Bernhard KERNEGGER[1] & Oliver VETTORI (Wien)

Editorial: In quality (assurance) we trust – don't we?

Quality assurance is obviously here to stay. In the past twenty years, 'quality' and 'quality assurance' have become two of the most-used and most-discussed 'buzzwords' (LASKE et al., 2000) in international higher education, constituting a remarkably successful management fashion (STENSAKER, 2007). On the other hand, as Vroeijenstijn had already noted, almost two decades ago: "The concept of quality is not new: it has always been part of academic tradition. It is the outside world that now emphasizes the need for explicit attention to quality." (VROEI-JENSTIJN, 1995, p. 2; cf. also MITTERAUER, in this volume)

A lot of indicators of and reasons for the changing relationship between higher education and its environment have been identified, such as a global increase in student numbers (massification of higher education), a growing number of ever more diverse higher education institutions, the emergence of new governmental paradigms ('new public management') and a general concern for accountability, the increased mobility of students, teachers and higher education graduates across Europe, and an international trend towards a more consumerist view on higher education and the roles within it (cf. HODSON & THOMAS, 2003; BRENNAN & SHAH, 2000; SCHNELL & KOPP, 2000, VAN VUGHT, 2000; cf. also VETTO-RI, 2012). The references to the European context also already indicate the pivotal role of the Bologna Process as "an obvious driver for change with regard to quality in steering mechanisms" (SCHWARZ & WESTERHEIJDEN, 2004, p. 36) – small wonder, then, that it has been repeatedly framed as 'the quality reform' on national levels (cf. EUA, 2007).

On the other hand, it was not until the Berlin Communiqué, that quality was found "to be at the heart of a European Higher Education area" (BERLIN COMMUNIQUÉ, 2003). Nevertheless, the emergence of quality assurance as a regular policy field and professional domain had already started some fifteen years before that, with the UK and the Netherlands taking a pioneer role in Europe (see also LOUKKOLA, in this volume). Then, after a phase of Europe-wide pilot initiatives in the early 1990s on models of internal and external quality assurance, the next decade saw the implementation of formal quality assurance instruments and processes such as self-assessment, supporting documentation, peer review and public reports in most European countries (cf. HARVEY, 2006). Closely intertwined with the Bologna Process, quality assurance has since become a central element of higher education development all over Europe (cf. SCHWARZ & WESTERHEIJDEN, 2004). This can be particularly well observed in the Bergen Communiqué (2005), where universities were explicitly urged to enhance the quality of their educational activities through systematic internal mechanisms and by linking them to external

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[1] E-Mail: bernhard.kernegger@uni-ak.ac.at

quality assurance. This led to a remarkable trend towards institutional quality assurance systems between 2005 and 2010 (cf. LOUKKOLA & ZHANG, 2010). In 2008, an OECD publication named the development of external quality assurance systems among the most important trends in higher education in the last decades (cf. RIEGLER, 2010, p. 157). The increase in respective publications, conferences, forums, networks and quality assurance professionals can in addition be regarded as an indicator of the emergent institutionalization and professionalisation of the field.

This phase of growth was accompanied by an increasing number of critical analyses, and not just from the perspective of the academics affected by the system (cf. NEWTON, 2002, 2000 or LIESSMANN, 2006), but also on part of the quality assurance community itself (see i.a. VETTORI, 2012). It almost seems as if the quality assurance movement had entered a new phase of "realism" (cf. STENSAKER, 2008, p. 4), where the impact issue takes centre stage. Yet in contrast to the Anglo-American tradition of evaluation research, where questions on the use and effects of educational evaluations have been the object of academic debate and research for years, the respective discourse in European Higher Education is still showing some considerable gaps and blind spots.

At least partly, this problem may result from the still unclear relationship of quality and quality assurance. In many ways, "'Quality' has the rather dubious honour of being one of the most intangible key concepts in higher education discourse" (VETTORI, 2012, p. 12). Conceptually it is framed as "relative" (HARVEY & GREEN, 1993), "subjective" (DOHERTY, 2008) "dynamic" and "contextual" (VETTORI et al., 2007), "contested" (NEWTON, 2002; BARNETT, 1992) or "value-laden" (KEMENADE et al., 2008) – all characteristics which may be polemically subsumed under one category: 'it depends'. Leaving it at that has its own dangers, however: As LASKE et al. (2000) have found, the less such quality notions are defined the more they run the risk of becoming a tool for safeguarding and enforcing (political) interests. But maybe things become clearer, when focussing on quality assurance instead of quality itself? HARVEY (2006, p. 2) compares the difference between quality and quality assurance to the concept of intelligence and IQ tests, with the latter purporting to measure intelligence. Following this train of thought, the relationship is one between a complex construct and a broadly accepted (though always limited) attempt at operationalisation. Ironically however, the major part of the literature on quality assurance omits the operationalisation part altogether (usually by paying a reverential nod to the relativity and complexity of the quality concept), and focus on the instrumental side instead. Several definitions (e.g. BROWN, 2009; BLACKMUR, 2007), for example, regard quality assurance as a process of identifying quality related characteristics, fixing standards for these characteristics (to ensure at least a 'minimum' of quality) and monitoring/protecting the standards through a combination of institutional and external actions – mirroring the "hope that error can be eliminated" (BARNETT, 1992, p. 117). This view is contrasted by Harvey and Green, for whom quality assurance is explicitly not about specifying standards and quality criteria, but about "ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality, however defined and measured, is delivered" (HARVEY & GREEN,

1993, p. 19) – a view which Harvey would later pronounce even more clearly (HARVEY, 2004-9).

What practically all definitions and viewpoints have in common, though, is an emphasis on the instrumental character of quality assurance, putting it into the service of achieving quality objectives on the organisational macro and micro level (cf. VETTORI, 2012). Consequently and unavoidably, this brings us back to the critical line of questions indicated above: after more than two decades of experiences (and experiments) with quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area, the 'impact question' is continuously becoming more relevant. What are the outcomes and effects of all these endeavours? What has been achieved and by which means? And how can the impact be observed?

On a European level, the 'UK-Experience' (cf. the impact analyses by HOECHT, 2006 or HARVEY, 2005) can be regarded as an impressive example of the major structural problems that can arise from an overemphasis on the external control part. Overall, however research on the impact of quality assurance – whether on the system level or on the level of particular institutions – is rather scarce, even though the relevance of the topic is on the rise (cf. STENSAKER, 2008, 2007b). Practically all higher education actors and stakeholders have come into contact with various forms of quality assurance and quality management, and the issue on the positive and negative aspects of current developments remain heavily debated. Consequently, this issue of the ZFHE wants to seize the opportunity to undertake a critical yet constructive assessment of the status quo.

The actual call has tried to identify different levels and aspects of impact. Due to the Pan-European character of the subject, the call was published internationally (explaining the novelty of an English editorial as well) – which made it possible, in the end, not only to assemble contributions from the inner sphere of the growing ZFHE community, but also to collect inputs from current and former EUA representatives, as well as to provide room for an argumentative dispute between a former ENQA board member and the current ENQA president.

Overall, the contributions to this volume provide plentiful of reflective insights on past and current developments and constructive suggestions for the future, spanning from European level comparative analyses to the micro level of individual institutional practices:

At the international macro level, Tia LOUKKOLA reflects on previous and upcoming European developments from a policy perspective. In her analysis, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) play an important role as a common reference for the development of quality assurance procedures all over Europe. Her argument that this still leaves room for many national differences is supported by David CAMPBELL who identifies some key aspects in which various European countries differ, using data from a broad survey project dedicated to explore the changes in academic cultures throughout Europe (CAP). Unaddressed by both papers, however, remains the tension between the current convergence and standardisation trends and the obvious need to tailor QA systems to national and cultural contexts: At the moment, most

relevant EU and Bologna activities still seem to focus more on standardisation than on supporting diversity.

Still on the macro level, but with a clear focus on the Austrian situation, Lukas MITTERAUER reflects on the strategic context of quality assurance, pointing out that quality and quality assurance cannot be separated from – and are in fact very much influenced by – the overarching (political) governance system. Thus they need to be contextualised in order to develop a more productive path, such as supporting strategic processes of change within complex institutions.

Opening the forum block – where this time ZFHE has directly invited a number of renowned professionals to reflect on the status quo of national and international quality assurance –, Kurt SOHM (former managing director of the Austrian Fachhochschulrat and former ENQA board member) delivers a polemic yet effective plea against the misuse of external quality agencies in a political game of shirking responsibility. Achim HOPBACH, ENQA president and newly appointed head of the Austrian quality assurance agency (AQ Austria), counters with a strong analysis of his own, offering a potentially promising outlook towards a very different form of external quality assurance. Taking an institutional view, Andreas RAGGAUTZ (head of the performance and quality management unit at the University of Graz) opts for a stronger developmental focus and emphasises the potential of linking quality assurance to governance issues, thus creating a quality management system focusing the management side. Concluding the forum, Karin RIEGLER, former EUA policy officer and now vice rector for academic affairs at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, presents five theses from her experience in both functions, which can also be read as a suggestion for the near future.

Very closely related to this forum debate, Manuel PIETZONKA's research paper brings up some strong empiric evidence that at least programme accreditation in Germany is not capable of judging the effects of internal quality assurance on programme level in an effective way, thus supporting some of SOHM's polemics. A different possibility to ease the relationship between agencies and higher education institutions is described by Viola KÜSSNER and Cornelius LEHNGUTH: Cooperation between higher education institutions in building up quality management systems can not only enrich the process within each institution, but can also lead to a better balance between institutions and external quality assurance agencies. Susanne IN DER SMITTEN and Ulrich HEUBLEIN bring up another different approach: for them, establishing a quality management system is not so much an externally set task to fulfil, but an adequate strategy to bundle central and peripheral resources in order to tackle specific problems like, in their case, the reduction of drop outs.

Also located at institutional level, Benjamin DITZEL's very theory-driven paper provides an analysis of process oriented approaches and how they offer valuable options beyond any technical or administrative dimension, yet also pointing out that these approaches can endanger higher education institutions when they do not sufficiently consider their specific social and interaction logics. By describing a specific approach (FH Münster), Annika BOENTERT contributes a practical example that can be fruitfully compared with DITZEL's theoretical analysis, showing that the necessary effort for carefully exploring a given context before introducing

new mechanisms into a system can pay for itself quickly, e.g. in the form of broad acceptance within an institution.

Growing awareness in the field that specific QA instruments need to be contextualised and incorporated into an institution's QA system and quality culture, is also mirrored in the micro level papers of the final section of this ZFHE volume: Christiane METZGER presents an approach for empirically determining student workload, as a basis for curriculum reforms. Katrin THUMSER-DAUTH et al. introduce a structured study programme report as a comprehensive tool for programme management and curriculum development. And Nadine MERKATOR and Andrea WELGER present a methodical variant of carrying out student feedback on teaching in a more use- and meaningful way from a developmental perspective.

Summing up, the contributions in this ZFHE issue demonstrate that academics and third space professionals alike take a very differentiated view towards the developments of the past two decades: Critiques are balanced by constructive suggestions of how the situation could be improved, paving the way for potentially powerful new approaches, while also showing awareness of the organisational and political complexities involved. There is a strong tendency of countering the instrumentalism of the past years by contextualising QA activities and integrating them in more comprehensive arrangements (if not even systems) or embedding them in the disciplinary and organisational cultures that are already there. In very simple terms: Quality assurance may have grown in the past twenty years, but it has also grown up – whether the momentum of the discourse can be translated into practice remains to be seen, but the many practical examples collected here can at least be interpreted as a promising indicator.

Before leaving the valued readers to the papers which we could only brush very quickly in this editorial, we want to express a warm thank you for ZFHE board member Doris Carstensen, for entrusting us with the pleasure and challenge of preparing and editing this issue and for her valuable inputs along the way. In a similar manner, we are also very much indebted to Michael Raunig, who accompanied us through the entire process: without his experience and calm support, we would not have been able to get everything done in time. The same holds true for the dozens of reviewers, who have done a remarkable job in helping the authors to further develop their contributions.

Last but definitely not least we want to thank all our authors themselves who have decided to take up the challenge of the call and/or follow our invitations. We sincerely hope that their papers will engage, enlighten and provoke the readers of this issue in a similar way as we have experienced them.

With our best wishes for some 'quality time' and maybe even some joy,
Oliver Vettori & Bernhard Kernegger

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Editors

Mag. Bernhard KERNEGGER ‖ Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien, Bereich Studienangelegenheiten, Universitäts- und Qualitäts-entwicklung ‖ Oskar Kokoschka-Platz 2, A-1010 Wien

www.dieangewandte.at

bernhard.kernegger@uni-ak.ac.at

Dr. Oliver VETTORI ‖ WU – Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien Pro-gramm- und Qualitätsmanagement ‖ Augasse 2-6, A-1090 Wien

www.wu.ac.at/structure/servicecenters/qmpd

oliver.vettori@wu.ac.at