

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

HIGHER EDUCATION DYNAMICS

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The titles published in this series are listed at the end of this volume.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation

edited by

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PREFACE

The Douro seminars on higher education studies that take place every October on the banks of the river Douro in the heart of the Port wine region, are now an established tradition well known by the higher education research community. The seminars are the result of an initiative by *Hedda*, a European consortium of nine centres and institutes devoted to research on higher education, and CIPES, its Portuguese associated centre.

At the seminars, each member of a small group of invited researchers presents and discusses an original research-based paper that is revised afterwards taking into account the comments of the participating colleagues. The revised papers form the basis for the annual thematic book published by Springer in the book series called Higher Education Dynamics (HEDY). Paying tribute to the regularity of the seminars it was decided that the volumes originating from the initiative will be collected in a 'series in the series' called the Douro Series.

The first seminar (2001) was dedicated to the *Governance Structures of Higher Education Institutions*. The second seminar (2002) discussed the *Emergence of Managerialism in Higher Education Institutions*, and the third seminar (2003) focused on *Markets in Higher Education*. The 2004 seminar was dedicated to the topic *Cost Sharing and Accessibility in Higher Education*, while the fifth seminar (October 2005) focused on the *Dynamics and Effects of Quality Assurance in Higher Education*.

The present volume contains the edited versions of the papers presented at the fifth Douro seminar. This volume is dedicated to quality, a theme that pervades the life of higher education institutions all over the world. With massification of higher education, quality has come to the forefront of the debates on higher education being used as a tool for a number of diversified actions, ranging from quality management to compliance and control. The developments of the Bologna process and the proposals concerning a European system of quality assurance and accreditation are additional reasons for the interest in the theme underlying the present book.

By using the marketplace more directly as a coordination mechanism for higher education, governments have been forced to strengthen the autonomy of higher education institutions. The rules of the marketplace demand that producers have decision-making freedom to compete and adapt to the competitive environment. However, this has created challenges with respect to governments' steering capacity and policy effectiveness, as institutions have acquired freedom to define their own strategies under conditions of market-like competition. Quality assessment might be seen as a government tool to regain some degree of control over institutions.

On the other hand, new public management approaches have reduced the power of the academic professionals; and one may argue that the use of quality assurance in new public management has led to micromanagement techniques that have been used at the local level (faculty and/or department) to control the behaviour of

academics in an intrusive way. Recently, the European Commission has promoted the implementation of a European accreditation system that may result in a highly stratified European Higher Education Area.

Being initially an almost exclusive concern of academics, quality assurance has become progressively a matter of public concern in the 1980s and 1990s with an emphasis on quality improvement and accountability. The balance between these potentially conflicting objectives shifts towards improvement when academics have a strong voice, and towards accountability when the will of the government predominates.

This book shows that assuring quality, albeit in a number of different forms (quality assessment, programme review, accreditation, licencing, etc.), is nowadays an (intrusive) reality in each national higher education system and will remain an important regulation and steering tool for many governments. The book also analyses some recent trends and developments, such as the increasing internationalisation of quality assurance mechanisms as part of a more globalised higher education sector; the recent focus on accreditation mechanisms in Europe, with the support of the European Commission; the relevance of efficiency and effectiveness in the new quality assurance modes; and the emergence of the marketplace or quasi-market solutions of quality assurance problems. We are convinced that the present book will contribute to a better-informed discussion about the choices and options on the future of quality assurance in higher education.

We are grateful to all who have made the fifth Douro seminar and book possible, namely Amélia Veiga at CIPES and Therese Marie Uppström at *Hedda*, the perfect organisers of the Douro seminars. We are also grateful to Di Davies for her editorial work. We have appreciated the diligence of all our colleagues who have contributed to this book with their papers, comments, and editorial suggestions, and we certainly noticed their forbearance in replying to our tedious editorial demands.

We want to acknowledge the financial support from *Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia*, of the Portuguese Ministry for Science, Technology, and Higher Education, making the organisation of the fifth Douro seminar possible. We also want to acknowledge the financial support of the Luso-American Foundation with the participation of our American colleagues. And last but not least, we register once more the superb environment provided by the management of the Vintage House Hotel on the banks of the Douro River.

Alberto Amaral
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December 2006

DON F. WESTERHEIJDEN, BJØRN STENSAKER,
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INTRODUCTION

1. TRANSFORMATION AND CONTINUITY: ANOTHER BOOK ON QUALITY?

‘Quality is here to stay’ may be one of the worst platitudes in the discourse about quality assurance in higher education – and still it may be a useful statement. It is a platitude, because as Guy Neave stated: “quality is not ‘here to stay’, if only for the self-evident reason that across the centuries of the university’s existence in Europe, it never departed” (Neave 1994: 116). Indeed, quality, especially if taken in its meaning of something exceptional, of excellence (Harvey and Green 1993), is and must be the core value in higher education – it is what makes higher education ‘higher’. Without striving for excellence, there is no way to distinguish higher education from skills training. How much of higher education has already succumbed to demands for providing skills training instead of giving students a higher education?¹ The quality debate is not used just to further the traditional understanding of quality as excellence, but simultaneously as ‘fitness for purpose’, the new purpose being to make higher education institutions more responsive to societal demands for graduates with readily usable knowledge and skills in the job market. In such debates much depends on who uses the term ‘quality’. The new aspect, making our opening platitude still worth repeating, may be that the ambiguity of the term has increasingly come to the fore.

Another reason why we repeat it is that quality has become a central theme in the ways that higher education operates: we have ‘quality management’ in thousands of higher education institutions, we have ‘assessments’, ‘audits’, and ‘accreditation’ as policy instruments in many states² around the world. Apparently, the quality of higher education is no longer seen as self-evident, but as a value about which different actors in higher education systems have different views – and thus it requires special attention. Different actors may have different reasons why they want to give special attention to quality – we will come back to that later – but the general point is that nowadays they do. And there are no signs that this is a fad that will soon wither away. On the contrary, quality assurance schemes are being developed in many states and higher education systems as one of the necessary instruments to adapt higher education institutions to the increasing demands put upon them within the states’ economy and society, and equally to prepare or adapt the states’ systems for the increasing impacts of globalisation on higher education (Vik 2006). Higher education has to ‘produce’ ever-larger numbers of increasingly relevant graduates; it has to focus its research on areas and projects with economic impact; and it has to

attract increasing numbers of foreign students, whether in the continuing project of, for example, European cooperation or in the global competition for short-term income generation (Van Vught, Van der Wende, and Westerheijden 2002) and for long-term development of a workforce that can realise the knowledge-based economy.

Given this continuing and perhaps still growing interest in quality assurance schemes, the aim of this volume is to step back for a moment from the bustle of day-to-day assuring of quality, adapting or changing schemes to new demands and turbulent environments, and reflect on some fundamental questions. The overarching goal of the whole 'Douro Series' is to give an overview of the (theoretical and empirical) state-of-the-art research on certain topics in higher education. We wish to reflect, therefore, from an academic perspective on the dynamics and effects of quality assurance as a policy instrument and management tool in higher education. We look at different institutional arrangements for regulating quality and quality assurance, at how these are 'translated' to the level of higher education institutions, how the higher education institutions respond to the challenges set before them, and we want to sketch some principles of what may be consequences of this reflection for alternative quality assurance schemes in the future. The perspectives that we collected were varied on purpose. This volume is to aid thinking about quality assurance and to extend knowledge about it through critical analysis. Criticism is essential for scientific progress in all areas of knowledge as Lakatos and Musgrave (1974) claim.

2. PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

We will look at the content and main statements of each chapter in the conclusion (Chapter 11), so we will limit ourselves here to indicating the main flow of the argument, noting at the same time that across the chapters different and sometimes contradictory arguments are made.

Quality assurance as a separate area of attention in the steering of higher education can trace its roots back over more than a century, to the end of the 19th century, when in the United States the first accreditation organisations arose. Yet for a long time, this remained an exceptional approach to quality in higher education and even in the United States accreditation was an issue of limited interest. Only when the effects of the transition from 'elite' to 'mass' higher education emerged as a focal area for decision makers ('early warning' was given by Trow 1974) did quality assurance move out of what Ewell in Chapter 6 calls the 'pre-quality' era – he gave 1982 as the time of transition in the United States. European countries caught up quickly, as the first formal quality assurance schemes there were introduced in 1984 (Schwarz and Westerheijden 2004). By the way, the move to mass higher education was certainly not a fad, as mass – or even universal – higher education is here to stay. Consequently, the size and variety of higher education institutions and higher education systems demanded more formal management than what was needed in the small, socially homogeneous elite institutions. There is no need to look to further causes than the size of higher education systems to realise that quality assurance is here to stay. But there are other

reasons as well: limits (or reductions) to public budgets, increasing demands for transparency in general, governmental approaches that favour ex post evaluation over ex ante regulation, often – rightly or wrongly – labelled neo-liberalism or new public management (Van Vught and Westerheijden 1994).

2.1. Framing Quality Assurance: Governmental Tools and Theoretical Perspectives

Quality assurance may in other words be seen in a context of the regulation of higher education. Given the fact that, at least on the surface, there seems to have developed what one could call a ‘general model’ with respect to quality assurance (Van Vught and Westerheijden 1994), one could run the risk of overlooking the options and tools available if quality assurance is conceived as a regulatory problem. As Hood (1983) has pointed out, there are in principle at least four different tools available: economic resources, laws and other regulations, organisation, and signals/information. In many states, the debate on quality assurance is often an indirect result of the choice of instruments: Should quality be economically rewarded? Should new laws on the rights and duties of higher education institutions be clarified? Should an intermediate body be established to control or enhance quality? Should governments limit themselves to informing the general public about the importance of having a focus on quality? Hence, we start our book with the topic of regulation, and how this mix of instruments can and is combined in various states.

In Part I of the book, various public policy perspectives are used to shed light on the choosing and functioning of various governmental policy mixes. Within this broader public policy perspective, several approaches can be identified. Hence, the chapters by Blackmur, Dill, and Westerheijden use and combine various theoretical perspectives from welfare economics, human capital theory, public choice, and neo-institutional theory. Their common denominator is not in the theoretical perspectives as such, but in their search for a better understanding of the quality problem, and how both ‘market failure’ and ‘government failure’ can occur as a result of ill-combined mixes of governmental tools.

Against the backdrop of these analyses, an observer could be surprised by how quality assurance, in practice, was implemented in higher education. After initial, sometimes vehement, discussion on the meaning of ‘quality’, leading to exasperated reactions like “What the Hell is Quality?” (Ball 1985), a rather pragmatic consensus in practice was reached that quality means ‘fitness for purpose’ as well as ‘fitness of purpose’. Hence, as the introductory part illustrates, many higher education systems started working on quality assurance, perhaps without a proper analysis of the policy problem(s) quality assurance was to solve. This point can be empirically illustrated by the fact that ‘fitness for purpose’ and ‘fitness of purpose’ are empirically empty terms: they can mean anything, depending on what is given as purpose.

Consequently, ‘quality higher education’ often remains undefined in operational terms, because there is no single understanding of what the purpose (or multiple purposes) of higher education in current society is: Is it maximising graduate completion whatever the level of qualification? Providing society with a fitting number of competent workers? Advancing scientific knowledge to gain Nobel

Prizes etc.? Or all of the above and more, perhaps in different parts (sectors, institutions, degree levels) of a higher education system? It is to shed light on these issues that other theoretical perspectives are introduced in Parts II and III of the book, acknowledging that the more structural perspectives need to be accompanied by perspectives with greater emphasis on the cultural and political dimensions of higher education? As the chapters by Stensaker as well as Rosa and Amaral illustrate, higher education is also a sector open to policy copying from other sectors, or as the chapters by Perellon and Ewell show, higher education is open to various forms of institutionalisation in which actors, structures, and events form certain political outcomes. Hence, views may differ about what quality is, and how it should best be obtained: politicians, academics, students, employers, and other stakeholders may have different views; each of these groups of stakeholders among themselves may have different views. The variety seems boundless and leads back to Ball's exasperated reaction.

Still, for all those possible purposes, student learning is a necessary condition, but then again there is no well-established 'production theory' detailing how to turn all available inputs (students, staff, facilities, curriculum) into the desired student learning. And who are the students? They seem to become evermore heterogeneous in age, time available for study, study modes (from on-campus to Internet-only), learning styles, gender, ethnicity, previous knowledge, experience and competencies, reasons for studying, etc. Again, we do not see a way out of the vexed definition question by focusing on student learning, although we do emphasise the need to be better informed about the often overlooked microprocesses quality assurance is supposed to improve. As the chapters by Harvey and Newton as well as D'Andrea illustrate, there is a need to improve our theoretical knowledge about the microprocesses of higher education, and to be more open to the possible contributions from theories of learning when designing quality assurance schemes in higher education.

Hence, for our purposes, it is more important to highlight the debates and processes to arrive at a common understanding of the terms in use than to emphasise what are exactly the perspectives of quality in use, or the exact standards and criteria in use. We can, therefore, go forward in this volume without a detailed definition of quality from the outset. In the contributions to follow, there will accordingly not be extensive attention to defining the term. It is noteworthy, however, that Blackmur in Chapter 2 took the observation very seriously that one of us once made, to the effect that there are as many views on quality as there are dimensions distinguished by stakeholders; he consequently writes about 'qualities' in the plural. In a way, this goes back to the literal meaning of the roots of the word, because 'qualitas' in Latin was derived from the interrogative adverb 'qualis', meaning 'how'. 'Qualitas' then would literally mean 'howness', and would point to the different characteristics of higher education for different users rather than to excellence. But that was 20 centuries ago, and language has changed over that long period of time. Yet, even our not choosing an explicit definition of quality has consequences, as will be apparent in the following chapters.

The renewed interest in quality of higher education since the 1980s centred on two questions: Were graduates learning the knowledge and skills necessary for a changing economy in the context of improved study programmes to achieve more

and better learning? Were higher education institutions spending tax money in the right way? In the United States, both questions culminated in the single issue of loan defaults; in Europe and many other more state-dominated higher education systems, the two were seen as separate questions. The tension between the two extremes of improvement and accountability ever since has remained the Scylla and Charybdis (Vroeijenstijn 1995) between which quality assurance schemes had to be steered. While both extremes had an external, societal, and internal, institutional aspect to them – the former was emphasised in the previous sentence – quite often the improvement issue became associated with institutional actors, and the accountability issue was more often the external view on quality assurance schemes. From the outset, therefore, it was clear to us that we would have to include in our book academic perspectives at the institutional level as well as at the level of society and the state, each taking both improvement and accountability aspects into account. Thinking only one step further took us to the buzzwords – and the realities – of a multilevel and multi-actor approach. Taking the mixed public and private system of higher education as a multi-actor system, embedded in a multilevel governance situation (especially if we look at Europe or at federal systems like the United States), instruments such as quality assessment need to be assessed from multiple actors' viewpoints and at different system levels. Also for that reason, we are happy to be able to include comparative perspectives on issues in quality assurance. Sometimes, the comparison is cross-institutional, sometimes cross-national, depending on the level of the issue addressed – Parts I and II are more about cross-national comparison (including multilevel states), while the institutional perspectives dominate Part III. Sometimes the comparisons are across chapters and sometimes it is found within single chapters (as in Dill's Chapter 3 and Perellon's Chapter 7).

The multi-actor perspective was already implicit in the notion of quality as fitness for purpose. The multilevel idea of governance should come naturally to anyone living in a federal state (like the United States) or in the complex international and supranational governance constellation of the European Union and the European Economic Area, which together include almost all our co-authors in this volume. In governance relationships, as well as in multilevel systems, funding may be the main driver and the most direct way of influencing behaviour, since “what gets rewarded, gets done” (as Westerheijden states in Chapter 4). In contrast to such direct steering, quality assurance is a major vehicle in a communication view of steering: the way quality is assessed, and the consequences (sanctions) of positive and negative assessments in a certain quality assurance scheme, carry important strategic messages to all concerned, higher education institutions and stakeholders alike.

2.2. Sensitising Concepts and Foci

In section 2.1, we moved from quality to quality assurance. We venture the statement that quality assurance is here to stay – or maybe that too is a platitude. However that may be, it seems that this new instrument for policy makers and for managers in higher education institutions has gained a secure place among the other modes of management. As Harvey and Newton point out in Chapter 10, there

are four basic methods associated with quality assurance: accreditation, audit, assessment, and external examination. In the literature on quality assurance, much has been written about these methods, and on the pros and cons associated with each. In our discussion of quality assurance, we want to move beyond a focus on the method per se, towards a stronger focus on what we see as the main issues, concepts, and questions surrounding this area: What is the use of quality assurance? Can quality assurance be more than a ritual of filling out forms for student feedback or to record publications? Can it achieve its main goals of accountability and improvement? For whom can it achieve these aims?

To answer these and related questions there are a number of sensitising concepts and foci that can be of assistance to improve our understanding of quality assurance. As such, a key focus in Part I is exactly on these *cost/benefit* relationships in quality assurance, since one of the lessons learned in the practice of quality assurance in higher education has been that, whatever the official balance between quality improvement and accountability, quality improvement is not easily achieved through external quality assurance. As Dill (1995) stated, we cannot achieve higher quality by inspecting; quality has to be ‘made’ painstakingly in the interaction between educators and students at the work-floor level. Accordingly, there is a crucial role for quality management within the higher education institution and even more so for the professional teachers and researchers at the ‘chalk-face’ level. Parts II and III address questions relevant to this. Stensaker in Chapter 5 introduces the concept of *translation*, which we used as the title of Part II, for the process that goes with the move from the governmental, external outlook on quality assurance to the internal, management view. Translation suggests a more complicated process than the more traditional term of ‘implementation’. Implementation suggests a linear, mechanical process of making commands happen, while translation has the image of an active process performed by an interpreter – and much may be lost in translation, as the 2003 movie of that name showed. Successful translation is not just a matter of replacing a word from one language with a word from another, but also must take account of different grammar, syntax, and cultural nuances.

The latter term takes us from the design focus related to regulatory issues to how policies are translated into practice with increased attention paid to policy networks, policy communities, and policy styles. Hence, in Part II, it is not the design, but the *dynamics* of the policy translation process that is emphasised. As Perellon argues in Chapter 7, politicians in various states view problems in various ways: the role of government and their agencies might differ from state to state leading to differently constructed debates on quality and distinct policy styles across states. In a similar vein, though using other words, Ewell in Chapter 6 characterises the history of quality assurance in the United States as a ‘quality game’ with a number of ‘players’, forming a particular, informal, policy community. In this chapter, as well as in the one by Perellon, we can also find examples of the dynamics of the past in the form of the establishment of ‘path dependency’ where new developments can often be explained as reactions and continuations of former decisions and outcomes. Hence, quality assurance that focuses on accountability has to do with knowing about what is done in higher education, and how it affects students and external stakeholders such as employers and society at large.

A lesson learned in the practice of quality assurance in higher education in this perspective is that quality assessment does not automatically lead to quality assurance (Stensaker 2003). That too might need a translation process. Yet the aim of the translation is a different one than in the previous paragraph, as is the target. The aim of accountability is to re-establish a situation where *trust* characterises higher education, as was the case when higher education was still an elite system, both in quantitative terms and in terms of educating the elite classes of society (Trow 1996). Trust is visible in the provision of support, by either public or private bodies, without the requirement that institutions either provide specific goods and services in return for that support or account specifically and in detail for the use of those funds. When trust is weakened, accountability is enforced, since they represent two alternative modes of linking institutions to their surroundings (Trow 1996). Quality assessment in this context can be seen as a substitute for trust (Amaral, Rosa, and Tavares 2006). Accordingly, the target in this case is society at large or more narrowly the political world, not the professional in the higher education institution. With a focus on trust comes also the introduction of the more symbolic aspects of quality assurance. In general, quality assessment has not been very successful in re-establishing trust, because if it had, external quality assessment would have become superfluous. Currently, it seems that subsequent generations of quality assurance schemes have, if anything, become stricter – witness the spread of accreditation across Europe (Schwarz and Westerheijden 2004). However, one should be open to the possibility that this new development also has some elements of symbolic adjustments to it, with the promise of accreditation as a ‘hard’ form of quality assurance although this image might be questioned in practice (Stensaker and Harvey 2006). The intention is, nevertheless, that the introduction of accreditation will increase the level of trust in the sector, an ambition that Ewell questions in Chapter 6.

An interesting exception to this view nowadays seems to be the United Kingdom, where programme assessments were replaced with institutional audits in 2001 (Brennan and Williams 2004). It remains a question, though, whether that was a move to re-establish trust in the higher education institutions. Hence, the penultimate chapter by two British authors, Harvey and Newton, proposes ‘moving on’ by giving more weight to empirical evidence and by blurring the boundaries between institutional enhancement and external evaluation.

In this way, Harvey and Newton address a theme missing in much of the popular discussions and publications: the question of what higher education does to students. We want to pay attention to this aspect of *transformation* (as put forward forcibly in Harvey and Knight 1996), also because it implies that for an important category of ‘consumers’ there is no fixed purpose against which they can assess higher education’s fitness. The aim of education, and especially of students’ first experience of higher education, is to assist students to be transformed from adolescents with school-type knowledge into adults ready to enter society and the labour market at the highest levels of competencies available. From this, two consequences follow. First, at a superficial level, we chose ‘transformation’ as the title of Part III. Second, and much more importantly, it means that standard models of quality assurance in which customers’ needs are taken as exogenous and immutable cannot be applied to the bulk of higher

education (in short training courses, especially for post-bachelor participants, this may be different). Quality assurance models, for example, developed in the business world may be useful, but only after smart adaptation, not simple adoption³; a first approximation of such an approach is described in Chapter 8 by Rosa and Amaral.

The contribution by Rosa and Amaral simultaneously helps to illustrate the final point we want to make in this section about the themes in this book – that a ‘one size fits all’ approach is not suitable for successful quality assurance in higher education. The contrast between their chapter and the one following, by D’Andrea (Chapter 9), shows that while in a Portuguese university a business and management-oriented approach to introducing quality assurance may be useful, in other situations improving the quality in higher education institutions would be better served by looking to the nature of the ‘primary process’ – education and the theories underlying it.

3. BEYOND STATE CONTEXTS – QUALMS FACING THE FUTURE

A careful reader of the ‘Douro Series’ will notice that this volume is different from previous books in that it is less occupied by country-specific experiences and chronicles of changes in higher education, emphasising more the basic challenges facing quality assurance regardless of geography, and some of the universal lessons that research on this topic has disclosed. This is not an attempt to override the conclusion in section 2.2 – our scepticism towards the ‘one size fits all’ approach is still present, and many of the chapters draw their empirical evidence from specific states – but a recognition of some general tendencies with respect to how quality assurance seems to develop in different parts of the world. Even though this volume can be said to have a European touch to it, we do not think that that is a disadvantage, because an understanding of the situation in Europe can be of relevance to a number of other regions and contexts as well. The European touch in this volume does not go so far as to give a detailed account of, for example, the Bologna process; that international policy development is mentioned mainly in the final part of Westerheijden’s chapter. He stresses that the Bologna process is primarily an international lever for national reform agendas, but it is developing its own dynamic, thereby influencing the national agendas of the participating states’ higher education systems to some extent (very slightly in some states, and considerably in others). This is the perspective from which we want to view the European situation and the Bologna process in it: as cases of the general class of influences on quality assurance in higher education systems coming from beyond the national context.

What is first and foremost in our mind is the tendency that quality assurance issues are to a growing extent internationalised and fast becoming an inherent part of a more globalised higher education sector (Van Vught, Van der Wende, and Westerheijden 2002). What this internationalisation and globalisation of higher education mean for quality assurance is still unknown, but we do have some indications where the chapters in this book might be of assistance in improving our knowledge on how to better understand the current developments.

The increasing focus on accreditation is one such tendency (Schwarz and Westerheijden 2004) which can be seen with the use of quality assurance as a tool for the implementation of supranational policies such as in the case of the Bologna process (Amaral, Rosa, and Tavares 2006). Nevertheless, for those predicting that internationalisation and globalisation in a more deterministic fashion will lead to harmonisation and less diversity, the chapters by Westerheijden (Chapter 4) and Ewell (Chapter 6) provide some counter-arguments pointing to the importance of the inherent dynamics of policy processes, sometimes leading to quite unexpected outcomes.

If one perceives internationalisation to include policy copying between different states, Stensaker (Chapter 5), Perellon (Chapter 7), and Rosa and Amaral (Chapter 8) should also provide interesting examples of how global ideas and practices might be interpreted quite differently in various contexts. We do know that quality assurance is a phenomenon that is ‘travelling’ between countries, creating a field where one can identify both adopters and latecomers (Neave 1994), and where the latter sometimes looks to the former for inspiration and experience. There is a tendency to overestimate what can be learned from one setting to another, as we can see from the adoption of the European Union ‘open method of coordination’ as a way to induce policy borrowing between states, based on the use of indicators and benchmarks. Therefore, we would argue that perhaps the most important lesson to be learned is acknowledging the complexities surrounding the spread of ideas in higher education. These complexities derive from the fact that higher education is embedded in contexts of regulation, funding, and other policy instruments, in economic circumstances and in specific societies and cultures. Accordingly, the ideas have to be made to fit all those contexts as well as the particular policy problems they are supposed to solve.

Another tendency that can be identified internationally is the issue of efficiency and effectiveness of the current quality assurance modes. This is a theme that is high on the agenda in some of the most experienced states with long-established quality assurance schemes, and which is a common starting point also for the chapters by Blackmur (Chapter 2), Dill (Chapter 3), D’Andrea (Chapter 9), and Harvey and Newton (Chapter 10), although their answers differ with respect to means and ways to address such issues. Although one probably cannot relate the emergence of ‘lighter touch’ arrangements of quality assurance in some states to the issues of the lack of efficiency and effectiveness of existing schemes alone, one should not overlook the possibility that concerns about the costs and increasing bureaucracy surrounding many existing systems will increase in strength in years to come – both from the higher education institution and the government.

That leads us to the final point we want to make on the increasing internationalisation of quality assurance, i.e. the increasing weight given to quasi-market and market solutions of quality assurance problems. As illustrated by Dill in Chapter 3, and partly also by Ewell in Chapter 6, quality assurance in the governmental mode has a new competitor in the growing numbers of ranking systems that are being established (Dill and Soo 2005; Van Dyke 2005). With the increasing interest in such alternative ways of accountability in many parts of the world, we should also be open to the possibility that the current governmentally initiated or

governmentally owned quality assurance schemes actually face a competitive arrangement that could diminish their influence, and maybe even threaten their existence (Stensaker and Harvey 2006). On the other hand, rankings may – like quality assurance schemes have done over the past decades – be added to the higher education policy toolbox without replacing any previously existing instrument. Overall then, agreeing with Dill (1998: 362) that the state not only decides “the effectiveness of government provision of higher education” but also the “effective functioning of markets and professional control”, our hope is that the present volume contributes to a better-informed discussion about the choices and options concerning the future of quality and of quality assurance in higher education.

NOTES

- 1 At the same time, the mistaken belief that ‘excellence’ must mean ‘academic excellence’ has led to the widespread phenomenon of academic drift, especially among ‘colleges’, i.e. mainly teaching-only, polytechnic types of higher education institutions. This tendency threatens to pervert excellent higher education institutions aimed at educating highly skilled but also reflective ‘practitioners’ (Schön 1987).
- 2 The connection between nation states and higher education systems seems to have been loosened in recent years. Ever since its Constitution was written, the United States has had higher education systems within the federal states, but in large European countries the devolvement of authority over, amongst other things, higher education from nation states to regional entities, as in the United Kingdom, Spain, or Germany, means that we have to be increasingly careful about words. In our text, we will use ‘state’ as a neutral term denoting any public authority with a say over higher education, from federal states to nation states and up to supranational authorities like the European Union. Since there is no easy adjective for ‘state’, we will often use ‘national’ where one should read ‘of the state’.
- 3 Using a different metaphor, we return here to the implementation–translation divide.

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