Quality Assurance in Transition towards a Global Concern

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Abstract

Transparency and comparability of higher education especially in terms of their academic programmes are important issues for today’s working environment. Employers are looking for the best staff and students want to have a recognised degree for a national and a global labour market. Strict quality criteria have to assure the effectiveness and comparability of academic programmes for the individual student, the scientific community as well as for the market and industry. This paper provides an overview of my doctoral thesis which outlines examples of selected OECD countries (Austria, Germany, Finland, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada) with their different ways to implement a quality assurance system. Descriptive country reports of all these national case studies together with expert interviews will show the key objectives to transform and improve their quality assurance systems. The focus is laid on the development of such a system as well as on the different challenges these countries are currently facing.

1. Introduction

Higher education research is a quite new field of interest and can be seen as a multidisciplinary subject. Researchers from different fields of study are interested in learning about the complexity of higher education. They are looking at higher education from different angles with an educational, management and/or social science approach. This study is based on educational, historical, social as well as economic aspects of higher education in the context of quality assurance.

The doctoral thesis shall both create a new understanding of existing issues and identify new and emerging issues worthy of investigation and explanation in terms of quality assurance in higher education. Hence, this research study aims to investigate the effects of higher education reforms concerning quality assurance issues within national higher education systems. Therefore, this approach explores different ways to deal with these changes and transformations in higher education considering the implications on teaching, research and administration at the system level (nationally and internationally).

2. Research objectives

In times of mass higher education and a high complexity of higher education systems gains a great importance. Higher education institutions are confronted with tremendous tensions and transformation processes – they have to react quickly to educational needs of a fast-changing society and have to assert one’s position with other higher education providers. Many of these rapid changes have had an impact on the quality of teaching and learning, research as well as the management of higher education in a certain way. Thus, the following main research question underlies this doctoral thesis: What are the further developments of the respective higher education system and how will quality assurance emerge successfully in an international higher education area?

A theoretical framework concentrates on the growth and diversification of higher education systems (concepts of massification and diversification), the increased emphasis of the market (privatisation of higher education) as well as the ongoing globalisation process [7, 9, 10]. These transformations show the diverse dynamics and highlight the need of quality assurance in higher education to enhance, improve and even maintain a quality-focused orientation [2]. Thus, a (nationally and internationally recognised) quality assurance system should be able to guarantee transparency and control of academic programmes and degrees. Nearly all over the world national and internationally-operating quality assurance agencies have been developed but with different approaches (internal or external procedures, accreditation vs. evaluation, quality audits etc.) [5]. Of course, these ongoing transformation processes shall give an insight to international perspectives and developments concerning higher education in general and quality assurance schemes in particular and are not aiming for a comprehensive framework on all ongoing developments in today’s knowledge-based society.

A variety of country reports and comparative research projects on higher education issues have been carried out by international organisations, individual researchers or research teams with their different scientific background [3, 8, 13]. But what is missing are future scenarios of the ongoing transformation processes, a link between countries and their different approaches in quality assurance as well as possible solutions for higher education.
systems to establish a functioning system while still considering their cultural, social and economic diversity.

Thus, this thesis investigates quality assurance policies of six OECD countries: Austria, Germany, Finland, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Canada. Descriptive country reports serve as basis for conducting expert interviews on the ongoing trends and changes in the respective countries. Next to national experts perspectives from international organisations and known researchers are gathered to gain another insight in this complex field of research and emphasis on the other sub-questions as well as the main underlying research question of this thesis.

3. Methodology

The emphasis is laid on a multiple holistic case study design in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of multiple national higher education systems in terms of their quality assurance procedures. Hence, the empirical part of this thesis focuses on six country reports which provide an overview of general features on their higher education system (facts and figures, governance and funding, reforms) on the one hand and picture a comprehensive description of different quality assurance mechanisms (development of quality assurance and their agency/agencies, ongoing discussions) on the other hand. Furthermore, an interview and feedback process on the country reports from different executive directors of quality assurance agencies, representatives of ministries or members of higher education institutions (academic and administrative staff, students) is carried to gain a deeper insight on the prevailing situation within these countries out (up to six experts per country). Qualitative interviews have been conducted via e-mail or via telephone with both gathering feedback on the country reports concerning their correctness and asking further questions, as e.g., their opinion on the prevailing quality assurance system and possible future developments.

The expert interviews and the various remarks on the country reports have been taken into consideration in the comparative part of the thesis. After an adjustment of the country reports and a qualitative data analysis of the expert judgements a comparison of the systems has been carried out. The expert interviews provided the basis to show future developments on quality assurance and a possible way to implement a functioning quality assurance system. Furthermore, the expertise of the international perspective shall be taken into account to judge the nature and degree of changes concerning both the national cases and the international transformations processes at the same time.

In summary, the different layers within this empirical research are the following:

1. case-study approach: description of the specific situation in selected OECD countries (Austria, Germany, Finland, United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada).

2. expert interviews via email or telephone: experts from national and international organisations/institutions.

3. qualitative content analysis of the expert interviews.

4. overall comparison as a combination of the above mentioned approaches: comparison along the country reports and the qualitative content analysis of the expert interviews.

With the help of the combination of these two approaches (descriptive and analytic) overall assumptions on quality assurance in a global context, trends and transformations in quality assurance as well as recommendation will be formulated. At this stage the main findings of the theoretical framework are taken into account and linked to further assumptions of these different concepts. Each dimension is used for the comparison of the six quality assurance systems in their prevailing structure and concerning their future developments.

Thus, the methodological approach of this research is multi-layered: survey research (questionnaires, interviews) next to unobtrusive research [1] (content analysis, analysis of existing statistics, comparative analysis). This combination and integration of quantitative and qualitative steps of analysis is a model of triangulation. The aim is not to determine which approach shows the right outcome but to support each other. The point of intersection of all individual results will give the final outcome. Hence, the objective of triangulation is to enlarge the knowledge and findings gradually and step-by-step through mutual comparison of different scientific approaches to cope with the complexity of the field of higher education [6].

4. Theory, Methodology and Reality

The aim of this study was to figure out challenges and developments within quality assurance in higher education concentrating on six national case studies: Austria, Germany, Finland, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Canada. These case studies shall exemplify the ongoing trends and changes along descriptive country reports and expert interviews. Perspectives from international organisations and known researchers are gathered to gain insight into the international dimension.

As one of the main conclusions quality assurance schemes have to be developed as necessary instruments to adjust higher education institutions to the ongoing transformation processes. Some of the
main results from the comparative analysis out of the
country reports are summed up:

- The overall view on all national higher
education systems concerning their quality assurance
system provides a very complex picture on multiple
different approaches.
- The observed quality assurance systems have
taken great efforts to implement their individual, for
their purposes relevant quality assurance system that
goes along with their economic, social and cultural
setting, especially within the last three decades.
- The U.S. has the longest history in quality
assurance, especially in terms of accreditation,
followed by the UK with a strong focus on research
evaluation and accountability procedures. Only
within the last decades the other European countries,
Finland, Germany and Austria (in that order) started
more comprehensive and nation-wide quality
assurance procedures. Canada can be seen as an
exception with a rather diversified system along their
thirteen jurisdictions which mainly concentrate on
accreditation.
- The ongoing development in the European
countries (Germany, Finland, the UK and partly also
in Austria) shows a shift towards audits and reviews
of internal quality assurance procedures.

Currently all countries are facing similar
challenges or have been confronted with
fundamental reforms and dealing differently with
internationalisation processes at the same time. Out
of the expert views the move towards quality
assurance in an international higher education area is
visible. Nonetheless, the pressures and challenges on
national higher education systems are significantly
growing. National quality assurance systems have
been developed, have been and still are in the
process of transformation and change and do not
only face national complexities within the
differences at system, institutional and programme
level but also have to deal with an international
dimension.

5. Conclusion

Although there are lots of different national
opinions and ways to implement a quality assurance
system, there is a need and a will to cooperate
between this diversity while still keeping the
individuality of the own country [3]. As the different
systems are most of the time newly developed they
should be able to adapt to changes and try to react
quickly to the needs of our knowledge-based society.

The research findings and outcomes provide some
useful guidelines and recommendations for
upcoming challenges of the observed higher
education systems and beyond their national borders.

Recommendation 1: Less diversification within a
higher education sector at system, institutional and
programme level would enhance the establishment of
a functioning quality assurance system. Peculiarities
and innovative solutions of a national higher
education system have to be sustained and shall be
supported though too much complexity within a
system is a hindering factor. The observed country
cases with their individual quality assurance systems
shall find a balance between over-diversification and
over-homogenisation [12]. Throughout all countries
a comparability within and also with other national
systems is needed and common procedures, standards, profiles or results are necessary especially
within rather decentralised systems.

Recommendation 2: Higher education should be
made more comparable and transparent through
detailed and reliable information on the quality of
individual study programmes, faculties and higher
education institutions [4]. Innovative transparency
tools have to be developed, e.g. through rankings.
Higher education institutions are much more
involved in rankings, benchmarking and other
quality assurance procedures if their funding streams
are highly diversified and derived from different
sources (e.g. tuition fees, education contracts, third
party money).

Recommendation 3: Higher education is much
more oriented towards the different perspectives of
stakeholders. Hence, a continuing engagement of all
stakeholders in quality assurance matters (especially
students), an improved awareness of all stakeholders
on the expectations of quality assurance mechanisms,
a greater orientation towards the impact of quality
assurance (e.g. learning outcomes), common projects
with different stakeholders and an exchange of
know-how would be helpful.

Recommendation 4: A continuing trend towards
quality assurance in an international higher education
area is predominant. This international dimension
within quality assurance shall be supported by an
exchange of staff and know-how as well as different
innovative solutions, e.g. through international
quality assurance projects. Higher education across
borders is a promising path to enhance especially the
quality of higher education and therefore common
standards at international level to increase
international comparability of quality assurance
frameworks are needed (good examples:
OECD/UNESCO Guidelines for quality provision in
cross-border higher education, European Standards
and Guidelines, European Quality Assurance
Register, international rankings, benchmarking
projects). In that sense diverse, stratified,
hierarchical (possibly ‘joined-up’) system of higher
education seems the most realistic (and likely)
response to the steady globalisation of research and
teaching in higher education, and the most likely
product of the changing relationship between the
state and the market in its delivery [11]

Of course, there is not one single approved
solution which way is more suitable for all countries.
Nonetheless, the different national approaches show that all countries are trying to follow both their national peculiarities and international developments at the same time. All countries aim for increased international co-operation to attract more students from abroad and in this way generate more income emphasising on their respective national approach. In that sense, quality assurance systems shall be better prepared to respond to an environment that is becoming increasingly more market-oriented and competitive to generate more and diversified sources of income through, for instance, international students (tuition fees) or research contracts with other international partners. Especially, in times of financial crisis the funding of higher education is incrementally affected. Thus, higher education has to assure their high quality to gain additional public as well as private income and to compete with other higher education providers in this increasingly diversified higher education area. Those higher education institutions, which react more effectively on these pressures concerning a decline of income and a competition between institutions as well as for the best students, are expected to build up a functioning quality assurance system that is able to face the challenges of the upcoming decades.

These recommendations shall support policy makers, higher education staff members, quality assurance agencies, international organisations as well as other stakeholders which are involved in the field of quality assurance to get familiar with different quality assurance systems and approaches and to judge further developments in this field. To show how higher education is influenced by quality assurance mechanisms this thesis shall provide more clarity but also serve a plea for those higher education institution that are not on the road to assure their quality. Quality assurance in higher education is not fully developed but still under construction!

6. References


