

Global Challenges to Higher Education: Responding to a “New Ecology”

Peter Ewell

February, 2014

As higher education nears the midpoint of the second decade of a new millennium, it inhabits a landscape that is rapidly being transformed. If current trends continue, college students in 2020 will participate in new kinds of learning experiences, access new kinds of learning resources, and deal with a broader range of providers than ever before. Meanwhile, providers themselves harness almost unimagined new technologies, will face escalating demands for performance, and be forced to operate in an increasingly seamless global marketplace for higher education. Together, these conditions constitute nothing less than a “new ecology” for higher education. This paper examines the nature of these changes and the specific challenges that each poses to established modes of operating with a particular focus on assuring quality.

- New Kinds of Providers. One of the most rapid developments of the past five years has been the growth of new kinds of postsecondary providers. Particularly striking has been the growth of for-profit institutions. Such rapid growth raises fundamental questions about the ability of such institutions to match enrollment increases with necessary infrastructure and breadth of administrative experience. Looking farther into the future, some providers are not higher education institutions at all: expansion of corporate training opportunities and the growing number of resources that learners can access on their own now allow a dedicated “student” to master all the material contained in a baccalaureate program without attending an organized institution of higher education at all. Quality assurance approaches developed in an era dominated by face-to-face classrooms and faculty-centered approaches to teaching and learning are not well suited to these new institutions. In parallel, standards and review processes evolved primarily to address traditional instructional and scholarly activities are out of step with “institutions” for which awarding degrees and certificates, not teaching, is the dominant activity.
- New Patterns of Participation. Second, the dominant pattern of college attendance no longer has individual higher education institutions at its center. Several dimensions of this dominant pattern can be discerned, some established and some emerging. First, Department of Education longitudinal surveys in the U.S. have for twenty years reported that the majority of students earning a baccalaureate degree attended two or more institutions in doing so, with a fifth attending three or more. These developments are raising issues about how learning transfers from one institution to another in a cumulative and coherent fashion as a student works toward a credential. Adding to this fractionalization, some parts of an institution’s curriculum may be developed and delivered by third-party providers—raising parallel questions about “transfer” of content *within* the curriculum. The growing availability of credit-bearing courses on the web through modalities like Massive Open On-Line Courses (MOOCs) will only add to this trend. Both situations render the dominant quality assurance paradigm of reviewing individual institutions increasingly obsolescent and demand greater attention to how institutions ensure that quality is protected when so much of the instructional process is outside their direct control.

- A New Paradigm of Teaching and Learning. Also fading into history is the traditional academic calendar based on fixed time-based terms (semesters or quarters) and one-way transmission of content. In contrast, the emerging new “paradigm” of teaching and learning—best illustrated now by a handful of competency-based institutions like Western Governors University (WGU) in the U.S.—is based on a mastery model in which students make academic progress by successfully completing, at their own pace, successive examinations, demonstrations, or performances. In contrast to the traditional time-based approach, this model is not only asynchronous, but it is also characterized by a wide diversity of individual learning experiences. No two students at WGU, for example, will have engaged in the same “curriculum,” although all will be expected to meet common outcomes standards. At the opposite end of the continuum, another feature of this new paradigm of teaching and learning is characterized by far more standardized and structured learning experiences built using insights about how people learn provided through cognitive science. Institutions employing this mode, like the British Open University, rely on a centrally-developed, standardized curriculum delivered by adjunct faculty or at a distance. By 2020, it is very likely that a majority of college students worldwide will be experiencing one of these two transformed modes of provision. Both of these approaches challenge traditional views of instructional quality based on resources and processes. They also require established standards of mastery based upon an agreed-upon array of intended learning outcomes consistent with the needs of the 21st century. National qualifications frameworks in Europe and Australasia, as well as the Degree Qualifications Profile in the U.S., are beginning to fill this void.
- Accountability for Results. Probably the most important shift in the external landscape for higher education that has occurred over the last two decades is an unprecedented demand for accountability. This trend has become sufficiently visible worldwide that the international journal *Quality in Higher Education* recently cited it as one of the most prominent developments since the widespread emergence of national quality assurance agencies for higher education in the early 1990s (V16. #2, July 2010). What is more, the nature of the demand has shifted. National quality assurance organizations have been asked by policymakers with growing stridence over the last twenty years to require institutions to pay more attention to student learning outcomes. Now there is a demand for them to go beyond just “doing assessment” by examining the average performance of selected samples of students using one or more assessment methods. The new expectation instead is ensuring that **all** graduates measure up to established learning outcomes **standards**. The growing press for such standards is shown by the steady emergence of national qualifications frameworks mentioned above.
- Transparency Demands. Accompanying these external demands for specific performance in the realm of student success and meeting acceptable levels of learning are growing calls for higher education institutions to become far more transparent about what they do and the results they achieve. All organizations that review college and university performance are now pressed to identify areas of challenge and exemplary performance. At the same time, they are under greater pressure to broaden public participation in what is perceived by many outsiders to be a “secretive” process by increasing the number of lay members on Boards and Commissions and, where appropriate, including technical experts on review teams. Institutions are simultaneously being asked to show more about their internal operations—standards of student academic

achievement, quality of resources and learning experiences, and so on—and their academic results.

- Constrained Resources. The current global economic downturn has caused significant budgetary shortfalls and consequent disinvestment in public higher education. Growing gaps between rich and poor that accompany these economic trends in many countries mean that higher education has become unaffordable for growing numbers of students. These conditions put pressure on quality assurance agencies to ensure that institutions are paying proper attention to the stewardship of their fiscal resources for future survival—demanding attention to efficiency as well as effectiveness. They also put pressure on quality assurance agencies themselves to make review processes more efficient by reducing duplication, streamlining reporting, and harnessing technology to allow remote inspections and electronic collaboration among quality reviewers.

It is easier to define these emerging changes and identify the challenges they pose than it is to delineate the specifics of how these practices ought to change. Nevertheless, these trends suggest the following:

- Quality assurance agencies will need to perform a more overt accountability role, with processes more attuned to public concerns about quality. This may include greater public participation in the accreditation process by increasing the number of public members of appropriate boards and commissions and seeking more input from employers and industries about their needs and their particular views of quality.
- Quality assurance agencies will need to shift some of their attention toward monitoring how students move toward earning credentials, using the services of many educational providers. This may require special attention to examining how the increasingly disparate parts of a student's experience attending multiple institutions fit together to constitute an effective path to a given credential or degree. How institutions treat, monitor, and evaluate incoming transfer work will be an important part of this. In addition, quality assurance agents will need to increasingly examine “outsourced” providers of packaged instructional experiences and informational websites. At the very least, they will have to pay more attention to examining the criteria by which institutions decide to use licensed providers such as these.
- These trends, as well as the changing paradigm of teaching and learning, will require even more emphasis in quality assurance to be placed on aligned standards of academic achievement, as well as solid evidence that these standards are being achieved. This will require attention to what the common elements of a particular degree ought to be, as well as how institutions set performance benchmarks on these learning outcomes as “good enough.” Once again, the growing prominence of qualifications frameworks worldwide is part of this trend.
- Quality review processes will need to be more visibly cost-effective, employing, where appropriate, more virtual communication and less paper-and-pencil reporting. What reporting remains must be indicator-based and ruthlessly focused on institutional effectiveness and performance. A focus on performance, in turn, means requirements that every review include a focused look at graduation rates and mandatory interactions about the documented quality of student learning results.

- Quality assurance agencies in every country will increasingly need to partner with and mutually recognize the actions of their counterparts in the rest of the world. As they do so, moreover, they will need to align their expectations of what degree recipients at various levels should be expected to know and do with the qualifications frameworks established elsewhere. This also means creating more proactive partnerships among quality assurance agencies throughout the world. The Bologna process in Europe is the pioneer in establishing such regional networks of cooperation and mutual recognition, but similar trends are rapidly emerging in Asia, and in Central and South America.

As the past ten years have demonstrated in many sectors, change can happen quickly and become profoundly transformational. After all, tools that we now take for granted, ranging from Google to Skype, were only created in the last decade. The standards and review processes that quality assurance agencies in higher education establish for the future must anticipate similar rates and directions of change. They must be positioned for an era of greater accountability and rapid instructional transformation, while they provide institutions with a sound basis upon which to examine their structures and operations objectively to systematically improve. Only standards and review processes with these characteristics constitute an appropriate response to the new ecology for higher education that faces higher education today.