closer attention to these external demands. It is intrinsically linked to other forms of market regulation in higher education. In contrast to the *basic standards* approach, it is less absolutist, but has a relativistic stance towards the external expectations of consumers and other stakeholders.

Each of these four different approaches to quality and quality assurance involves its own definition of the notion of quality and leads to a distinct use of standards and indicators. Hence, it is not possible to give a coherent, abstract definition of quality.

Definitions of academic quality are oscillating among the various dimensions of the model, as illustrated in Figure 1. The 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a movement from *excellence* to *fitness for purpose*. The late 1990s witnessed a correction to this movement, first to the *basic standards* approach and next to more *consumer satisfaction-oriented* approaches. In the near future, a resurgence of the *excellence/standards* approach is expected, as institutions try to distinguish themselves from their competitors and ranking practices become more widespread. Probably, the oscillating movement between *relative* and *absolute* perspectives, between *internally oriented* and *outward looking* approaches, between rather *basic* and more *advanced* notions of quality is something close to perpetual.

Figure 1. Definitions of academic quality



Source: The author.

3. MAPPING QUALITY DEFINITIONS

All of the above does not necessarily imply that there is no room for a minimal consensus on what is meant by quality. The current situation is not one dominated by relativistic confusion and, ultimately, meaninglessness. There are also signs that a kind of balance is developing, in which each approach plays a part of the game. Quality thus becomes a multi-dimensional and multi-level phenomenon, with various features and colours depending on where one stands and how one looks at the question, but still with a hard core. The specific definition of quality used in a particular context, then, is a discrete integration of the following elements and functions asked of institutions and programmes: (i) the guaranteed achievement of minimal standards and benchmarks; (ii) the capacity to set objectives in a diversifying context and to achieve them with the given input and context variables; (iii) the ability to satisfy the demands and expectations of direct and indirect consumers and stakeholders; (iv) the drive to excellence.

4. FROM QUALITY ASSURANCE TO ACCREDITATION AND BEYOND

4.1. *The Emergence of Quality Assurance in Higher Education*

Undoubtedly, quality has been the central concept and one of the major focuses of policy-making of institutions and governments in higher education in the 1990s. With varying intensity, pace, thoroughness, and success, most countries in the world have established systems and procedures of quality assurance in higher education, comparable to those in industry or government, created a number of years earlier. After more than twenty years of development of quality assurance in higher education, one can conclude that the ambitions of some decades ago have, in general, been achieved.

Traditional, informal, academic self-regulation, which, for centuries, was held to be sufficient in guaranteeing quality, has been replaced by explicit, formal, quality assurance mechanisms and related reporting and external accountability procedures.

There are a number of interrelated factors to which one can make reference in order to explain the importance and strengths of the quality assurance movement of the past decades. First, there are the concerns about a potential decline of academic standards against the background of massification in higher education. Second, key stakeholders, especially businesses, professional bodies, and employers' organizations began to lose confidence in the traditional academic quality management capacities of higher education institutions. In their view, the ability of higher education institutions to match their quantitative and qualitative output with the needs of modern workplaces and labour markets in an increasingly competitive and globalizing economy was no longer guaranteed. Third, budget restrictions and fiscal crises led to stagnating or declining government funding per student and pressure to increase

efficiency in public expenditure. Fourth, institutions were expected to meet the demands of an increasingly “evaluative state” for greater public accountability. Fifth, the higher education environment itself became increasingly competitive with the erosion of traditional student recruitment practices, growing mobility of students, increased mobility of professionals and academics, the pressure of private institutions, etc.

In this context, the notion of quality has become a distinguishing labeling tool with potentially powerful effects. One can expect that the international higher education market will become more competitive and more diversified in the future, and that (perceived) quality will become the decisive criterion for students, employers, etc., in making decisions in an increasingly complex market. In some regions of the world, specific considerations add up to these factors. It is clear, for example, that, in Eastern Europe, the development of quality assurance and accreditation schemes has to be understood as a response on the part of the State to the increasingly complex situation caused by the establishment of numerous private higher education institutions. The same is true in the case of a number of developing countries that have established accreditation systems to control the supply side of the higher education market and to safeguard minimal quality standards.

The establishment of quality assurance policies and mechanisms in many countries took place in a political and governmental environment characterized by a changing relationship between the State and the institutional field. Deregulation, increasing institutional autonomy, devolution of authority, a shifting balance between state- and market-oriented elements in the steering of higher education systems, and a growing weight of output-related, performance-based factors in steering and sometimes also in financing, were the decisive features of that changing relationship. In general, there was an exchange between deregulation and institutional autonomy, on the one hand, and quality assurance, accountability, and output control, on the other hand. Both the state and the institutions in most countries considered that this exchange was advantageous.

In conclusion, in the establishment of quality assurance systems, external drivers were probably more important than internal demands. Higher education accepted and developed quality assurance schemes because institutions favoured the trade-off with autonomy. In addition, they preferred the internal quality improvement functions of these schemes much more than their external accountability functions.

4.2. Strengths and Weaknesses of Quality Assurance Systems in Higher Education

Looking back after more than twenty years of quality assurance in higher education, it is not perfectly clear what the general outcomes and results are. Sufficient evidence exists to assert that overall results are positive. In many institutions, quality assurance schemes have provoked a push in the

quality of programmes and processes and in the understanding of the importance of quality. The high level of trust that higher education enjoys from the general public – if not always from the political system – testifies that fears of diminishing public confidence in the context of massification have been averted by the development of formal quality assurance systems. Although they do not yet produce the levels of transparency that some observers seem to regard as necessary in a more market-oriented system – a need that in some countries is satisfied by different kinds of rankings – formal quality assurance systems produce sufficient guarantees that overall quality levels are adequately monitored and defective programme or institutions are corrected or removed from the system. How much these rankings are based on, or related to, existing quality assurance procedures is a question with no clear answer. They seem to follow parallel tracks.

However, in many cases, the establishment of quality assurance schemes was not mirrored by the development of a real internal quality culture within the institutions. The informal internal academic quality control systems, prevalent in the age of élite universities, is vanishing, and, in many cases, they have not yet been replaced by strong internal systems adjusted to the new realities and environments. In many institutions, there is still a relatively high tolerance for poor quality. It still seems to be the case that quality assurance is perceived as an externally imposed phenomenon, reluctantly accepted by academics who experience it as a loss of professional autonomy and academic freedom. There are indications that, in the power game regarding quality and involving the three communities involved, namely the higher education institutions, the quality assurance agencies, and the State and other stakeholders, there is less and less room for consensus.

In current debates on quality assurance in higher education, a number of criticisms are being voiced that seem to indicate that the issue of quality is again at a kind of turning-point. The drawbacks and weaknesses of present-day quality assurance arrangements in higher education, most commonly mentioned, can be summarized in the following way:

- *Issues of cost, bureaucratic overload, and various other ways in which quality assurance imposes a burden on higher education institutions and programmes.* In particular, higher education institutions themselves increasingly make an issue of the high burden quality assurance arrangements impose on their internal functioning and resources. As Sursock (2004, pp. 65-76 in this volume) demonstrates, quality fatigue and resistance to increased burdens heavily influence the contemporary stance of institutions towards quality assurance. There is a need for light, but highly efficient, quality assurance procedures having a minimal cost and the smallest possible impact on institutional autonomy.
- *Critical questions regarding the benchmarking of standards, the self-referential nature of peer-review methods, the independent nature of*

review processes, the opportunities left for window-dressing and deceptive practices on the part of institutions, and the critical nature of quality statements resulting from quality assessments. These questions have in common that they express reservations about the external trustworthiness of quality assurance arrangements and their ability to satisfy the public and political demands for transparency and accountability.

- *Issues resulting from the rather vague connection between institutional quality and its regulatory consequences (funding, for example).* In most countries, external quality assurance and accreditation is not explicitly linked to public regulation, even though many contemporary policy discourses view quality as the main regulatory criterion in future higher education systems.
- *Observations about the conservative nature of quality assurance systems, imposing particular models, certain canonized curricula and contents, as well as established delivery modes.* Quality assurance systems are criticized for having a homogenizing impact on the higher education system, for not taking into account increasing diversity in higher education institutions, curricula, and delivery modes, such as distance education, and for jeopardizing innovation.

Looking at the weight and emotional load of debates on the issue, it seems that in many parts of the world a balanced agreement, on the basis of which the development of quality assurance could take off, is being increasingly challenged.

4.3. The Expansion of Accreditation

Accreditation, as it has been defined, is a particular form of quality assurance that has gained increasing attention as a possible answer to some – certainly not all – of these criticisms and refutations. More specifically, those favouring the introduction of accreditation address the elements mentioned in the second and third points made above. The section on the definition of the concept of quality has already stressed that the *basic standards* approach, to which most accreditation schemes are tuned, has developed as a reaction to the relativistic nature of the hegemonic *fitness for purpose* approach.

To fully understand the expansion of the accreditation model, reference has to be made to the changing social context. Factors and developments in the social environment of higher education that are of critical importance in this regard include the growth of the knowledge society urging policy-makers to attach a more vital role to higher education systems and to their outcomes; the impact of internationalization including various forms of transnational higher education and globalization in general; and the increasing penetration of market factors and characteristics into the higher education systems. These and other developments are radically affecting higher education systems throughout the world. Institutions are having to adapt their operations to new

demands, especially addressing lifelong learning opportunities, vocational and professional qualifications, and short courses. Leaving behind the hegemony of egalitarian approaches dominant in the era of massification, higher education systems are becoming increasingly competitive and market-like. A process of increasing diversification of higher education institutions, practices, delivery modes, etc., is drastically changing the face of higher education hitherto dominated by fairly traditional brick-and-mortar universities. New developments, labeled under the umbrella-concept of “borderless education”, including for-profit providers and corporate learning provision, are competing and fundamentally challenging higher education systems.

In this changing environment, governments and external stakeholders, including students and their families, are looking for policy instruments that enhance the transparency of the higher education system, first of all by guaranteeing that, in any case, basic quality standards are met, and secondly, by providing devices to check differential quality features among competing providers. Accreditation is thus expected to fulfill the following needs, demands, and ambitions:

- to guarantee that certain agreed upon basic quality standards are met and, thus, to ascertain that programmes and degrees – for example new Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree type qualifications in the context of the Bologna Process in Europe – correspond to generally accepted basic quality descriptors, thus assuring their international recognition;
- to sharpen quality assurance arrangements by making them more independent, by focusing on more absolute and externally benchmarked standards, and by making them result in clearer statements;
- to allow international benchmarking of standards and criteria, and thus of programmes and degrees, allowing them to function in a context of student mobility, credit transfer and accumulation, and transnational delivery;
- to strengthen the capacities of quality assurance arrangements to inform the students and the general public and to demonstrate the accountability of higher education institutions;
- to make possible the linking of quality statements to other forms of regulation, including funding, financial aid to students, recognition of institutions, programmes or qualifications, entry to professional practice, etc.

The spread of accreditation and accreditation-like practices is thus part of a contemporary process of renewal and revitalization of quality assurance arrangements. Despite convergence, there are still a number of differences among various national accreditation systems. Accreditation does not mean the same thing in the United States, Eastern Europe, Japan, or Argentina, but there are certainly some common characteristics.

Some observers do not find the case for accreditation convincing. Pioneers from the quality assurance community feel that there is no need for checking basic quality in well-developed higher education systems, that fixed standards are not very appropriate in an increasingly complex system, that accreditation at minimal quality standards offers no advantages for the 90 percent or so of programmes or institutions that will pass accreditation, and that the quality improvement function will be jeopardized by a stronger emphasis on the external functions of quality assurance systems. Some institutional leaders dislike the additional burden of accreditation systems and consider them to be a violation of their institutional autonomy. Academics sometimes see accreditation as a manifestation of distrust in their academic quality and sovereignty.

In current debates and developments in the field of quality assurance in higher education, apparently two contrasting phenomena are occurring: on the one hand, an increasing stress on basic standards and external accountability; on the other hand; a renewed emphasis on institutional autonomy and diversity. In fact, these two concerns do not necessarily have to be in conflict with one another. Perhaps it has become an illusion to assume that in the present-day context the two functions of quality improvement and accountability can be served by one and the same quality assurance model. In a context of increasing competitiveness and diversification, the needs of higher education and the demands of the external society can both be met by separate systems of independent accreditation, that, on one hand, safeguard basic quality standards and internal quality improvement schemes within institutions or inter-institutionally, and on the other hand, respect autonomy and diversity.

4.4. Towards International Quality Assurance and Accreditation?

Internationalization and globalization have not only provoked changes in national quality assurance and accreditation systems, but have also stimulated discussions on the need for an international approach to quality assurance and accreditation. It is also felt that in the field of higher education, globalization is degrading the capacities of national policy frameworks to achieve their objectives and that globalization, the rise of “borderless” higher education, and especially the liberalization of trade in educational services are calling for new regulatory frameworks and instruments operating at international level.

The need for greater convergence of quality assurance arrangements and systems is particularly clear in the context of the regional integration of national higher education systems. The case of the Bologna Process in Europe is exemplary: From the 1999 Bologna Declaration onwards, to the Prague Communiqué of 2001, and probably also in the Berlin ministerial meeting in September 2003, a more integrated European approach to quality assurance and accreditation is viewed as necessary to complete the process of convergence towards a European Higher Education Area. However, despite this favourable environment, progress is slow.

Conceptual divergence, differences in arrangements and systems, national prerogatives over issues of substance, fears of a possible centralized European quality bureaucracy, and the sensitive nature of quality hinder rapid convergence in this matter. Nevertheless, many see progress in a European approach to quality assurance and accreditation as a necessary condition for success in the general Bologna Process. Similar developments and discussions can be witnessed in other cases of regional integration of quality assurance arrangements, *e.g.*, in the framework of free trade agreements, such as, for example, in MERCOSUR or APEC.

Elsewhere, the author has argued for the development of a new, international public policy framework to deal with the impact of globalization on higher education (van Damme, 2002a). Three components appear to be essential in this international framework: (i) the international registration of providers; (ii) the development of new arrangements for the recognition of foreign qualifications and for the transferability of credits; and (iii) the development of an international approach to quality assurance and accreditation. Quality assurance and accreditation are particularly mentioned in many publications as the crucial elements of regulation in the increasingly trade-oriented international higher education market. Many experts believe that trade liberalization is unavoidable and perhaps also beneficial in the long run, but that the resulting liberalized global higher education market will need strong quality assurance and accreditation arrangements. These are viewed as necessary, not only to safeguard learners in their basic consumer rights, but also to defend broader academic values and the fundamental characteristics of the academic/scientific system. Trustworthy accreditation systems, based on comparable recognized professional standards themselves, could provide safeguards in a more globalized higher education system.

Current developments in the direction of international quality assurance and accreditation include: (i) approaches attempting to achieve greater convergence between national quality assurance systems by stimulating international or regional co-operation and empowering them to deal more effectively with new forms and providers in higher education; (ii) strategies to promote mutual recognition among national quality assurance systems; (iii) the establishment of systems of international meta-accreditation or "recognition" of national quality assurance systems on the basis of agreed-upon standards of good practice; and (iv) attempts to arrive at genuine international forms of quality assurance or accreditation (van Damme, 2002b).

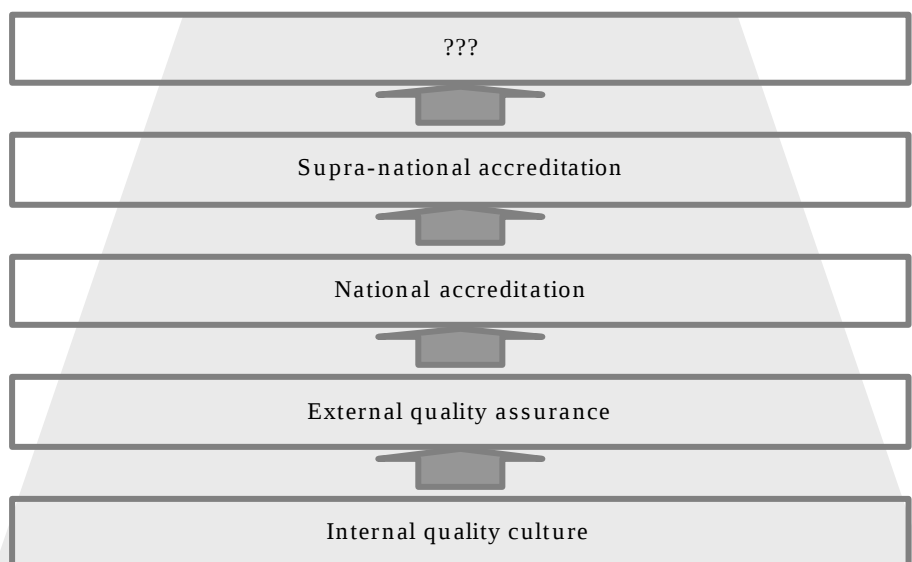
In practice, however, progress in this field is slow and hesitating, because many quality assurance agencies prefer to stay close to their national policy-making environments from which they derive their political legitimacy and to acknowledge the particular social and cultural contexts in which they developed. Many also distrust the establishment of too distant forms of authority and power. Still, the combined impact of globalization, liberalization, and transnational education pushes forward processes of co-operation, convergence, mutual recognition, and even

meta-evaluation – for which the regional and international associations and networks of quality assurance agencies are the vehicles – that do not yet bring about an internationally integrated quality assurance system, but do establish a fruitful basis for the international quality assurance community to deal with international issues and challenges.

4.5. A Multi-Level Model

Tensions and shifts between the internal and external functions, the improvement of transparency oriented dimensions, the relativistic or standards-related approaches, and the national and international aspects of quality assurance have fuelled important debates and developments in present-day quality assurance and accreditation systems. In too many instances, these tensions and shifts are considered to be mutually exclusive, as conflicting poles. It is preferable, however, to see them as complementary, serving different purposes at various levels of the quality assurance configuration. The image of a quality assurance edifice with several levels can be used. The structure of this edifice is gradually differentiating into several layers or levels, each with specific characteristics and functions and, of course, addressing various standards and indicators, but with links (elevators) among them. Not all countries have quality assurance systems that comprise all levels, but for the sake of the conceptual argument, all relevant levels are distinguished here. Figure 2 illustrates the multi-level model of quality assurance.

Figure 2. The multi-level model of external quality assurance and accreditation



Source: The author.

The first and most basic level is that of internal quality assurance arrangements within an institution. All quality assurance systems ultimately depend on the existence of effective arrangements within institutions, preferably supported by a well-developed quality culture as an integrated system of quality-supportive attitudes and arrangements. The scope of standards and indicators addressed at this level is very broad, covering all relevant quality aspects over which an institution has control. Indeed, the concept of *total quality management* is governing internal quality assurance practices in many institutions, covering all relevant factors and processes in the production of high quality output. The function dominant at this level is clearly that of quality improvement. The time-perspective is that of continuity. The ownership of quality arrangements is clearly institutional.

The second level is that of national external quality assurance schemes. There are many models of external quality assurance arrangements, but most of them are characterized by a mixed ownership of the state and the higher education sector, and by the combination of quality improvement and external accountability and transparency functions. Internal institutional quality assurance arrangements feed into the external quality assurance level by means of the self-assessment reports prevalent in most schemes and by the fact that most external quality assurance schemes also review the functioning of internal arrangements. The scope of the quality aspects addressed at this level is often still very broad, but there is no need that it still totally cover all quality aspects. Most external quality assurance arrangements are periodic, with external reviews every five to ten years.

The next level is that of national accreditation. Not many countries make a distinction in their systems between national external quality assurance and accreditation, but some do, and from a conceptual perspective it is interesting to distinguish them. Compared to external quality assurance, accreditation is still narrower in function and focus. The main functions of accreditation are externally oriented, guaranteeing minimal quality standards and enhancing transparency and accountability. Ownership is usually external to the higher education sector, with independent or state-run accreditation agencies being the dominant model.³ Usually, the scope of quality aspects that fall into the focus of accreditation is still smaller than that in the case of external quality assurance. In any case, there are very good reasons to include fewer quality standards and indicators in accreditation than in external quality assurance. Given its main functions, accreditation has to focus on those standards and indicators that are essential to making relevant statements about those functions. In countries in which external quality reviews and accreditation are distinguished, the results of the first feed into the accreditation procedures, but at the same time selecting those

³ See the author's remark on the American system of accreditation in Footnote 2, p. 128.

quality aspects that are considered to be essential for taking decisions related to the standards covered by accreditation.

Above national accreditation systems, supranational schemes of accreditation can be imagined. These can take many different forms: real international systems of accreditation, meta-accreditation or recognition of existing national systems, regional integration of national systems via mutual recognition agreements or in the framework of free trade agreements, etc. In most cases, these supranational schemes will be built on top of existing national schemes and will not substitute for them. Through bilateral or multilateral recognition of national schemes and their outputs, national quality assurance systems will feed into supranational ones. Again, the scope of supranational schemes can be less broad than that of national arrangements, covering only those quality aspects that are relevant for the international objectives, such as the international recognition of qualifications, students and graduate mobility, credit-transfer, etc.

Figure 2 illustrates this multi-level model of quality assurance and accreditation. It shows that the scope of standards and indicators at stake at each level is not necessarily the same, but that the range of standards and indicators is diminishing from each level to the next.

5. STANDARDS AND INDICATORS FOR ACCREDITATION

5.1. Introduction

With the conceptual framework and the multi-level model of quality assurance and accreditation developed above in mind, it is now possible to proceed to the analysis of standards and indicators. The intention is to arrive at a kind of comparative mapping of standards and indicators used in contemporary quality assurance and accreditation schemes.

5.2. The Use of Quality Aspects, Standards, and Indicators

Various regional papers on standards and indicators give an insight into the range of quality aspects, standards, and indicators used in various systems of quality assurance and accreditation around the world.

All quality assurance systems rely on an analysis of certain aspects or dimensions of quality, but not all use *standards* in the sense as defined above. Building further on the definitions also given and on the useful clarifications of Hämäläinen *et al.* (2004, pp. 15-29 in this volume), standards can be described as the statements on requirements and conditions, formulated at certain threshold levels, that have to be noticeably met by programmes or institutions in order to be accredited. The difference between mere quality aspects and standards is that the latter include thresholds that distinguish between conditions below and above that point of reference, and criteria, that give rise to information, to be derived from indicators, that are suitable for taking decisions on the question of the thresholds values for that standard. In most accreditation

systems, these threshold levels are defined as being at the level of minimally acceptable quality.

Using this strict definition, quality assurance systems are usually not standards-focused, and even many existing accreditation systems do not have clear statements as to the threshold levels of each standard. In more relativistic definitions and approaches to quality, *i.e.*, the left and right criteria on the horizontal dimension in Figure 1, there are, in principle, no fixed (in absolute terms) defined “standards”, since quality is dependent on its relationship to other things, namely the internal, sovereign purposes of the programme or institution itself, on the one hand, or the external expectations of customers and stakeholders, on the other. Only the approaches in the middle – the “basic standards” and the “excellence standards” approaches – use standards in the strict definition of the word. However, in most quality assurance systems, there are implicit ways of evaluating the level at which particular quality aspects are met, for example, by assessing the performance levels of programmes or institutions as *sufficient*, *good*, or *excellent*. The discriminative points on the performance continuum implied in such judgments are seldom explicit, but their demarcation is left to the inter-subjective assessment of review teams. In accreditation systems, however, clearly defined and benchmarked threshold levels should be made explicit beforehand, so that they may serve as discriminative tools when real programmes or institutions are being reviewed.

Hämäläinen *et al.* (2004) are correct, of course, when stating that “the final judgment is always subjective” (p. 20), and that, ultimately, the verdict depends on the confidence of the reviewers, in the capacity of the provision under review to realize the academic standards in practice. Standards can never be formulated in such an absolutist manner that the discriminative character of reference points on the scale is interpreted by everyone in the same way. The information needed to discriminate between two points on the continuum – and in the case of the threshold level between “yes” and “no” – is always less than perfectly available. A team of reviewers always has an inter-subjective critical margin in arriving at a conclusion. Still, it should always be the ambition of accreditation systems that standards be defined in a clear and univocal way and that review teams have sufficient instrumental guidelines to follow in order to make their decisions as objective as possible.

Departing from a desire for objectivity and also from a desire to protect the review panels from their own subjectivity, there is a clear tendency, in many quality assurance and accreditation systems, to quantify quality dimensions and to define standards as quantitative benchmarks. Formalizing standards and relating them – via well-defined criteria – to quantifiable indicators is a very attractive avenue of development in the context of making evaluation systems more reliable, robust, and homogeneous. Quantifiable standards are often linked to statistical performance indicators, *i.e.*, a selection of parameters that can be expressed in statistical terms and that represent the measure to which the

programme or institution is performing in a certain quality dimension. Performance indicators also allow comparisons among programmes or institutions and therefore serve as invitations to ranking.

There are two possible, interrelated risks in this development. The first is that certain quality aspects or standards are assessed only in their quantifiable dimensions. The teaching performance of academic staff members, for example, may be assessed solely by calculating the average marks of student assessments of their in-class learning experiences in lectures by means of questionnaires or surveys. The second is that only those quality aspects or standards are included in quality assurance or accreditation decisions that can be linked to indicators that allow for quantification. Accreditation systems that attach a higher value to the number of square meters in university buildings available for a specific programme than to the learning outcomes of students – because the first is more easily measurable in quantifiable ways – are moving away from the fundamental purpose of quality assurance and are confusing means with objectives of quality assurance. Precisely the most sensitive aspects of academic quality are often the least fit for quantification.

Much more progress is needed in educational research to arrive at the level of sophistication in measurement techniques for teaching and learning experiences that is required by standardized assessment in robust accreditation systems. In the meantime, relying too easily on quantification can produce a false sense of objectivity and trustworthiness. The inter-subjective judgment of review teams, even with the risk of collegial partiality by peers, is still the best alternative to superficial quantification.

There is also a time-related aspect in the use of standards and indicators and the way they are assessed. In addition to measuring the actual situation by means of performance indicators, the standards-oriented assessment of programmes also needs to look at the policies that are elaborated by an institution and/or programme. The assessment of standards and indicators has to include a dynamic perspective and not only a static one. A static approach has the disadvantage of time lags. In most cases, the actual situation measured by quantifiable performance indicators reflects the reality of a few years ago and the results of the policies of still longer ago. An assessment of quality standards and indicators has to include a dynamic perspective and build a bridge spanning the past, the present, and the future. Many contemporary quality assurance and accreditation systems are becoming aware of this necessity, as is amply illustrated in the article on the Western Association of Schools and Colleges by Appleton and Wolff (2004) appearing in this volume (pp. 77-101). This increased awareness implies that an assessment of standards and indicators always includes a mix of reality-based and potentiality-focused components.

Professionals of quality assurance know that there are many cases in which an assessment of the actual situation could lead to a negative conclusion. However, sufficient confidence may be provided by new policies to bring the reviewers to the conclusion that the potential for improvement

in the future is great enough to compensate for deficient realities in the past or the present. In this regard, the often-mentioned antagonism between the improvement and the accountability functions of quality assurance and accreditation are reduced when looking at standards and indicators assessment from a more dynamic point of view.

5.3. *The Numbers of Standards and Indicators Used in Accreditation*

An interesting variable in the current development of external quality assurance and accreditation systems is the quantity of standards and indicators involved. It would be an interesting experiment to plot the actual number of standards used against the date at which they were introduced. As the study by Hämäläinen *et al.* (2004) demonstrates in the European case, accreditation systems, in their early stages of development, still stick to a rather elevated number of standards, each again substantiated by a number of indicators. Some external quality assurance and accreditation systems check hundreds of quality-related items. In most cases, it is unclear how these are weighted or what criteria are used to decide on their relative impact on an eventual negative accreditation decision. Argumentation is often absent regarding the necessity of these standards and indicators or how they relate to the particular goals and consequences of the external quality assurance or accreditation system. The burden of these systems on the programmes and institutions under review is very high; their autonomy and integrity is often imperiled. The amount of information requested bears insufficient relation to the quality improvement or accountability function of the system.

It should be an elementary principle in external quality assurance and accreditation that the number of standards and indicators reviewed and the burden imposed on the programme or institution under review be directly related to the objectives of the system and the benefits which might result for all partners involved. Also, external quality assurance and accreditation should be subject to elementary principles and rules of efficiency and “value for money”.

It is a fortunate development that, in recent adjustments to external quality assurance and accreditation protocols, attempts have been made to rationalize the actual review system and to reduce the quantity of standards and indicators involved. A good example of this sort of reduction is provided by Appleton and Wolff (2004) in their description of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Instead of 9 standards with 268 “sub-components” or indicators, now, no more than four standards with only forty-two indicators are used, reflecting “a significant shift in emphasis to effectiveness and attention to student learning”.

Another interesting example is the division of standards made by the Japan University Accreditation Association into three groups, each with a different use and purpose, as is illustrated by Ohnami and Hokama (2004). Put in simple words, Group A standards are indispensable for accreditation; Group B standards are highly recommended; and Group C

standards are items that can be included as well in the self-assessment and thus also in the accreditation/re-accreditation process. It thus partially depends on the sovereign decision of the programme or institution which items from Group B and C will be addressed in the accreditation system. However, in this Japanese system, the actual total number of detailed items or indicators is still very high, 205 for university undergraduate programmes and 143 for graduate programmes. The compulsory Group A, however, only has 39 and 29 items, respectively.

The newly established Dutch Accreditation Agency has six standards and only twenty-four quality aspects, in all. There are many other examples of recent accreditation systems that are reducing their numbers of standards and indicators to those that are viewed as necessary to make an informed decision, leaving out those that are considered as more or less irrelevant for purposes of accreditation.

This development is closely linked to the increased confrontation of external quality assurance and accreditation systems to the growing diversity in higher education. For example, distance learning and, especially, e-learning challenge conventional wisdom on the nature of the teaching and learning process and the kinds of learning experience a learner is supposed to undergo in higher education. They thus also challenge conventional external quality assurance and accreditation systems based on familiar input- and process-related norms and criteria. Several features of distance learning are so different from traditional delivery modes that conventional quality standards and indicators can no longer be applied. The learning experience is fundamentally different from on-site face-to-face learning. Traditional notions of study-load and time invested in courses are no longer applicable. Physical campuses are absent. The roles of faculty members are fundamentally changed. There is an unbundling of parts of the educational activity (for example, separation of curriculum design from actual delivery, which, in turn, is separated from assessment and evaluation), etc. Questions about responsibility for the educational enterprise and external accountability are affected by changing concepts of “institution” and “degree”. The issue of quality assurance for these new forms of higher education and new delivery modes has thus become a very pressing one (Middlehurst, 2001; van Damme, 2002b).

If external quality assurance and accreditation systems seize the challenge to deal effectively with increasing diversification in higher education, they will have to question the conventional ways in which they translate academic quality into standards and indicators. They will have to strip protocols to the hard core, to define, more precisely, what they mean by quality, and to drastically reduce the number of quality standards and indicators under review. Such a process of elimination does not imply that standards and indicators left out in external quality assurance and accreditation would not remain valid and relevant for internal quality assurance arrangements. The idea advanced in this study is that internal quality assurance, falling completely under the autonomy and

responsibility of the institution itself, would cover all quality dimensions considered by the institution, as being relevant, but that external quality assurance and accreditation schemes, certainly, when moving to the supra-national level, would restrict themselves to those aspects, standards, and indicators strictly relevant for quality management purposes at these supra-institutional and supra-national levels. Furthermore, since these systems would have to care for an increasingly diversified reality, they would have to develop quality assurance and accreditation systems that depart from a quality definition that is robust, irrespective of the kind of providers or the delivery modes involved.

5.4. Mapping Standards and Indicators in the CIPOF-Model

In the often-long lists of quality aspects, standards, and indicators addressed by external quality assurance and accreditation systems in the world, there is a great deal of variation but also many commonalities. Why some systems attach a higher importance to specific standards and indicators than others is a question that is almost impossible to answer. Cultural elements, political decisions, the personal preferences of key persons involved, and idiosyncrasies difficult to explain all play a role in deciding what is to be more or less emphasized.

In fact, there is not as much variation in the standards and indicators themselves, but there is more variety in the ways they are classified and ordered. It is mainly the groupings of standards and their headings that vary, not the actual lists of standards and indicators themselves. There are many possible ways to categorize and group standards and indicators used in external quality assurance and accreditation. At international level, there is perhaps not so much need for a complete consensus on which standards and indicators should be used, but there is certainly a huge need for a common understanding on how to map them.

In what follows, the author focuses on a proposal for a set of standards and indicators for quality assurance and accreditation. In their study in this volume, Hämäläinen *et al.* (2004, pp. 15-29) propose a conceptual framework with five categories:

1. Objectives
2. Resources
3. Programme
4. Results
5. Internal quality assurance.

The author wishes to propose a somewhat similar categorization, one that is well-known in evaluation studies as the CIPO-model, using the four categories: **C**ontext-**I**ntput-**P**rocess-**O**utput, but with the addition of a feedback category, thus arriving at a CIPOF-model:

1. **Context;**
2. **Input;**
3. **Process;**
4. **Output;**
5. **Feedback.**

The advantage of this categorization is that it is based on a rather universal model grounded in cybernetics and systems theory. It departs from the perspective of the possibility of the institution or programme as a system functioning in a certain context, working with a defined input, steering its own processes, which all lead to a particular output, and with a feedback loop which also makes it a dynamic and self-regulatory process.

The following paragraphs will attempt a characterization of the various categories and will list the standards that are minimally fundamental to each category. The intention is to be rather programmatic and normative, by formulating a proposal rather than by describing realities. No attempt is made to list all possible standards and indicators in each category, but only those in regard to which there seems to be agreement, in the view of the author, that they are indispensable.

The first step is to explore which standards and indicators seem to be minimally necessary. Then, an attempt will be made to formulate them as real standards and indicators, thus indicating the threshold levels that have to be met.

5.4.1. CONTEXT

Strictly speaking, context elements fall outside the scope of impact of an institution or programme, which cannot thus be held responsible for these items. For this reason, specific standards and indicators for quality assurance or accreditation will not be listed under this category. A programme cannot be denied accreditation because of defective context variables. However, it is still important in all systems of quality evaluation that the context in which a programme or institution is operating be taken into account in order to fully understand and appreciate the links that it has with its surrounding environment via the input and output categories. Institutions or programmes do not function in a vacuum, but in particular economic, political, social, and cultural environments. Relevant information here may include the historical context, the geographical location, the political environment, the specific rules and regulations that apply, the social and economic environment, etc.

5.4.2. INPUT

Input factors are those elements such as resources, personnel, and students that are “fed into” the “black box” of an institution or programme, provided by the context or generated/selected by the institution or programme itself. Input factors are thus a mixed responsibility of the contextual environment and the institution/programme. Although they are a legitimate category of standards for quality assurance and accreditation because the

institution/programme has at least a partial capacity to influence the input variables, input factors also heavily influence the efficiency of processes and the output. Accreditation, focusing solely on output, without taking into account input factors, would lead to the perverse conclusion that it could be more profitable, for example, to opt for a more selective student inflow than to invest in more efficient teaching and learning processes.

There are at least two input standards that seem to be essential in programme accreditation:

- *The physical/material and the human infrastructure, i.e., funding, buildings, teaching and learning facilities, supportive facilities, and a sufficient number of qualified staff.* In most quality assurance and accreditation systems, there is still a huge proliferation of these standards and indicators. The underlying idea is that trustworthy levels of input indicators provide minimal guarantees to the overall quality of the programme concerned. There has to be a certain material and human capacity in order to guarantee a sufficient condition to realize quality. It is generally accepted that certain basic input conditions have to be fulfilled in order to guarantee a threshold level of quality in process and output standards. However, contemporary views on quality assurance tend to minimize the importance attached to input indicators in the achievement of quality to the benefit of process and output indicators. These input indicators also have a rather high reciprocal correlation. Therefore, it is wise to limit the numbers of input standards and indicators in quality assessments. According to the author, the input indicators relevant to the guaranteeing of quality can be limited to two indicators, namely (i) adequate resources and facilities, and (ii) staff quantity and quality. These indicators together constitute one standard.
- *Students, i.e., student recruitment, selection, and intake.* In a certain sense, incoming students constitute the “raw material” with which a given programme will work. Student selection – not only in the formal sense as entrance requirements, access policies, and eventual selection procedures, but also, more informally, in the actual processes of social-cultural selection resulting in a certain student intake – constitutes an important variable for the quality of a programme. Contrary to many protocols in existing quality assurance and accreditation systems, it is advisable to make a distinction between student selection and intake and other aspects, which are more process-oriented, such as study-load. Among the many aspects and indicators relevant to student selection, the following two indicators seem to be crucial: (i) the admission requirements (on paper and the compliance in reality), and (ii) formal and informal student intake and access policies.

5.4.3. PROCESS

Undoubtedly, this category is the one in which the numbers of standards and indicators in most external quality assurance and accreditation systems abound. Process standards include all relevant aspects of institutional practices that determine its output quality. Process standards make certain that, for example, a particular programme makes the most efficient and beneficial use of its input to produce the highest possible quality output in a given context. Just as with input standards, process standards are checked in order to guarantee that all is in place to reasonably predict a certain quality result.

The problem with conventional process standards is that they depart from rather traditional, well-known, teaching and learning processes in higher education. Innovation in teaching and learning processes and, especially, technologically supported developments such as distance learning and e-learning have led to an increasing diversification of some of these processes. The confrontation with the fact that there is no single road to quality output and that conventional views on process standards may well entail unfounded presuppositions and even prejudices about effective teaching and learning environments, has led many external quality assurance and accreditation systems to revise their approaches to process standards. From the wisdom that “many roads lead to Rome”, more emphasis is now being placed on the policies and approaches of the given programme and on the “culture of evidence” supporting it. However, it seems essential that the institution or programme have a clear commitment and orientation to facilitate student learning and that it have an outcome- and demand-driven approach, not confining itself to the organizational and instructional part of the process.

Minimally, the two following process standards seem to be required in programme accreditation:

- *Mission and objectives*, i.e., the aims and purposes of the institution or programme, based on its educational philosophy, its values, and its frame of reference. Partly as a heritage of the “fitness for purpose” approach to quality, most quality assurance and accreditation systems put great emphasis, in quality assessments, on the aims and objectives of programmes. From a more accreditation-oriented perspective, based on standards, it is clear that not all aspects related to the aims and purposes of programmes are relevant. First of all, institutions or programmes should be able to demonstrate that they have clearly defined strategic mission statements, institutional purposes, and educational objectives, including the planning and improvement processes for continuously realizing them. Secondly the educational objectives should be stated in terms of benchmarked levels of knowledge, skills, and competencies to be achieved by students, and they should respond to nationally defined and/or internationally benchmarked level descriptors of the qualification concerned. In Europe, for example, the so-called Dublin Descriptors

for Bachelor's and Master's Degree qualifications have a strong impact on quality assurance and accreditation systems. Thus, there are two indicators for this standard: (i) a clearly defined strategic mission as well as clearly defined institutional purposes and educational objectives, including planning and improvement processes; and (ii) correspondence of educational objectives to qualification-level descriptors

- *Effective learning processes, i.e.*, the conditions that have to be in place, for example, regarding the curricular design, the contents offered to students, including the evaluation procedures (testing, examinations) used to assess student achievements, and the didactic approaches and teaching/learning environments designed so as to facilitate and to achieve effective student learning. As the standards and indicators of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges suggest (Appleton and Wolff, 2004), an institution or programme should have a clear commitment to learning. Of course, the curriculum, the contents, and the teaching/learning processes have to be such that they achieve the objectives of the programme. They must, as well, relate to the research basis of the discipline concerned and to the requirements of the profession for which they are preparing in a relative weight depending upon the nature of the programme. Furthermore, the curriculum has to be compatible with the particular student intake of a programme, and the evaluation of students must adequately reflect the attainment levels that are expected of students in order to realize the objectives of the programme. The various didactic settings applied in the programme must effectively reach the stated objectives of the curriculum and programme contents chosen, including lectures, field work, group work, assignments, dissertations, student guidance and counseling, etc., with a particular focus on their innovation and the thoughtful use of technologies. Teaching and learning processes have to be effective and innovative. It is advisable to integrate these various elements into one standard, because of their strong interdependence. Thus, three indicators appear evident for this standard: (i) the relation of curricula, contents, and didactic approaches to the objectives of the programme; (ii) programmed and real study duration, study load, and student support; and (iii) the characteristics of student assessment.

5.4.4. OUTPUT

In many quality assurance and accreditation systems, attempts have been made to shift the focus from input and process to output standards and indicators. Learning outcomes-based assessment is a hot topic in quality assessment literature and practice. Of course, it is wise to move the quality assurance perspective away from those characteristics that are supposed to guarantee quality towards checking whether that quality has been realized effectively in the graduates themselves. What is important is what a

programme accomplishes in terms of change in the knowledge and skill levels of students, not in how the job is done.

The quality assurance and accreditation experiences reviewed in the literature illustrate various attempts to deal with this challenge. In particular, recently designed systems invest a great deal of energy into elaborating quality assessment arrangements that adequately focus on learning outcomes. However, a number of problems are linked to this ambition. Assessing learning outcomes in the levels of knowledge and competencies in students is tricky. There is also a time problem involved in the exercise. The actual realization of learning outcomes often occurs only some time after the actual teaching/learning processes took place. But a large time-lag also increases the chances that other learning experiences will become intertwined and interact with the teaching/learning processes in the programme under review. Also, the responsibility of the programme for the actual realization of the training of a graduate into, for example, job placement and, still farther along, socio-economic development, is limited.

Despite these critical considerations, it is clear that contemporary quality assessment and accreditation systems have to put a great deal of emphasis on output-related standards and indicators. Two standards are particularly relevant in this regard:

- *The realization of the programme objectives.* It is quite obvious that the most important quality standard related to output is the realization, by the programme, of its own objectives. As this study has focused on the correspondence of the educational objectives to the defined and benchmarked level descriptors, it is clear that the actual realization of the objectives as related to the descriptors must be measured. As a first indicator for this output standard, it is necessary to define the degree to which the actual knowledge, skills, and competencies of graduates – the learning outcomes – meet the level descriptors for the specific qualification concerned. Secondly, a more social perspective has to be included. In order to measure a programme output, it is important to look at the impact of that programme via its skilled graduates. There are several relevant indicators at stake here, but emphasis is placed on the labour market, by measuring graduate placement, and the broader economic, social, and cultural impact that an institution or programme achieves via its graduates. There are huge measurement issues attached to this indicator, but it still seems necessary to include such a perspective.
- *Efficiency.* Quality is also linked to the efficiency with which resources, as input indicators, are used to achieve the output measured. As the *fitness for purpose*-approach has stressed, quality in higher education necessarily also entails a *value for money*-perspective. The efficient use of resources is thus an indicator for assessing the second standard in the output category.

5.4.5. FEEDBACK

As Härmäläinen *et al.* (2004) emphasize in their review of standards and indicators in Europe, any review of the quality of a programme or institution must address the internal quality assurance arrangements, the quality management systems, and the quality culture integrated into the organization. This idea is enlarged to feedback in general, in correspondence with general systems theory. In addition to the original CIPO-model, a feedback loop has to be included as the fifth category of standards and indicators. Any external quality assurance or accreditation system has to attach an important value to the capacities, strengths, weaknesses, and efficiency of the ways in which institutions or programmes, as learning organizations, learn from experience, systematically including quality management processes in the overall process, and continuously adjusting and improving their strategic planning. Two standards can be distinguished:

- *Effective internal quality management.* The seventh standard that the author proposes in his model is the effective functioning of internal quality management procedures, their integration into the organizational culture, and their consequences for quality improvement and arrangements for innovation. Thus, two indicators for this standard can be distinguished: (i) the presence and functioning of effective internal evaluation procedures, whereby students, graduates, staff, employers, other stakeholders, and internal and external quality reviewers provide evaluative information to the programme or institution; and (ii) the ways in which this information is translated and integrated into effective quality improvement and innovation arrangements, and the degree to which these arrangements are embedded in the organizational culture.
- *Feedback to strategic planning.* In order to close the feedback loop, the institution or programme should be able to demonstrate the ways in which it is able to develop policies and strategies for change and improvement. Effective strategic planning seems to be a necessary condition for a trustworthy institution or programme. Two indicators are essential for this purpose: (i) the capacity for integrating feedback into strategic change and improvement processes itself; and (ii) the presence of effective organizational strategies to improve equity and student participation. Of course, the last indicator is a rather normative or political stance, but in many countries and quality assurance systems, a clear commitment to equity regarding sex, social class, ethnicity, and disability, and an orientation to improve the role and influence of students in the policy-making processes of the institution or programme are viewed as essential.

In the perspective of proposing a limited list of quality standards and indicators for programme accreditation, the author has developed a model of eight quality standards and sixteen indicators. This CIPOF-model of quality

standards and indicators for accreditation in higher education is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Standards and indicators for quality assurance and accreditation in the CIPOF-model

Categories	Standards	Indicators
Context	The physical/material and human infrastructure	Adequate resources and facilities
Input	Student selection and intake	Staff quantity and quality Admission requirements Student intake and access
Process	Mission and objectives	Clearly defined strategic mission and objectives Correspondence of educational objectives to qualification level descriptors
	Effective learning processes	The relation of curricula, contents and didactic approaches to programme objectives Study duration, study load, and student support The characteristics of student assessment
Output	The realization of objectives	Correspondence of learning outcomes to qualification level descriptors Impact on labour market and society
	Efficiency	Efficient use of input resources to realize output
Feedback	Effective internal quality management	Effective internal evaluation procedures Effective quality management and innovation arrangements
	Strategic planning	Capacity for strategic change and improvement processes Effective organizational strategies to improve equity and student participation

Source: The author.

5.5. Criteria, Thresholds, and Evidence for the CIPOF-Standards and Indicators

So far, only the themes and aspects to which the CIPOF-standards and indicators refer have been indicated. This way of proceeding seemed to be the most appropriate for selecting the essential standards and indicators in quality assurance and accreditation in higher education. At this point, it is necessary to return to the list of proposed standards and indicators and to reformulate them as real standards, thus indicating certain criteria or threshold levels that have to be met. Of course, this task will still be accomplished in a rather general way. When applying the model in a more specific context, more precise formulations will be necessary to make the model more operational.

Related to this more operational approach is the question of how actual performance levels for the various standards and indicators should be measured. Performance indicators, especially in the quantifiable dimensions, should be measurable. However, this need does not imply that quality assessments in all circumstances should employ elaborate and sophisticated measurements of all those aspects themselves. The standards and indicators of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (Appleton and Wolff, 2004) rightly stress the need for a “culture of evidence” to be

deployed and demonstrated by the institution or programme under review. An institution or programme should be able to demonstrate, by evidence, that its claims for meeting standards and criteria can, in reality, be substantiated.

Table 2 again lists the CIPOF-standards and indicators and attempts to reformulate them with criteria and thresholds.

Table 2. CIPOF-standards and indicators and their criteria and thresholds

Categories	Standards	Indicators
Context	-	-
Input	The physical/ material and human infrastructure	Adequate resources and facilities
	Student selection and intake	Staff quantity and quality Admission requirements Student intake and access
Process	Mission and objectives	Clearly defined strategic mission and objectives Correspondence of educational objectives to qualification level descriptors
	Effective learning processes	The relation of curricula, contents, and didactic approaches to programme objectives Study duration, study load, and student support The characteristics of student assessment
Output	The realization of objectives	Correspondence of learning outcomes to qualification level descriptors Impact on labour market and society
	Efficiency	Efficient use of input resources to realize output
Feedback	Effective internal quality management	Effective internal evaluation procedures Effective quality management and innovation arrangements
	Strategic planning	Capacity for strategic change and improvement processes Effective organizational strategies to improve equity and student participation

Source: The author.

6. CONCLUSION

The starting-point of the UNESCO-CEPES project, "Indicators for Institutional and Programme Accreditation in Higher Education/Tertiary Education", of which this study is a part, is the conviction that the wide variety of standards and indicators used in quality assurance and accreditation systems around the world is a hindrance to substantial progress in the internationalization of quality assurance. In order to promote convergence of quality assurance and accreditation arrangements and bilateral or multilateral recognition of agencies and their assessment or accreditation decisions, a more common understanding is needed of what exactly the objects of the focus of quality assurance are, what is being assessed, and what standards and indicators are used in these processes. The step forward in this project is that attention is being directed to the real heart of the matter, namely the standards and indicators themselves. Ultimately, if some sort of common understanding of what should be essential in quality assurance and accreditation can be reached, substantial progress may be expected in the form of better

understanding among quality assurance and accreditation agencies, eventually resulting in mutual recognition. This step, in turn, seems to be an essential condition for taking new steps forward in the issue of the international recognition of qualifications.

In this study, an attempt has been made to develop a conceptual framework for a shared vision on quality assurance and accreditation and to work out a proposal for a set of standards and indicators that can be viewed as a kind of common core. The ambition behind this study is not to impose a standardized set of standards with a UNESCO-CEPES label attached to it, but to advance a proposal for further debate among the quality assurance and higher education communities.

The proposed model builds on a comprehensive data set of protocols, handbooks, and materials collected from numerous quality assurance and accreditation agencies and arrangements. Some of the regional papers that were developed in the framework of the UNESCO-CEPES project have masterfully synthesized a great deal of these materials. Of course, the model advanced in this study is not to be interpreted as a kind of summary of the common denominator found in these materials. It is necessarily a normative, and to some extent also a personal, model, based on a set of concepts and ideas elaborated in the first sections of the study.

The crucial starting-points were the proposal for a minimal set of really indispensable standards and indicators, on which sufficient agreement seems to be possible, keeping in mind the need to minimize the burden of quality assessment. Ideas on the shift from teaching to learning and on outcomes-centered assessment have heavily influenced the model, even though emphasis is still placed on the necessity to assess capacity in terms of input and process characteristics. The model should be applicable to highly diverse situations, even though it is clear that modifications would still be necessary in order to apply it to atypical forms of higher education. Finally, the model is based on a theoretical logic grounded in systems theory, whereby an institution or a programme is viewed as a dynamic system functioning in a given context, with specific input characteristics and various processes, leading to a certain output, and, crucially important, with feedback functions with which such systems continuously adapt to changes and improve their performance.

Some criteria or guidelines have steered the author in the choice of standards and indicators from the large pool of available ones. A first and very important question was the following: is it really necessary to externally guarantee these standards in order to trust the quality of the institution or programme under review. Quality fatigue and protests against sometimes-exaggerated quality assurance protocols have forced the quality assurance community to focus on what is really necessary. The amount of indicators, on which the performance of an institution or programme can be measured, is almost unlimited. A second question was whether or not the standard or indicator was really within the range of responsibility or accountability of the institution or programme. The capacity of institutions to influence contextual variables, for example, is

limited. Third, a standard or indicator should be empirically measurable, which means that evidence can be found that allows for sound decisions as to whether or not the standard is met.

Quality assurance and accreditation are not value-free activities, primarily because the concept of quality cannot be defined in a vacuum. Values and normative considerations have also inspired our thinking and have thus led to a certain normative bias in the proposed model. The political bias is, for example, very clear in the indicator addressing issues of equity and student participation, but there was convincing support to include it. Also the student- and learning-centered approach has a normative component and may not be accepted by all institutions or quality assurance agencies. More problematic, perhaps, is the bias resulting from the dominance of the developed world on thinking and practice in the field of quality assurance. The CIPOF-model departs from a societal context in which resources and input variables are sufficiently guaranteed. Countries facing a dramatic lack of capacity in assuring even the barest necessities for higher education institutions and students may consider the proposed standards and indicators as very luxurious, leading to the perverse conclusion that minimal quality is something beyond their reach. Nevertheless, the model is designed relative to context and input. No abstract definitions of quality are given.

The CIPOF-model that has been developed in this way includes eight standards and sixteen indicators. The ambition now is to introduce them for further debate into the higher education and quality assurance communities, and, subsequently, to test them in a variety of settings. Only such testing can determine the validity of the model.

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