

Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education: Current Practices in OECD Countries and a Literature Review on Potential Effects

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1 Introduction

1. This paper examines the current academic and policy literatures surrounding quality assurance in tertiary education. It provides a typology of existing national quality assurance mechanisms, in addition to presenting the advantages and disadvantages of different quality assurance systems. Finally, it provides an account of the current empirical evidence on the effects of quality assurance mechanisms.

2. One limitation of this paper should be noted: it focuses principally on quality assurance systems that assess quality of teaching and learning as opposed to the quality of research. A major reason for this is that literature on quality assurance processes concentrates more on quality issues related to teaching and learning than on research. Vroeijenstijn (1995a), for instance, argues that focusing on quality of teaching and learning may be justified by the fact that it raises more questions than does quality of research. In the case of research there are already well-established quality assessment mechanisms based on peer-reviews; publications in refereed journals can be assessed, conferences allow researchers to discuss each other's work and research funding allocation is often based on the quality of proposals. Such an open scholarly community that would allow the evaluation of each other's activities does not exist in the case of teaching and learning.

3. On the other hand the development of quality assurance of teaching and learning is more recent. Several broad trends have fostered interest in quality assurance policies in higher education; including the trend toward mass higher education, growing diversity of educational offerings, the internationalisation of higher education and the expansion of private higher education institutions and of distance learning (El-Khawas *et al.*, 1998). In numerous countries, a further factor has been the growing pressure on governments to limit public expenditure. Furthermore, guiding student demand to fields that are important for economic development is a key issue in the transition to technology-based economies (Van Vught and Westerheijden, 1994).

4. This paper has four sections. Section two examines different types of existing national quality assurance systems in higher education. Section three presents the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to quality assurance. Section four considers difficulties in implementing effective quality assurance systems. Finally, section five summarises current evidence on the effects of quality assurance systems.

2 Typology and description of existing national quality assurance systems in higher education

5. This section summarises the key features of existing national systems of quality assurance in tertiary education within the OECD area.

2.1 Definitions for quality in higher education

6. The term quality assurance refers to “systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and improvement” (Vroeijenstijn, 1995a). As cited in Watty (2003), a further review of the literature around change in higher education reveals two schools of thought:

- *The first attaches quality to a context and as a consequence quality becomes meaningful (Baird, 1988; Fry, 1995; Nordvall and Braxton, 1996). For example, references to the*

quality of assessment, student intake, academic programmes, teaching and learning, the student experience and programme designs are not uncommon. Any attempt to define or attach meaning to the term is largely ignored and one is left to assume that it is 'high' quality that is being referred to as opposed to 'good' or 'poor' quality.

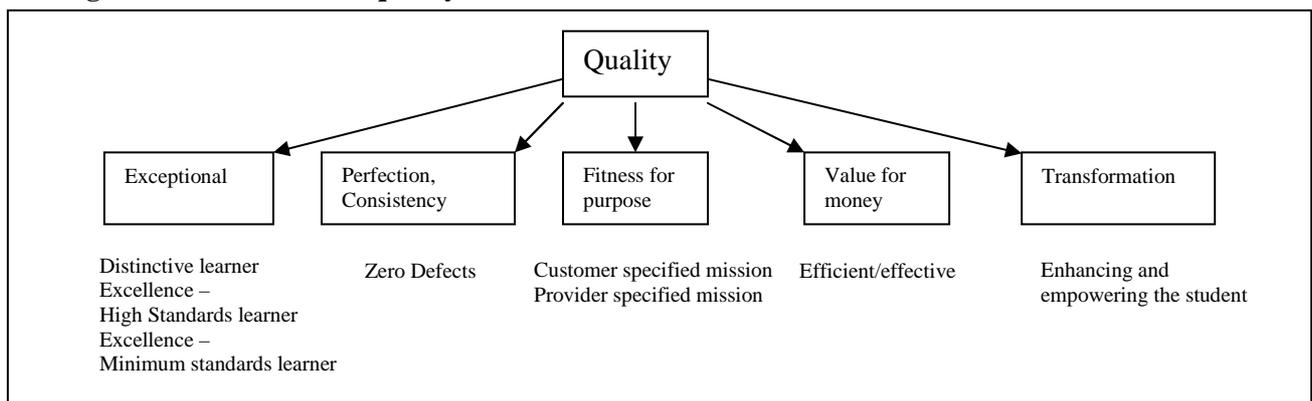
- A second way of thinking about quality relates to a stakeholder-specific meaning. Here quality is considered, having regard to a variety of stakeholders with an interest in higher education, each having the potential to think about quality in different ways. In particular, the early works of Vroeijenstijn (1992), Middlehurst (1992) and Harvey and Green (1993) highlight the importance and value of considering quality from a variety of stakeholder perspectives.

7. Harvey and Green (1993) identify five categories or ways of thinking about quality. As cited in Watty (2003) key aspects of each of these categories can be summarised as follows:

- *Exception: distinctive, embodies in excellence, passing a minimum set of standards.*
- *Perfection: zero defects, getting things right the first time (focus on process as opposed to inputs and outputs).*
- *Fitness for purpose: relates quality to a purpose, defined by the provider.*
- *Value for money: a focus on efficiency and effectiveness, measuring outputs against inputs. A populist notion of quality (government).*
- *Transformation: a qualitative change; education is about doing something to the student as opposed to something for the consumer. Includes concepts of enhancing and empowering: democratisation of the process, not just outcomes.*

Watty (2003) suggests that the dimension of quality as perfection can be removed, since higher education does not aim to produce defect-free graduates. Lomas (2001) suggests that fitness for purpose and transformation seem to be the two most appropriate definitions of quality, according to small-scale research with a sample of senior managers in higher education institutions.

Figure 1. Definitions for quality



Source: Watty, 2003 p. 215

2.2 Approaches to quality assurance

8. This section describes the different approaches to quality that can be taken by quality assurance systems. Quality assurance agencies can adopt one or more of these according to different educational systems and traditions (Woodhouse, 1999).

9. The three main approaches to quality are accreditation, assessment and audit. Accreditation and evaluation (which includes assessment and audit) differ in their perspectives. Both accreditation and assessment monitor the quality of teaching and learning, while audit focuses on internal procedures adopted by a HEI in order to achieve its objectives.

Accreditation

10. Accreditation is an evaluation of whether an institution or programme meets a threshold standard and qualifies for a certain status. Obtaining accreditation may have implications for the HEI itself (e.g. permission to operate) and/or its students (e.g. eligibility for grants) (Woodhouse, 1999). The focus of accreditation is comprehensive, examining the mission, resources, and procedures of a HEI or programme (Dill, 2000). The output of an accreditation is a yes/no decision, though graduations are also possible (Woodhouse, 1999).

11. Accreditation is a widely used method in quality assurance in OECD countries. In the United States accreditation of both programmes and institutions is the main quality assurance method (Eaton, 2004). Accreditation of programmes is used on a regular basis by about half of the European quality assurance agencies. This method is frequently used in German-speaking countries, in the associated countries, by the Dutch and also Nordic and southern agencies. Accreditation of institutions is done on a regular basis by 22% of the agencies in Europe, e.g. by German, Austrian agencies and some in the associated countries. Accreditation procedures can also focus on QAAs; for instance, one of the tasks of the German Akkreditierungsrat is to accredit other agencies (ENQA, 2003). US accrediting organisations also undergo a periodic external review based on specific standards, this process is known as ‘recognition’ (Eaton, 2004).

Assessment

12. Assessment is an evaluation that makes graded judgements about quality, in this respect it goes beyond accreditation that makes a binary judgement (Dill, 2000). Assessment asks “how good are your outputs?” The output of an assessment is a quantitative evaluation, a grade (whether numeric, literal or descriptive) (Woodhouse, 1999).

Programme and institutional assessments are widely used by European QAAs. Programme assessment is one of the most frequently used methods. It is done on a regular basis by 53% of the European agencies, mainly in the Nordic, Dutch or English-speaking countries. Focusing on programmes is particularly frequent in the non-university sector. Institutional assessment is less widespread; 22% of the European agencies are using it regularly (ENQA, 2003).

Audit

13. A quality audit checks the extent to which the institution is achieving its own explicit or implicit objectives (Woodhouse, 1999). As cited in Woodhouse (1999) “ISO (Standards New Zealand, 1994) defines quality audit as a three-part process, checking 1) the suitability of the planned quality procedures in

relation to the stated objectives; 2) the conformity of the actual quality activities with the plans; and 3) the effectiveness of the activities in achieving the stated objectives". Audit asks 'are your processes effective?' The output is a description of the extent to which the claims of the HEI are correct (Woodhouse, 1999).

14. Academic audits are carried out at the institution level. However, unlike accreditation or assessment, audits do not aim at making a comprehensive review a HEI's or programme's resources and activities, nor do they directly evaluate the quality of teaching or learning. Rather audits focus on those processes implemented by HEIs in order to assure and improve the quality teaching and learning (Dill, 2000).

15. In Europe institutional audit is regularly used by 28% of the quality assurance agencies. It is used on a regular base in Ireland and the UK and by some of the agencies in Nordic and associated countries. The use of programme audits is not very common in European quality assurance (ENQA, 2003).

2.3 Level of quality review

16. Subject to wide debate is whether the quality review should focus on the institutional level or, instead, on academic programmes. Practices vary widely among Western European countries. In Denmark, the Netherlands and Portugal the focus is on academic programmes, in some HEIs in Germany the reviews focus on the institutional level, while in France, the United Kingdom and Ireland both institutional and programme reviews are carried out. Outside of Europe, many countries have begun with institutional reviews but, as their systems experienced growth in professional fields of study, there has been a trend towards programme-wide approaches (El-Khawas *et al.*, 1998).

2.4 Scope of evaluation

17. The scope of QAAs varies considerably between and within different national education systems.

- A first categorisation can be made by territorial level. Agencies may carry out evaluations of HEI in a determined region, as it is the case in those countries where education is the responsibility of regional entities (Canada, United States, Belgium, Germany, Spain etc). In other countries national QAAs operate all over the national territory.
- A second categorisation is by type of HEI. In some countries agencies cover both university and non-university HEIs (Germany, Iceland, United Kingdom, Nordic countries except Sweden, Portugal etc.) In others separate agencies are responsible for quality assurance in the university and non-university sector. In both cases a further distinction can be made between public and private HEIs (Van Damme *et al.*, 2004).

2.5 Key agencies and organisations involved in quality assurance

18. The identity of the relevant stakeholders in higher education and how their interests may be utilised in the context of quality assurance is subject to discussion in the literature. The first question is whether stakeholders should be actively involved in quality assurance processes or whether the reviews should involve only quality assurance agencies and academics. Also, if stakeholders should have an active role, the question is what organisational implications this could have within quality assurance systems (Thune, 1998).

19. **Government body.** Government bodies often play an important role in the quality assurance of higher education. In the US for instance, the United States Department of Education, a federal agency is one of the two institutions that carry out the recognition of accrediting agencies (Eaton, 2004). Similarly, in Japan independent evaluation bodies must be recognised by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Sciences and Technology (Kimura *et al.*, 2004).

20. **Autonomous agency.** Almost all European countries have an agency co-coordinating quality assurance. External quality assurance agencies are usually established either by the national or regional government or by the HEIs themselves, often at the requirement of the government. The agency is by nature an independent organisation with a steering body. However, institutions and government may be represented on the board of the quality assurance agency, or contribute to the funding of the agency or evaluations (QAANZ, 1999).

21. In Europe, the main source of funding of quality assurance in higher education is the government, but also the HEIs are a source of funding in 1/3 of the cases (ENQA, 2003). In Denmark evaluation system is owned by the government, while the Dutch system has both a government owned and a university-owned level (Thune, 1996). The QAAs that are not funded by government are in virtually all cases funded by the evaluated higher education institutions. Agencies of this type exist in Belgium, France, Latvia, Romania and the VSNU in Netherlands (ENQA, 2003).

Further sources of funding, according to the ENQA survey (2003), include the National Assembly (France), donations (Akkreditierungsrat in Germany) and joint funding by central government, national higher education funding councils, HEIs and students (Higher Education and Training Awards Council in Ireland, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK).

22. **Other stakeholders.** Generally, other stakeholders (students, graduates, employers, government and other budget providers) have a limited role in the European quality assurance procedures. An example for participation of other stakeholders can be provided by Denmark, where the expert panels always include employer representatives and extensive surveys are conducted of the attitudes of employers, recent graduates and students in the evaluation processes. Sweden, where students are included in the expert panels can be mentioned as another example (Thune, 1998).

2.6 Criteria and standards

23. “For each academic programme it is possible to define standards, or minimum requirements to be expected from the graduates. Standards can be described as a statement in general or specific terms of the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitude to be demonstrated by successful graduates” (Vroeijenstijn, 1995a).

24. The evaluation criteria can be formulated by a quality assurance agency, a government body, an expert group or a professional organisation, but they are also often formulated jointly by diverse stakeholders (ENQA, 2003). For instance, in the US standards for recognition of accrediting organisations (i.e. standards for accreditation of agencies) are defined by the recognising institutions (CHEA – independent institution and USDE – federal agency) (Eaton, 2004). In Australia, the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes were recommended by the Joint Committee on Higher Education (composed of representatives from the Commonwealth and each State and Territory department with responsibility for higher education) and approved by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (AQF, 2000). In Japan, requirements for establishing a new institution are stipulated in a ministerial ordinance, the “Standards for University Establishment” (Kimura *et al.*, 2004).

2.7 Methods used for quality review

25. Most EQA agencies use three basic methods for quality review, namely self-review followed by a peer-review and/or external review. From an overall perspective, the choice of approach to quality (accreditation/ assessment/ audit) does not seem to influence the methodological elements fundamentally.

26. **Self-review** is a key element in most evaluation procedures. It provides a standard against which the HEI can measure itself and a framework for building up a definition of quality. Thus “it helps the HEI check how far it is achieving its strategic mission and goals, and it allows it to prepare an action plan for further development” (Thune, 1998). Self-reviews are carried out by many HEIs though their nature varies significantly (Brennan and Shah, 2000). In the US, there has been a long tradition of conducting self-reviews (generally termed self-study) in accreditation procedures and HEIs tend to have a strong capacity for the collection, analysis and interpretation of information for such procedures (Brennan, 1997). In Europe, a self-review is included in 94% of the assessment and 68% of the accreditation procedures (ENQA, 2003). In order to facilitate the conduction of self-reviews, practically all European QAAs provide guidance or manuals, though only a minority of them provides training (Thune, 1998).

27. **Peer-review.** A peer-review is an evaluation carried out by another academic or academics, usually in the same discipline (Frederiks *et al.*, 1994). Peer-reviews, already dominant in research evaluation, are increasingly used in the evaluation of teaching and learning as well. However, who is considered as a peer varies in different quality assurance systems (Brennan and Shah, 2000). In US accreditation procedures peer-reviews involve faculty and administrative peers in the profession and are carried out for reviewing the self-study and for conducting site visits (Eaton, 2004).

28. **External review.** Increasingly, quality review panels include non-academic members and people from other countries in addition to peers (Woodhouse, 1999). In the US for instance, the review panel may also include non-academic public members who have an interest in higher education (Eaton, 2004). In the Danish quality assurance system there are permanent, salaried external examiners and the review panel includes not only professional or academic experts, but also representatives of employers (Thune, 1998).

2.8 Data gathering instruments

The following four major sources of data are used in quality assurance mechanisms.

29. **Self-review reports:** Generally, they provide a foundation for peer or external-review teams.

30. **Site visits** are a widely used follow-up on the self-review reports; site visits and self-review reports are closely connected, though there may be a difference depending if the key focus is on control or elaborating of the content of the reports (ENQA, 2003).

Site visits are widely used in European quality assurance procedures. An ENQA survey found that only in two cases site visits are not used: In Norway, during accreditation of programmes and in the Netherlands, in benchmarking of programmes (ENQA, 2003). However, there are major differences among QAAs regarding the procedures used during the site visit to the programme or institution. “The British spend up to four days on a visit which even includes observations by experts of class room teaching. The Danes concentrate on a one day visit which, however, is so carefully planned that all relevant groups from the level of Rectors/Deans down to students are covered in sessions” (Thune, 1998). Site visit is also used US accreditation procedures, where the self-review is used as a foundation during the site visit (Eaton, 2004).

31. **Surveys** (questionnaires, interviews etc.) are typically produced in connection with an evaluation procedure (ENQA, 2003).

In Europe the use of surveys is not as common as the use of other methods. About half of the agencies carry out some kind of surveys (ENQA, 2003). For instance, the Danish Evaluation Centre carries out surveys among the users of the academic programme: students, recent graduates and employers (Thune, 1996). Generally, the use of survey is more frequent in the EU countries than in the associated countries, in assessment rather than in accreditation procedures and in the university sector rather than in the non-university sector (ENQA, 2003).

32. **Performance indicators / statistical data:**

Ewell (1999) distinguishes four kinds of statistical data measuring performance and used for policy purposes.

- *'Hard' statistics' consist of direct counts of things that can be relatively unambiguously enumerated. Examples include numbers of students and graduates, numbers of employees, age and replacement value of buildings or expenditures by line item. Data like these are routinely compiled by system administrators and government agencies on a census basis and few issues are generally associated with their basic validity and integrity. However, they are rarely used explicitly as 'performance measures', because they reflect little more than increases in scale.*
- **Ratios and indices based on 'hard' statistics and measures.** *The majority of current performance indicators consist of statistics calculated from two or more census-type measures. Common examples include faculty workload measures, cost-per-unit-of-output measures (such as, cost-per-credit), retention or completion rates or cost by institutional function. Although based on manipulations of 'hard' statistics, numerous issues of definition and calculation are generally associated with such measures. Such definitional issues may profoundly affect the validity of the statistic and the appropriate uses to which it can be put. Hence particular attention needs to be paid to developing more explicit definitions and calculational procedures.*
- **'Second-order' statistics** *consist of measures of some underlying trait or condition that cannot be directly counted. Prominent examples in the realms of performance measures include student satisfaction, which must be measured by survey or interview or student learning outcomes, which must be measured by an examination or assessment. The use of such measures requires inference as well as data collection and manipulation, adding an additional set of issues when such statistics are applied to resource allocation or other kinds of policies. (...) Virtually all such datasets are 'incomplete' and require statistical interpretation to render them meaningful.*
- **'Judgement calls'** (...) *are not 'statistics' at all but reflect the outcomes of often complex qualitative evaluation processes. Examples include whether or not the HEI has established an adequate institutional assessment process, the degree to which it has an acceptable strategic plan or affirmative-action process, whether it offers a high percentage of classes that employ 'active learning' approaches or whether it operates an effective system of post-tenure review. The interpretation of such indicators is particularly important in order to obtain an appropriate judgement, since 'judgement calls' are largely qualitative.*

33. The use of performance indicators as policy tools in higher education has remarkably increased world-wide, principally as a result of growing pressure for public accountability (Ewell, 1999). The

development of a few relevant performance indicators, allowing comparisons among HEIs and over time, has been supported by public authorities in many countries. However, only a small number of countries link decision making on public funding (whether level of funding or eligibility) to performance indicators (El-Khawas *et al.*, 1998). The development of PIs has facilitated the management of rapidly growing national higher education systems in Europe and Australia. Later on the use PIs have been extended to substantive decision making in some countries, such as creating direct links between PIs and both funding and structural decision in the UK and Australia (Ewell, 1999).

34. In European quality assurance systems, collected quantitative data include most frequently information on students and on teaching staff (e.g. student drop-out rate, average time of study, staff numbers etc), however in some cases data provided by external agents are also taken into consideration, such as labour market statistics in Denmark. Financial key figures tend to be used more in EU countries and in the university-sector, while their use is less frequent in associated countries and in the non-university sector (ENQA, 2003).

35. A key indicator of quality in higher education is the success of graduates in joining the labour market. Labour market statistics are used principally in assessment procedures in Europe. The use of such data is far less frequent in accreditation, which may be explained by the lack of relevant data in connection with *ex ante* accreditation (ENQA, 2003). In Australia data on employment success of recent graduates are included in the 'Institutional Quality Assurance and Improvement Plan' that HEIs submit to the Commonwealth Government. These data are collected on all graduates of participating HEIs through the Graduate Careers Council of Australia's Graduate Destination Survey and the associated Course Experience Questionnaire (DETYA, 2000).

2.9 Nature and purpose of quality assurance

36. Quality assurance procedures can serve two major purposes: improvement and accountability. There is an uneasy balance between both purposes, which frequently raises the question of incompatibility (Vroeijenstijn, 1995a).

37. **Accountability – summative approach.** "A central aspect of 'accountability' in any form is that of 'rendering an account' of what one is doing in relation to goals that have been set or legitimate expectations that others may have of one's products, services or processes, in terms that can be understood by those who have a need or right to understand 'the account'. For this reason, accountability is usually, if not always, linked to public information and to judgements about the fitness, the soundness or level of satisfaction achieved" (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). Quality procedures for accountability purposes are based on criteria set down by external authorities and institutions. They aim at strengthening external insight and control, with possibility of undertaking external corrective action, if necessary. Quality assurance for accountability purposes implies the use of a summative approach. Where this approach predominates, reports include explicit statements of outcomes and are published (Billing, 2004). The purpose of the publication is to inform the public of the performance of higher education institutions (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). This approach is common in countries, such as the UK, where there is a considerable institutional autonomy (Billing, 2004).

38. **Improvement – formative approach.** Definitions of what is regarded as 'improvement' have changed and perspectives regarding the purpose and the focus of improvement can vary according to different stakeholders. Notions of improvement (as well as of accountability) are related to different judgements of value and balances of power for different groups (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). Quality procedures for improvement purposes aim at promoting future performance rather than making judgements on past performance. The criteria and procedures used are intended to strengthen the

conditions, motivations, scope and level of information of HEIs towards quality improvement. “Procedures lead to ends that are specifically in the interest of the higher education institutions, and towards the specification of quality according to goals and criteria that are internal or may be made internal by the institutions” (Thune, 1996).

Quality assurance for improvement purposes implies a formative approach: the focus is not on control but on improving quality. Where this approach is predominant, the reports are written for academic audience and the emphasis is on recommendations. This approach is typical in those countries where the higher education sector is subject to strong state regulation, as in continental Europe (Billing, 2004).

2.10 Outcomes of quality assurance mechanisms

39. **Report.** The QAA produces a report on the HEI or programme it reviews. In some systems, the reports are published, while in others they are not (Billing, 2004). In Europe, a report is not published in 13% of the cases. According to an ENQA survey, the publication of the report often depends on the approach used by the QAA: a report is not published when the agency carries out accreditation as primary activity (Akkreditierungsrat in Austria, State Commission for Accreditation in Poland, Council of Educational Evaluation-Accreditation in Cyprus and Accreditation Commission of the Czech Republic), while reports are published when they do evaluations (Poland, Czech Republic). The content of the reports may vary from one system to another. In Europe, almost all reports contain conclusion, and a large majority also contain analyses, while only one third of the cases contain empirical evidence. In 89% of the cases, the reports include recommendations (ENQA, 2003).

40. **Follow-up procedures.** It is argued that the enormous amount of time and money being put into quality assurance processes will be wasted unless these activities have a beneficial effect (Woodhouse, 1999). However Woodhouse (1999) points out that few external quality assurance agencies have thorough formal follow-up procedures, and many do nothing about it, or simply ask the HEI what it has done. Furthermore many QAAs are ambivalent about using sanctions in follow-up procedures, believing on the one hand that threat of police action is unlikely to foster quality, while recognising on the other hand that some HEIs are so weak that they are reluctant to even try to improve unless the QAA can insist on action.

41. Responsibility for follow-up procedures can lie with a government body, a QAA or the HEI itself. According to an ENQA survey (2003), in Europe 39% of all cases the QAA is responsible for the follow-up on the evaluations, in 46% the central or regional government is responsible and in 76% the evaluated HEI is responsible (in many cases there are several possible agents). Thune (1998) reports that in France and Denmark the evaluation report is expected to advise the Ministry on the specific recommendations in the report. However, it is argued, the launching of a continuous process of quality assurance is principally the task of the HEI and the academic programme; hence it is crucial that the HEIs themselves are committed to the follow-up.

42. **Linking evaluation to funding.** A highly controversial issue is whether the allocation of public funding to HEIs should wholly or partially be based on the results of evaluation procedures (Thune, 1998). Woodhouse (1999) reports that quality reviews of research are often linked directly to the funding decisions. However, it is argued, there is a general view inside academia that basing funding for teaching solely on the basis of evaluation results would lead more to problems being concealed than solved. However, several countries (including Australia, England and Scotland) have linked marginal funding to results of quality reviews.

2.11 The cost of evaluation

43. As described in Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002), costs of evaluation include, on the one hand, those of the setting up of the agency and of the operation of the external procedure. The following factors that have direct cost implications:

- The number and types of higher education institutions in the national system.
- The focus of the quality review – whether HEIs, academic programmes or broader groupings of subjects/disciplines are being reviewed. The cost of quality assurance procedures focusing on programmes may be substantial.
- The frequency of evaluations – whether reviews are carried out as part of a periodic monitoring or on an *ad hoc*/ on demand basis.
- The remuneration of experts. In some systems, experts are recruited on a ‘volunteer’ basis and receive only reimbursement for expenses related to the QA activities; while in others, there may be some kind of honorarium paid to the external experts.

44. In addition to these costs, there are also ‘hidden costs’ related to quality assurance. These include staff time in preparing for external monitoring and the collection of information for the self-review and have to be taken into account in determining the type and amount of information to be provided by HEIs to external QAAs (Campbell and Rozsnyai, 2002).

3 Advantages and disadvantages of different quality assurance mechanisms in tertiary education

45. This section describes four aspects of quality assurance systems which are subject to debate. The first is about the purpose of quality assurance, whether it should serve accountability or improvement and whether it is possible to combine both purposes. The second debate is about the advantages and disadvantages of different methods and data gathering instruments used in quality assurance systems. The third question is whether quality of teaching and learning should be addressed separately from quality of research. Finally, the arguments supporting and opposing links between results of quality monitoring and funding will be presented.

3.1 Purpose of quality assurance: accountability vs. improvement

46. A wide body of literature discusses the relationship between the two purposes of quality assurance, whether they are incompatible or whether and how a balance could be found between them. According to Thune (1996) it is often argued that accountability and improvement are mutually exclusive since there is a conflict in terms of method between them. However, it is argued, accountability and quality improvement may be combined in a balanced strategy (Thune, 1996).

Middlehurst and Woodhouse (1995) suggest that in some areas improvement and accountability may be well integrated, while in others they may be independent of each other. “Areas where they may be linked include: guidelines which can offer advice about appropriate procedures and practice in relation to accountability requirements; performance indicators linked to the benchmarking of best practice between institutions; departments or programmes; and research evidence which points to deficiencies in practice and which leads to recommendations for improvement. Areas where improvement should be independent of accountability, particularly in relation to public information, include pilot studies and experiments; training; and staff development.”

Table 1. Incompatibility or Complementarities between Accountability and Improvement

Incompatibility - separate agencies	Complementarities - one agency
HEI are likely to hide weaknesses from accountability agencies that would be important for the goal of improvement. Separate agencies allow that each agency has the structure and processes appropriate to its particular functions	There is a dynamic and interactive process between both purposes, not a simple cause-effect model with separation of accountability and improvement activities
	Risk of duplication of the workload and unstable situation between separate agencies

Arguments supporting the establishment of separate agencies – incompatibility between purposes

47. According to a range of analysts, the purpose of accountability is incompatible with the purpose of improvement. Vroeijenstijn (1995b) argues that it is difficult for external quality assurance to serve two masters: it cannot work for the HEIs serving improvement and for the outside world serving accountability at the same time. However, it is argued, it is possible to try to reconcile the governmental aims of EQA with the aims of the HEIs. The two purposes are often claimed to be incompatible, as the openness essential for improvement will be absent if accountability is the purpose of the quality procedure (Woodhouse, 1999). Thus, it is sometimes argued that it is essential to have separate agencies, because HEIs are likely to hide from an accountability agency information that is essential for achieving quality improvement (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995).

Harvey (1997) suggests that though accountability *can* lead to improvement in teaching and learning, “it may damage learning by diverting academic staff’s attention away from the improvement of learning, to compliance with the bureaucratic imperative and to attempts to improve performance on indicators that are, at the very best, poor operationalisations of learning quality”. It is argued that accountability procedures might be underpinned by an imperative to make higher education more cost-efficient, rather than to enhance quality.

Arguments opposing the establishment of separate agencies – complementarities between purposes

48. **Accountability and improvement are closely linked and cannot be addressed separately.** Numerous analysts question the feasibility and the efficiency of addressing separately the objectives of accountability and improvement. Stensaker (2003) argues that the ‘accountability vs. improvement’ debate has contributed to a simplified view on how change in higher education occurs. It is argued that instead of seeing change as a dynamic process where interaction between actors and stakeholders takes place in a continuum, this debate has contributed to the development of a simple cause-effect model implying that internal processes are related to improvement, while external processes are associated with accountability. Woodhouse (1999) reports that some authors claim that accountability and improvement are inseparable, as accountability can always be re-phrased to focus on quality improvement. As cited in Stensaker (2003), “as Brown (2000) has argued those who work in higher education have, for a long time, been accountable to students, to disciplines and to their professions. In other words, accountability can be handled internally. Furthermore, there are a number of studies indicating that institutional self-evaluation processes taken on as a part of an self-evaluation processes are very useful processes for higher education institutions (Saarinen, 1995; Thune, 1996; Smeby and Stensaker, 1999; Brennan and Shah, 2000)”. Thus, quality improvement can indeed have external origin. Moreover, both accountability and improvement are among the aims of the government and would be difficult not to combine them. “Since governments have a big financial and political stake in higher education, which is vital for national well-being and development, governments would usually prefer that poor quality higher education institution or course be assisted to improve, rather than being penalised or closed down” (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995).

49. **It would be inefficient to establish multiple agencies: duplication of workload and unstable situation.** Middlehurst and Woodhouse (1995) argue that it would be inefficient to establish multiple agencies addressing different objectives separately. Unless the multiple agencies have clearly distinct spheres of responsibility (such as evaluation of research versus evaluation of teaching) it is not desirable or stable to have separate external agencies for the following reasons: Firstly, multiple agencies impose an excessive load on higher education institutions. Secondly, there is likely to be duplication, since the two roles have similar needs. Thirdly, a system including two or more agencies is unstable; one quality assurance agency is likely to ‘capture’ the other. Finally, accountability agencies are tending to be advisory, also and are likely to take on an improvement role. It is argued that financial auditors increasingly pride themselves on being advisory and directive in suggesting better procedures. Thus, some improvement is an almost inevitable consequence of checking. While it is possible to establish a separate system for improvement, it is not possible to have one solely for accountability, as it will inevitably overlap into quality improvement (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995).

3.2 Adequate methods and instruments

50. This section describes the arguments made by a range of analysts in the debate on adequate methods and instruments to be used in quality assurance systems. Firstly, the arguments supporting and opposing external/internal reviews will be presented. Secondly, the question whether quality assurance measures should focus on institutional or programme level will be addressed. Finally, the advantages and disadvantages of different data gathering instruments will be described.

3.2.1 External vs. internal review

51. A theme in the literature is whether quality would be better addressed by external or internal mechanisms. Table 2 summarises the arguments cited in the literature supporting and opposing both approaches.

Table 2. Arguments in the Literature: External vs. Internal Review

Pro external review	Pro internal review
Essential for accountability	Essential for improvement: sustainable improvement relies on internal engagement
EQA ensures the integrity of higher education	EQA inhibits innovation (conservative, rigid evaluation criteria, inflexibility)
Catalyst role for internal improvement within HEI	Inefficiency of EQA in improvement: high costs (time, resources, little return). Bureaucracy, risk of excessive workload for HEI
Provides information to various stakeholders	EQA: game playing, impression management

Arguments supporting external reviews and opposing internal reviews

52. **Addressing accountability requires the involvement of an external body.** Thune (1996) highlights the potential of external agents in assuring accountability in higher education. Middlehurst and Woodhouse (1995) also argue that the function of independent agencies that undertake external quality assurance activities is usually characterised as providing accountability of higher education institutions to different stakeholders.

53. **External quality monitoring ensures the integrity of higher education,** including international integrity, through something similar to an accreditation procedure. The context and the stage of

development of the higher education sector is a key variable. For instance, the development of private HEIs increases the need for institutional accreditation (Harvey, 2002).

54. **External quality assurance acts as catalyst for internal improvement within higher education institutions.** According to a range of analysts, external support and the provision of cross-institutional data may be useful for higher education institutions in their efforts at self-improvement. It is argued that an external quality assurance agency could enhance improvement by being available to HEIs for advice, research, and development on request; having general issues referred to it by accountability and certification agencies for investigation; undertaking research and promulgating ideas on its own initiative and by providing benchmarking data across the sector (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995).

The context of external evaluation contributes to quality improvement by motivating the staff for realising self-evaluation. The essential role of self-review in achieving improvement is widely recognised by authors. However the preparation of the self-review reports involves considerable workload. For this reason HEIs seldom start self-review procedures on their own initiative; they have to be motivated from outside (Rasmussen, 1997). Brennan (1997) argues that though there is a danger of compliance in externally initiated self-reviews, the external consequences of the review are an incentive to take the self-evaluation process seriously. Harvey (2002) suggests that this role of catalyst for improvement requires dialogue and advice as part of the monitoring process and the renewal of a trusting relationship between external quality assurance body and HEIs (Harvey, 2002).

55. **EQA should provide information to various stakeholders,** including prospective students, employers and funders (Harvey, 2002). This aspect is particularly important from an accountability point of view. Thune (1996) suggests that some of the key advantages of external quality assurance are: impartiality, credibility, authority, comprehensiveness, consistency and transparency.

56. **Self-assessment carries the risk of ‘write-ups’.** De Vries (1997) distinguishes between full-scale self-assessment and self-assessment for compliance, referring to the latter as ‘write-up’ and warns against the risk of such practices. It is argued that there is a risk of compliance and of using self-assessment as a political act. It is in the interests of HEIs to promote their reputation and image as providers of quality education and research; but in doing so they are reliant on academic departments. The problem lies in the fact that individual departments can “hijack the occasion and hold the higher education institution to ransom” using the self-assessment process to their own advantage. Furthermore, departments can use self-assessments as a vehicle for co-opting assessors to their viewpoints and for developing arguments for more resources (De Vries, 1997).

Harvey (2002) also draws a distinction between self-evaluation for internal use and self-evaluation for external use, especially when external evaluation is linked to accountability requirements. It is argued that, at worse, ‘two sets of books’ may be prepared, one for internal consumption and one that is ‘embellished’ for external consumption (Harvey, 2002). Brennan (1997) points out that if self-evaluation is a stage preliminary to a process of some form of external judgement, it is likely to be carried out primarily in order to attempt to influence these external judgements rather than to inform ‘self’. Thus self-evaluation which has external consequences runs the danger of producing compliance on the part of those who are carrying it out.

57. It is argued that in the case of self-financing institutions, e.g. business schools, there might be a particularly strong motivation to hide weaknesses in self-review reports. Their purpose might not be to reveal the ‘truth’ about the quality but to ‘stay in business’ by hiding deficiencies and promoting reputation. It is reported that in one case, for example, ‘negative aspects’ reported in the self-review were used as ‘evidence against’ the institution in published reports and incited the institution to avoid reporting negative aspects in future self-reviews. Furthermore, it is argued, in self-assessment reports departments tend to overvalue their performance. Moreover, the author points out that there are dissentient values and

purposes within the departments, thus the concept of 'self' in self-assessment is, in many cases, a misnomer for the activity (De Vries, 1997).

Arguments supporting internal reviews and opposing external reviews

58. **Sustainable improvement relies on internal engagement.** Middlehurst and Woodhouse (1995) argue that "achieving improvement requires an acknowledgement by providers of a need to improve, an understanding of the appropriate focus of improvement, knowledge of the means of achieving the objectives of improvement and an appreciation of the benefits that will accrue from the effort. In other words, improvement relies upon individual or group engagement with the desired objectives and commitment to their achievement". It is suggested that without intrinsic motivation to improve quality, the best that can be hoped for is compliance with external requirements. "Compliance may pass for improvement in the short term, but as soon as the need to display 'improvement' has passed, old habits are likely to re-emerge" (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). Askling (1997) also highlights the essential role of internal processes to achieve improvement. It is argued that while internally initiated quality monitoring can be problem-driven and useful as a mean for improvement, externally initiated processes tend to be more accountability-driven and less sensitive to internal needs. Similarly, Knight (2001) warns that reliance on external quality monitoring is unwise and argues that more attention should be paid to internal quality improvement.

However, it is also suggested that an emphasis on internal processes does not exclude the use of external processes. Harvey (2002) argues that the interaction between both processes is essential to ensure that the results of external monitoring are not just temporary adjustments but lead to lasting improvement.

59. **External reviews inhibit innovation.** Harvey (2002) reports that some delegates participating in *The End of Quality?* seminar suggested that external quality reviews inhibit innovation through its conservative or rigid evaluation criteria. In order to ensure the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms, there is a need for constant reflection and change in external quality assurance, including periodic change in both purposes and in the QAAs themselves. The problem is that the quality assurance bureaucracies become established and politicians reluctant to dissolve QAAs as this would appear to be an admission of failure. Hence external quality assurance systems risk becoming 'standardised', which may lead to excessive bureaucratisation and inflexibility (Harvey, 2002). Williams (1997) argues that over-elaborate bureaucratic systems of external monitoring may lead to internal processes becoming determined by external requirements, but at the expense of what is good for the HEI. Thus innovation may suffer for fear that it will not be understood.

60. **External reviews are inefficient in achieving quality improvement.** In economic terms the efficiency of external quality assurance systems is a little researched topic (Stensaker, 2003). However, a review of HEI in England realised by the PA Consulting Group identified an accumulation of accountability burdens on HEIs, generating costs to the sector in excess of £250 million. Much of this burden related to external quality monitoring, but sources of unproductive costs included also audit and reporting requirements. Thus the system represents a poor value for money both for HEIs and other stakeholders (HEFCE, 2000). Stephenson (2004) argues that the real cost of quality assurance cannot be quantified, since it includes not only staff, space and operational costs of a quality assurance unit, but also the time devoted by diverse stakeholders to quality assurance activities.

As cited in Newton (2001) a study realised by Graham (2000) highlights "the huge workload is associated with external quality review; the inadequacies of OfSTED/TTA 'snapshot' and 'dipstick' inspections of teacher training provision; the frequency and burden of quality assessment in a resource-starved system which, paradoxically, detracts from the delivery of quality; the loss of professional trust and consensus; the drift towards a risk-averse higher education system; and the lack of investment in quality enhancement." Middlehurst and Woodhouse (1995) argue that fully external quality assurance mechanisms are likely to be a costly and inefficient means of achieving lasting quality improvement. Similarly Harvey (2002) suggests

that external quality monitoring implies excessive costs which do not reflect the value gained from the process. In many systems, the periodic and dramaturgical manifestations of external quality assurance fail to engage with or help inform change management in HEIs. It is suggested that the significant resources spent on quality bureaucracies could be better spent on improving internal quality assurance mechanisms.

61. **External reviews carry the risk of ‘game playing’ and ‘impression management’.** One of the disadvantages reported by the opponents of EQA is that it promotes ‘game playing’ and compliance instead of quality improvement. Williams (1997) points out that one of the dangers of over-elaborate bureaucratic systems of external monitoring is that they can lead to a ‘compliance culture’ to the detriment of real quality improvement. Newton (2001) refers to the Times Higher whose “analysis provides ‘clear statistical evidence that the various criticisms from many academics are justified, and that the project has been blighted by elitism, favouritism, gamesmanship, and grade inflation’”. In reporting results from his own research in 1999, Newton also warns against the risk of ‘ritualism’ and ‘tokenism’ in external quality arrangements, with participants primarily engaged in learning the ‘rules of the game’.

Peer reviews

62. Like internal and external reviews, peer reviews are one of the main methods used by quality assurance systems. Brennan (1997) argues that one of the most important issues concerning peer reviews is the selection of peers to assure the legitimacy of the review. On the one hand, peers are ‘colleagues’ which raises questions of legitimacy of the review process to those outside of higher education. On the other hand, peers are ‘competitors’ which reduces the legitimacy of the review inside higher education. A major difficulty is to obtain both expertise and disinterestedness, since often there is a conflict between the two. Where it is impossible to obtain both expertise and disinterestedness in the same person, then it is essential to ensure that both qualities are obtained by having an appropriate balance of them in the peer group as a whole. (Brennan, 1997).

63. It is argued that peer-reviews bring more legitimacy to quality assurance mechanisms. Vroeijenstijn (1995b) suggests that academics are more likely to listen to their peers’ opinion than to ‘control’ by administrators, inspectors or the like. Hence peer-reviews can contribute effectively to quality improvement by changing the attitude of academics about their contributions to a particular programme. Finch (1997) also underlines the importance of peers in quality assurance processes. It is argued that external quality assurance agencies cannot operate on the basis of ‘naked power’; their authority needs to be considered legitimate by academics. It seems that the only way in which QAAs can obtain legitimate authority is to depend for their judgements upon the sources of legitimacy recognised by the academic community, namely the opinions of peers.

3.2.2 Institutional vs. programme review

64. The level of evaluation may vary from one quality assurance system to another, generally quality is addressed at institutional or programme level. Advantages of an institution-wide review are that it asks for fewer experts, is less time consuming and less expensive. Disadvantages of such reviews include little involvement at grass-roots level, insufficient feedback at discipline level, and lack of recommendations for further curriculum improvement. On the other hand, a programme-wide approach allows to go into more depth and details, it involves individual staff members and results in feedback from the committee and recommendations for improvement. Yet, this approach is more time-consuming and expensive than the institutional review (Vroeijenstijn, 1995a).

3.2.3 Data gathering instruments

65. The adequacy of different data gathering instruments used in quality assurance processes is widely discussed in the literature. Table 3 summarises the advantages and disadvantages reported by numerous analysts of self-reviews, site-visits and surveys and, finally, performance indicators.

Table 3. Different Data Gathering Instruments: Pro and Con

Data gathering instrument	Pro	Con
Self-review report	Engenders internal self-reflection, essential for sustainable improvement	Risk of ‘Two sets of books’: one for internal consumption + one ‘embellished’ for external consumption (especially if links with funding)
Site visit and survey	Necessary follow-up on the self-evaluation reports	High cost of the preparation for the visit and of the preparation of the required documents
Performance indicators	The use of performance indicators leverages improvement	Performance indicators are reductionist and offer inaccurate comparisons. Risk of manipulation of data by HEIs
	Objectivity and comparability: accountability and policy tool	The link between performance indicators and quality is not evident. Necessity of interpretation

66. **Self-review report.** A substantial body of literature argues that self-review reports have a crucial role in quality assurance many respondents at *The End of Quality?* seminar reaffirmed that the main value of external quality monitoring is the internal self-reflection that it engenders (Harvey, 2002). Furthermore, it is argued that the more self-review is given priority in the monitoring process, the more self-review will function as preparation of the HEI or the academic programme for talking over responsibility for its own quality improvement and the less it will be seen merely as a source of information for the expert committee (Thune, 1996).

67. **Site-visit and survey.** Harvey (2002) argues that monitoring processes impose an unnecessary bureaucratic burden. A central feature of this burden is the time taken in preparing for monitoring events, particularly the preparation of specific event-related documentation. It is suggested that rather than ask for specific documents, quality monitoring should be carried out on the basis of what HEIs already produce.

68. **Performance indicators.** The use of performance indicators and the selection of adequate measures of quality is a widely discussed issue in the literature.

Arguments supporting the use of performance indicators

69. **Performance indicators allow an objective measurement and comparability of quality, which are important to government.** Performance indicators are regarded as useful tools both for accountability purposes and in informing policy and decision making. They aim at discharging established accountability obligations to the public and elected officials by providing a relatively straightforward set of publicly available statistics about ‘performance’. Furthermore, they provide policy makers with an overall picture of what is happening in a particular institution or system in order to inform policy discussion (Ewell, 1999).

For governments, a major role of EQA is to collect objective information on the performance of HEIs and to provide them with objective measurement of the quality. Ministries are keen on using performance indicators, since they allow them to measure and compare the effects of government policies on quality and a proof that the right decisions are made may become feasible (Vroeijenstijn, 1995b).

70. **The use of performance indicators leverages improvement.** It is argued that the use of performance indicators can contribute to quality improvement by stimulating certain kinds of institutional behaviour. The monitoring focuses more on desired outcomes and behaviours, than in the case of traditional accountability mechanisms. Performance indicators are used intentionally to encourage HEIs to increase their progress toward meeting certain standards. The direction of the underlying incentive can be either positive or negative; HEIs can be rewarded for desired improvements or actions, or can be punished if they fall behind. Such mechanisms do not need to involve connection to budgeting, though they are generally held to be stronger if money is involved. It is assumed that continuing poor performance, if widely reported, will constitute an incentive to stimulate quality improvement (Ewell, 1999).

Arguments opposing the use of performance indicators

71. **Performance indicators are reductionist and there is a risk of manipulation of data by HEIs.** Reportedly, many academics have been opposed to the increasing use of performance indicators, arguing that they are reductionist, offer inaccurate comparisons, and are unduly burdensome (El-Khawas *et al.*, 1998). Middlehurst and Woodhouse (1995) also warn against the pitfalls in comparisons. It is argued that popular discussion often trivialises comparisons, selecting only one or two aspects, reducing them to simplistic terms and paying little regard to whether the aspects are truly commensurate. Furthermore, the use of performance indicators might encourage manipulation of data by HEIs to meet targets (Harvey, 2002). Knight (2001) also points out that summative assessment data of student performance are unreliable and routinely mismanipulated.

72. **The link between performance indicators and quality is not evident.** Another criticism concerning performance indicators is that there is no necessary link between performance indicators and quality. Quality is about much more than output measures, it is also about inputs, including the quality of the teaching staff, and the quality of the equipment and laboratories available within HEIs (Thune, 1998).

73. A major problem highlighted by several authors is the difficulty in measuring the quality of both research and teaching. For example, is the total number of publications a true measure of quality in research? Or is a high success rate in education a sign of quality, or does it reflect the reduction of standards? (Vroeijenstijn, 1995a) However, measuring and comparing research performance still seems to be less problematical than that of teaching and learning. Baldwin (1997) in a study on Australian quality assurance mechanisms suggests that most academics seem to accept the fact that peer judgements of quality are built into processes of refereeing publications and applications for research grants.

74. A distinction should be made between qualitative and quantitative indicators. Vroeijenstijn (1995b) argues that the 'quantitative performance indicators' are often basic data (e.g. numbers of students, numbers of staff, drop-out rate) and tell us nothing about performance. On the other hand, 'qualitative performance indicators' are elements which have an influence on quality; aspects to be taken into account. Rodriguez and Gutierrez (2003) also warn against the risk of confusion between performance indicators and other institutional statistics have little to do with quality.

75. Vroeijenstijn (1995b) concludes by underlining the importance of the interpretation of performance indicators. It is argued that "the concept 'performance indicators' has introduced a fatal discussion on objectivity and subjectivity and on the role of performance indicators and peer review. Performance indicators can never speak for themselves, but must be interpreted by experts. Where they

seem to be objective, they are not really performance indicators, but only statistical data or management information". Similarly, Vidal (2001) argues that performance indicators are never absolute measures, and are only meaningful after a process of contextualisation.

Connection between performance indicators and allocation: tight vs. loose

76. Ewell (1999) discusses this dimension which concerns the degree to which performance indicators are directly linked to particular levels of allocation. At one extreme, this relationship may be highly formulaic with little or no human judgement involved. Such mechanisms have the advantage of clarity and are relatively free of the political debates about 'fairness'. At the other extreme, the connection between allocation and performance may be very indirect, and the decision on resource allocation may involve significant amounts of human judgement. A major advantage of such mechanisms is their ability to incorporate a rich array of information into the decision process. However, such mechanisms can be seen as arbitrary and, because of their complexity, they do not generally provide HEIs with clear incentives to adopt particular kinds of behaviours (Jones, 1995).

3.3 Relationship between evaluation of education and of research

77. Thune (1998) identifies two distinct viewpoints on the need for convergence of evaluation of research and education. One is based on the fact that there is close connection between the higher education and the research, so that educational quality cannot be reviewed without taking into account this connection. According to the opposite viewpoint

(...) no evidence demonstrates unequivocally a casual link between teaching and research. There is no necessary link between high quality research and high quality teaching, although there is of course evidence to support the view that research can have useful spin-offs to teaching: certainly the complete absence of any research will, over time, cause the teaching to become out of date. But the point made is that there are no significant problems with separating the evaluation of the quality of teaching from the evaluation of the quality of research. Indeed there are several distinct advantages. Institutions need to be good research institutions to be rated as excellent in teaching. One could disengage research from teaching, because there is no evidence that these two need to be seen as a single activity. This separation allows good teaching to be identified and rewarded, and perhaps goes a little way to redress the imbalance between rewards and incentives for teaching and research. It allows teaching to have a different definition compared to research, which for a diverse sector is necessary. It still allows research to keep at least its international standards. It allows institutions to focus on their particular strengths. It does not compel institutions to focus to be rated highly. And separation in this way allows the various customers' needs to be addressed more specifically (Thune, 1998).

78. Vroeijenstijn (1995a) argues that teaching and research should be assessed separately. The assessment of research and the assessment of teaching and learning require different types of expertise. While for research, peers and specialists in the particular research field are necessary; for teaching and learning the experts need to have a broad overview over the discipline. Furthermore combining the assessment of research projects with the review of academic programmes would require very big committees and site-visits would be much more time-consuming.

However, there is necessarily a link between teaching and research at a university, which needs to be taken into account during the review of educational quality. "There are questions which cannot be avoided and must be answered during the assessment, such as: in which way do students come into contact with research? What role does research play in the programme? How are the most recent developments in the field of research reflected in the curriculum?" Nevertheless the review of research quality is not part of the

review of teaching and learning. Therefore, “the best way is to assess teaching and research separately, although it will be useful if each assessment is planned with the other mind”.

3.4 Consequences: links with funding?

79. The question whether the results of quality monitoring should be linked to funding is subject to wide debate in the literature. The arguments in support of, and in opposition to, performance based funding are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Arguments supporting and opposing performance based funding

Pro	Con
Important for accountability, incentive to improvement	Incitation for hiding weaknesses, game playing, manipulation of data
For research it is acceptable. Special-initiative funding can be efficient	Difficulty in measuring appropriately the quality of research. For teaching it is unacceptable: measuring the quality and outcomes of teaching is even more difficult
Risks of compliance exist under any evaluation system	Creates a compliance culture

Arguments supporting performance based funding

80. **Linking quality to funding is important for accountability and is an incentive to improvement.** One argument in favour of performance based funding is that, if aiming at rewarding excellence, it stimulates lower performances to increase their efforts (Ewell, 1999). However, subject to debate is what actions should follow from the results of the quality review and, especially whether bad results should have financial consequences. Some advocate rewarding good performance, possibly through supplemental funding or incentive systems. Others would like to punish bad results, for instance, “by withholding funds or not allowing a programme to enrol new students. Still others want to shape results so that they lead to voluntary improvements” (El-Khawas *et al.*, 1998).

81. **Linking quality in research to funding is widely accepted.** Linking the results of evaluation of research quality to funding seems to be rather accepted among both government and universities. Higher education institutions are not strongly opposed to targeted research funding (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). Indeed, if used sparingly, risk to funding can be effective in some circumstances (Harvey, 2002).

82. **Risks of compliance exist under any evaluation system.** It is suggested that not using performance based funding does not avoid the risk of compliance. The opinion voiced by representatives from the evaluation system of the British Funding Councils argues that the risks of compliance are real risks under any evaluation system, and all one can do is minimise the risks of compliance by making the system as sophisticated as possible (Thune, 1998). Brennan (1997) also points out that the danger of creating a compliance culture exists probably in any QA system that produces public summative judgements of institutional quality, whether they are linked to funding or not.

Arguments opposing performance based funding

83. **Linking performance to funding undermines improvement inciting for hiding weaknesses.** Several analysts argue that a direct link to funding undermines quality improvement. The danger is of producing compliance and encouraging a strategy to ‘outwit’ the assessors rather providing an incentive

for improvement (Brennan, 1997). According to Vroeijenstijn (1995b) “the direct link to funding is a threat to quality assurance, because every assessment loses its value for improvement. Academics are smart people: so they will find all ways to beat the system and by doing so try to get the money”. Reportedly, HEIs become very wary of divulging information because of the tendency of governments and people to make comparisons, and this is exacerbated if funding is related to accountability (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). Harvey (2002) also draws attention to the risk of lack of openness in quality assurance. In many countries, where resources are used to reward strengths rather than combat weaknesses, HEIs fear revealing weaknesses or problems in self-evaluation. In other words, a quality assurance system, which threatens withdrawal of funding for underperformance, incites HEIs to hide weaknesses rather than engage in self-review and quality improvement.

84. **Difficulties in measuring quality and linking it to funding.** Quality-related funding of teaching is seen as more problematic than funding links to research, “as the quality and outcomes of teaching are more difficult to measure, and courses cannot be started or stopped so easily as research programmes” (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). Woodhouse (1999) reports that there is a general view inside academia that basing funding for teaching on quality reviews would lead more to problems being concealed than solved. Rewarding the ‘successful’ would involve the state paying more for an already ‘good product’, while the reduction of funding is unlikely to improve low quality education. Thus there is a general reluctance to link the results of quality assessment directly to funding. An improvement logic would suggest that an inverse relationship might be to give more to the least good (Brennan and Shah, 2000). [*Difficulties in measuring: see 103-107*]

85. **Links to funding create a compliance culture among the HEIs.** Reportedly, there is a strong feeling in academia that “funding rewards are inappropriate, as they generate a ‘compliance culture’, and skew the system to follow the money” (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). Thune (1998) also mentions the argument warning against a direct link between evaluation and funding which points to the real danger of creating a compliance culture among the higher education institutions.

Different types of linkages between performance and funding: advantages and disadvantages

86. Ewell (1999) describes different types of linkages that can exist between information-driven approaches to resource allocation.

Table 5. Classifying funding approaches: ‘Time’ by ‘Direction of Allocation’

		<i>When do dollars flow?</i>	
		After reporting period	Before reporting period
<i>Results and allocation</i>	Positively correlated	Performance funding	Incentive funding to achieve targets
	Negatively correlated	Directed funding to correct deficiencies	Incentive funding to correct deficiencies

Source: Ewell, 1999 p.197

87. **Results and allocation: positive vs. negative correlation.** This dimension addresses the way in which performance data are related to resource allocation. One the one hand, enhanced performance can be rewarded, as in formal performance-funding schemes. Such mechanisms have the potential merit of stimulating lower performers to increase their efforts. However, they are unable to correct detected deficiencies and foster inequities allowing the ‘rich to get richer’ (Ewell, 1999). Indeed, why should extra money be awarded to the already excellent faculties instead of using it to strengthen weak quality? (Vroeijenstijn, 1995a)

88. On the other hand, primary emphasis might be placed upon the use of performance data to identify areas where further investment is needed. In such cases, “the direction of the relationship between funding and results can be either positive or negative, depending upon the perceived importance of the function in the eyes of the founder” (Ewell, 1999).

89. **Timing of allocation: before vs. after performance-reporting period.** This dimension addresses the timing when the associated financial resources flow. At one extreme, performance measures are collected first and allocations made after-the-fact on the basis of this information. Examples of such timing include formal performance funding arrangements and many other forms of information-driven funding mechanisms (Ewell, 1999). Performance-based funding rewards for achievement, and hence both a retrospective and a prospective component. Sometimes the achievement is related to pre-specified targets, and sometimes it is related to a more general framework of expectations. The difficulty with such arrangements is that, without vision and imagination on the part of the founder, it tends to focus on what has taken place rather than on the needs of a future (Yorke, 1996).

90. At the other extreme, HEIs can be ‘forward-funded’ to engage in particular kinds of initiatives or behaviours (Ewell, 1999). Incentive funding accentuates the prospective component since it requires HEIs to do something new, implying a contract (or quasi-contract) with the founder (Yorke, 1996). Examples of such mechanisms include providing resources for initiating experimental projects and ‘budget bargains’ between HEIs and founders designed to induce institutions to achieve specific targets established in advance (Ewell, 1999).

4 Difficulties in implementing effective quality assurance systems

91. This section considers the reasons why effective quality assurance systems are apparently difficult to implement. One reported reason is the difference of interests and conceptions of quality between stakeholders in higher education. Another problem identified is the ‘implementation gap’ and finally the external ownership of quality assurance systems which often leads to compliance instead of improvement.

4.1 Different interests and conceptions of quality between diverse stakeholders

92. There is some difference between the government and the universities in their approach to quality assurance. Government has a more summative approach, while the approach of the universities tends to be more formative. Vroeijenstijn (1995b) argues that governments and HEIs are in most countries still opponents on the ‘why’ of external quality assurance.

On the one hand, government is interested both in accountability and improvement. It aims at demonstrating to the society it makes justifiable decision on educational policy (such as allocation of funding or termination of academic programmes). On the other hand, the universities’ main objective is quality improvement. Their concerns are whether it is possible to offer high quality education within the conditions set by the government and to convince the public that the quality of their educational provision is the best possible. For HEIs, the most important function of quality assurance is an analysis of strengths and weaknesses and the formulation of recommendations for further improvement. However, HEIs also emphasise the accountability function of EQA, particularly its role in the process of self-regulation, internal steering and quality assurance (Vroeijenstijn, 1995b).

The different views of governments and HEIs on quality assurance are summarised in Table 6.

Table 6. Views on External Quality Assessment

	Government	Higher education institution
Nature of EQA	<i>Summative</i>	<i>Formative</i>
Aims	Accreditation (threshold quality) Accountability to parliament Steering/planning of higher education: Are the aims of the government with regard to higher education reached? Constitutional assurance of quality Comparison assurance of quality Efficiency Information for students and employers	Quality improvement Accountability Self-regulation Quality assurance
Instruments	Inspectorate Performance indicators	Self-assessment Peer-review

Source: Vroeijsstijn, 1995a, p. 10

93. This difference in the conception of quality can make the successful implementation of quality assurance systems more difficult. Watty (2003), referring to several case studies, suggests that academics adopt a variety of behaviours when quality led initiatives are implemented. It is argued that there seems to be little evidence that the majority of academics are embracing quality-change initiatives. One explanation may be that conceptions of quality can differ between academics and other stakeholders in higher education, which generates a potential for conflict.

94. In the case of self-assessment there are several factors that can create difficulties in the implementation. Within an academic department, there is likely to be dissent on the nature of the curriculum and how it should be delivered. When self-assessment is carried out without taking into account dissenting values, members of the department will take part in the process with varying degrees of enthusiasm or not at all. There is also unlikely to be group ownership of the final report or allegiance to the values adopted within it. Moreover, there are political pressures, such as reputation, “that can and do have a profound effect on whether the self-assessment findings are accepted by individual members and, if accepted, how, when and whether they will be implemented. These also reflect different degrees of commitment of the academic staff concerned with implementing suggested changes” (De Vries, 1997).

4.2 The ‘implementation gap’

95. Newton (2001) highlights the importance of the ‘implementation gap’: defined as the difference between planned outcomes of policy, or preferred definitions, and the outcomes of the implementation process. Referring to a case study of a university sector college (NewColl), he suggests that there is a gap between what was designed into and expected of the quality assurance system and what, at ground level, prevented this from being achieved. It is argued that the views of ‘front-line’ academic staff engaged in the implementation of policy are particularly important, since they are ‘makers’ and ‘shapers’ in the policy implementation process, not mere recipients. Thus how policy is received and decoded by academic staff seems to be of particular importance. The success of a quality assurance system may be dependent less on the rigor of application or the neatness of the ‘dry’ documented quality assurance system *per se* and more on its contingent use by actors, and on how the quality assurance system is viewed and interpreted by them (Newton, 2001).

96. Moreover Newton (2001) underlines another significant feature of policy implementation: the discretion exercised by ‘front-line’ workers, or ‘street level’ bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980; Prottas, 1978).

These policy implementers, it is argued, are the 'real makers of policy' since they have a relative autonomy at the point of implementation. Newton highlights another problem related to this issue suggesting that a growing emphasis on 'ownership' and 'self-review' in quality assurance systems, runs the risk of exacerbating the problem of the 'implementation gap' since there is more likely to be a problem of goal distortion. Similarly Rodriguez and Gutierrez (2003) report that one of the weaknesses of quality evaluation in Spain is the insufficient executive capacity of university and department leaders. There is a disconnection between the government, the university and the autonomous governments concerning the definition of the objectives of quality assurance which inhibits the effective implementation of such policies.

97. Another problem identified is the lack of preparedness of staff to quality assurance activities. Reportedly, in Spain some of the major reasons for the weakness of the quality assurance system are the lack mechanisms of analysis of the information gathered during the quality review, inadequacies of the selection process of and the training offered to evaluators, and the lack of effectiveness of evaluation committees (Sabiote and Gutierrez, 2003). Similarly, the lack of sufficient training in conducting self-reviews, the insufficiently explicit indicators and standards, and the usual change of members in the visiting committees seem to hinder the success of quality assurance activities in Chile (Silva *et al.*, 1997).

4.3 External ownership leading to compliance instead of improvement

98. Another reported reason for the failure of quality assurance systems is that they are imposed on academics, who are, through internal mechanisms of audit and review, encouraged to use them. "This encouragement is backed by the use of rewards and sanctions to ensure implementation. However, the ownership of the system, let alone its intended outcomes, is unlikely to be achieved when the development of the system is carried out at a distance from the academic to whom, and by whom, the system is applied" (Barrow, 1999).

There is a risk that quality assurance systems lead to a dramaturgical compliance to the requirements of the system, instead of quality improvement. A cited in Barrow (1999) "although most institutions are able to provide evidence of the implementation of their approved quality systems, it is likely that the compliance to the systems is in the nature of dramaturgical compliance (Goffman, 1971)".

99. Furthermore, Harvey (2002) suggests that, as higher education and quality assurance systems mature, there is the risk to emphasise procedural elements of quality rather than innovative processes. Reportedly, at the 'End of Quality' Seminar, the UK process was seen "as an extreme approach that, apart from being extensive and very intrusive, was increasingly requiring documentation of every aspect of teaching to the detriment of the learning experience of students. Continuous monitoring by a controlling agency requiring 'overly bureaucratic procedures' will result in detailed paper trails but entirely stifle development and innovation, leading to a continuous procedurising tendency and loss of academic autonomy" Harvey (2002).

5 Empirical evidence on the effects of quality assurance mechanisms on tertiary education systems

100. This section provides an account of the current empirical evidence on the effects of quality assurance mechanisms on tertiary education systems. The first part discusses the reported impact of quality assurance mechanisms and the second part considers the circumstances under which quality assurance systems seem to be more effective.

5.1 *The impact of quality assurance systems*

101. The impact of quality assurance systems on tertiary education is difficult to assess due to reasons described in the following section. However, effects of QA mechanisms can be observed at three different levels: on teaching and learning, on organisation and management issues within HEI and finally academics perception on QA will be described.

5.1.1 Difficulties in measuring the impact of quality assurance

102. **It is difficult to measure changes in quality and easier to focus on organisational change.** Investigation of the impact of quality assessment faces the general problem of investigating change in higher education: much educational change is invisible, incremental and slow (Brennan, 1997). It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms, since it is difficult to measure the achievement of a quality definition, particularly in terms of student transformation (Barrow, 1999).

103. Organisational change is more visible; changes to structures, responsibilities, policies and procedures are easier to identify, although the nature of their linkage to educational change cannot be assumed (Brennan, 1997). Institutional reporting has been reduced to quantifiable areas and organisations are encouraged to develop QA mechanisms that produce auditable paper trails that demonstrate compliance to the system. In these QA systems the effectiveness of the ‘means’ is central, and norms and values associated with the ‘ends’ (in this case quality higher education) are discounted (Barrow, 1999).

104. Reportedly, quality monitoring is frequently concerned with inputs, outputs and systems, rather than processes and learning outcomes. It is argued that the predominance of accountability means that quality monitoring focuses on aspects that may have little to do with outcomes in teaching and learning (Cave et al., 1990; Horsburgh, 1999). Similarly, Harvey and Newton (2004) report that most impact studies have focused on the effect of quality monitoring on staff, on internal procedures, or on management structures in HEIs. But it is far less clear what impact quality assurance is having on student learning.

105. **It is difficult to isolate the impact of quality assurance from other forces affecting higher education.** One of the difficulties for studies evaluating the impact of quality assurance mechanisms is to isolate the impact of quality assurance from the impact of the many other changes which HEIs are experiencing (Shah, 1997). Askling (1997) argues that “a search for possible impact from external quality monitoring must be undertaken with a broad openness for simultaneous events and changes exerting impact on various levels and aspects in the entire system and in the organisation” (Askling, 1997).

106. **Interest in creating a successful image of quality management.** Another methodological problem is related to the potential political and economic gains of being a ‘good implementer’ of external quality management. Stensaker (2003) refers to a study of Zbaracki (1998) of organisations adopting

TQM. This study claims that impact of TQM is often measured overly optimistically since managers and other stakeholders have an interest in developing a successful image of their own efforts. Stensaker warns against the risk of similar tendencies in studies of the impact of external quality assurance.

5.1.2 Impact on teaching and learning

Quality in teaching

107. Brennan and Shah (2000) argue that many case study authors reported that thanks to the introduction of teaching quality assessment, more attention was given to the teaching function within the institution – to talking about teaching, to monitoring teaching, and by implication the teaching act itself. However, it is suggested, some sceptics would argue that time devoted to the monitoring of teaching is at the expense of time dedicated to teaching itself.

According to a case study on external quality evaluation in Chile (Silva *et al.*, 1997) outstanding improvements have occurred in the teaching environment. These included curriculum reforms, higher standards in student assessment and improvement of the assessment instruments, innovation in professional degree programmes, implementation of upgrading programmes for instructors, particularly in pedagogical aspects. Reportedly, further positive reactions have occurred in the academic hiring and promotion system: including higher standards for staff; more stimulus to publish in refereed journals and revision of work loads. In contrast, Newton (2001) in his study of NewColl found that few front-line academics thought that ‘improvements in quality for staff’ had been made possible thanks to quality assurance mechanisms.

Quality in learning

108. Dill (2000) drawing on studies on the outcomes of academic audit procedures in the UK, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Sweden argues that academic audits have placed attention to enhancing teaching and learning on institutional agendas. They have also helped to clarify responsibility for improving quality in teaching and learning at the individual, academic unit, faculty, and institutional level.

Quality assessment can also affect the relative powers between students and academics. Students can be empowered by contributing their views and experiences to the assessment process and by using the public reports produced by the QA system in decisions about what and where to study (Brennan and Shah, 2000).

109. Conversely, Harvey and Newton (2004) point out that most studies reinforce the view that quality is about compliance and accountability and has contributed little to the improvement of the student learning experience. Harvey (1997) argues that, in most countries, external quality monitoring makes no attempt to encourage quality in learning, but tends to be driven by accountability requirements. Participants at *The End of Quality?* seminar held in 2001 were extremely sceptical that external quality assurance arrangements had any impact on student learning (Harvey, 2002). Newton (2000) reports that in his case study of NewColl there was little support amongst staff for the view that student learning experience *per se* had been improved. Rather academic staff associated the quality assurance system with improved ‘discipline’ and ‘technology’ for validation, monitoring, and external scrutiny.

110. Furthermore, it is argued that changes in learning outcomes are not necessarily linked to quality assurance mechanisms. Where positive changes to the student learning experience have taken place, these are not necessarily directly attributable to the existence of a quality assurance system (Newton, 2000) and, it is argued, the existence of external quality arrangements provides, at the best, a legitimation for internally-driven innovation (Harvey and Newton, 2004). It is argued that other factors completely outweigh the impact of external quality monitoring on student learning. (Horsburgh, 1999; Harvey, 2002)

5.1.3 Impact on organisation and management issues within HEIs

111. A wide range of analysts point out that quality assurance systems have effects other than enhancing quality in teaching and learning. Numerous studies seem to agree that quality assurance activities may have an impact on organisation and management issues within higher education institutions. Stensaker (2003) argues that some EQA systems are more concerned with organisational requirements surrounding higher education, than teaching and learning.

112. **EQA affects on the distribution of power.** One reported impact of EQA is that it affects the distribution of power within higher education institutions.

External quality assessment can strengthen authority at the institutional level by placing emphasis on the exercise of responsibility at that level, by scrutinising internal mechanisms of accountability, and by requiring institution-wide policies and effective strategies for their implementation. It is a challenge to the strength of unique disciplinary cultures within institutions. Conversely, external quality assessment systems which operate at the subject level generally embrace and reinforce disciplinary cultures (Brennan and Shah, 2000).

In several countries, studies have concluded that there is a trend towards greater centralisation in higher education institutions – in procedures and in organisational decision-making – as a consequence of external quality assurance activities (Askling, 1997, Stensaker, 1999; Stensaker 2003).

113. **Bureaucratisation.** Closely related to the trend towards centralisation, is the tendency that HEI have become more ‘bureaucratic’. Stensaker (2003) refers to a study from Norway (Gornitzka *et al.*, 1996), which shows “that university administration is changing its profile and functioning where simple tasks and positions are removed and replaced by administrators performing more complex and strategic tasks” (Stensaker, 2003). As cited in Stensaker (2003) “even if it can be argued that this trend is not caused by EQA systems alone, a large comparative study of change processes in higher education in the UK, Sweden and Norway during the 1990s found that EQA is an important contributor to increased ‘bureaucratisation’ (Kogan *et al.*, 2000).”

114. **Transparency.** It can be argued that increased institutional transparency is a noticeable effect of EQA in higher education. “It seems that evaluations have made the ‘black box’ more open and quantifiable. More information than ever before is published about higher education and its outcomes, and EQA systems are the main driver behind this development. The most apparent consequence of this growth of information is that activities at the department and study level are more vulnerable to institutional and governmental interference” (Stensaker, 2003). However, Stensaker points out that one could also question whether EQA systems have really led to more transparency. As cited in Stensaker (2003) “higher education institutions are good at playing ‘games’ and have a long history when it comes to protecting their core functions against external threats. The institutions try to keep an appearance in order to respond to the requirements defined by QA systems (Dill, 2000).”

115. **More managerialism.** Several studies highlight the cultural changes produced by QA systems in the direction of increased managerialism. The case studies realised by Brennan and Shah (2000) revealed a growth of managerialism at the institutional level and support for a greater emphasis upon teaching among individual academic staff. However, the authors also point out that these were general trends rather than the direct effects of EQA mechanisms.

Similarly, Barrow (1999) argues that the administrative norms put in place by quality assurance systems have extended the economic world of rational calculation and management into HEIs. As cited in Barrow (1999) “the rise in management has institutionalised the lack of democratic control of the organisation and its resources, another reason that the institution’s educators are unwilling to do more than comply with the

systems set up (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996)". Stensaker (2003) also notices that there is a trend towards a more autonomous role for the institutional management, including giving managers greater responsibility for follow-up procedures. As cited in Gosling and D'Andrea (2001) "for Trow (1994), the origin of the quality industry is 'managerialism' which is a 'substitute for a relationship of trust between government and universities'. He sees the traditional values of the university under severe threat because of the need of the quality assessments to use measures which can be seen to be 'more objective' and more easily accepted outside the institution".

However, running counter to this trend is the increased authority of subject communities by the use of peer review. The use of peer reviews may be a source of protection of intrinsic academic values and disciplinary culture against a variety of external and internal pressures (Brennan and Shah, 2000).

5.1.4 Academics perception of and behaviour in response to quality assurance

116. **Changing relationships within higher education institutions.** Dill (2000) drawing on studies on the outcomes of academic audit procedures in the UK, New Zealand and Hong Kong reports that audits have facilitated discussion, cooperation, and development within academic units with regard to means for improving teaching and learning.

Conversely, Newton reports (2001) that in his survey there was relatively little support amongst front-line academics for the view that quality assurance mechanisms contributed to 'better teamwork'. Baldwin's (1997) study on the Australian quality assurance system suggests that numerous academics see the new managerial prerogatives associated with accountability requirements as undermining traditions of collegiate decision-making and staff autonomy. As cited in Harvey and Newton (2004) "Warde's (1996) small-scale study of the impact of the 1992 Research Assessment Exercise in the UK suggests that the most remarkable impact appeared to be the 'sense of declining morale, loss of job satisfaction and a decline of collegiality'". Askling (1997) in his study of a Swedish university reports that academic leaders have gradually become familiar with the consequences of decentralisation: more responsibility, more obligations and new demands on institutional management. However, they have distanced themselves from faculty members in general. Furthermore there seems to be an increasing gap in views between the academics who participate in the decision-making process (as elected member of boards) and those who do not. Similarly, the results of Newton's (2001) the study on NewColl revealed a 'gap' between the views of the 'managed' academics, who had markedly less 'positive' views of 'quality' than academic managers.

Furthermore, as cited in Harvey and Newton (2004) "Lee and Harley (1998) explored the impact of the British Research Assessment Exercise on the discipline of economics. They concluded that the RAE had been detrimental to alternative approaches to economics and reinforced a conservative mainstream".

117. **Academics' perception on quality assurance instruments.** Rasmussen (1997) in a study on Aalborg University, Denmark reports that the work on the self-review report was a stimulating experience for the staff; it confronts staff with their own educational practices and incites reflection on change. However, Stensaker (1999) in a study of external quality auditing in Sweden concludes that self-reviews often seemed to be regarded as mere preparation for the external site visits, and not as an independent process which could profit to the institution independently of external accountability purposes. It is argued thus that just relating self-reviews to external needs is a waste of both resources and energy. Concerning the perception of peer-reviews, in a case-study carried out in Chile 86% of the respondents supported the view that the peer-review and report contributed to a better perception of the internal situation and 90% found the participation of peers beneficial (Silva *et al.*, 1997).

118. **Loss of academic autonomy.** Newton (2001) argues that with the development of EQA and the search for even greater efficiencies by HEIs, "it will become an organisational requirement that senior managers are carried more directly into the heart of the academic domain. For academics, this suggests

increased tension between the local level of department – the point of maximum professional and academic autonomy in terms of curriculum delivery, design, and standards – and the corporate requirement that the ‘product’ should meet both institutional targets and external monitoring requirements”.

Askling (1997) reports that most faculty members interpreted the 1993 higher education reform in Sweden in terms of increase in academic ‘power’ for decisions about their own teaching and inner life of their departments. However many of them have been disappointed when confronted to more administrative tasks, with demanding decisions taken by the internal decision-making bodies and perceived a loss of autonomy. As cited in Askling (1997) “some academics feel that their autonomy and integrity are offended by demands for increased transparency and by suggestions that quality might be improved through a more deliberate enhancement policy” (Askling, 1994; Bauer, 1994, 1996; Bauer and Henkel, 1996).

119. **Excessive workload.** Numerous analysts argue that evaluation systems create a considerable workload for academic staff (Askling, 1997; Harvey, 2002; Stephenson, 2004). Reportedly, quality assurance mechanisms include excessive bureaucratic demands, involve overwhelming volumes of paperwork and increased time spent in meetings (Rasmussen, 1997; Baldwin, 1997).

5.2 Some features of effective quality assurance systems

120. **Clarity of purposes.** Expectations regarding the aims and the outcomes of quality assurance may differ between different stakeholders; hence in order to create coherent systems the aim of EQA must be clear. It is argued that EQA systems should not be overcharged with summative and formative functions; it is hard for EQA to serve two masters (namely accountability and improvement). Quality will be enhanced more easily through improvement approaches than through control. Hence it is important not to burden the quality assurance system excessively with accountability and information delivering (Vroeijenstijn, 1995b). It is suggested that “improvement and accountability must be conceptually and practically distinct, with separate resourcing, while allowing for close contact between them”. Separate purposes can be served by several different mechanisms, but for mutual support information should be shared (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995).

Ewell (2002) found that one of the characteristics of ‘best practices’ is consistency with the mission and core values of the higher education institution. It is argued that it is “remarkable how ‘best practice’ organisations are driven by only a few well-articulated core values or mission elements, with evaluation processes attached visibly to these key areas in preference to being ‘comprehensive’ ”.

121. **Legitimacy.** Brennan (1997) points out that legitimacy is a key factor determining the impact of quality assurance. “Quality judgements which lack legitimacy in the eyes of those on the receiving end of them are not likely to be acted upon if action can be avoided”. In this respect, the nature of the involvement of the academic community as a whole is particularly important, while the balance of ownership of QAA between state and HEI seems to affect little the legitimacy of quality assurance activities. “Yet, the success with which the authority of subject communities is exploited by the QAA may be a key factor affecting its overall legitimacy and impact”. Harvey (2002) points out also that a key issue is the legitimacy of EQA systems and how far it is supported by academics.

122. **Dynamic link between internal and external processes.** A range of analysts highlight the importance of coherence and interactivity between internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. The cooperation between different stakeholders in higher education is essential, it is argued. Improvement “needs to be addressed more widely, less intrusively, and more interactively” between HEI and an external agency (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995) and external quality arrangements should be complementary to internal processes (Vroeijenstijn, 1995b). Empirical evidence show that the most effective quality improvement seems to occur when external quality arrangements mesh with internal processes (Harvey and Newton, 2004).

123. Harvey (2002) reports that at *The End of Quality?* seminar it was considered important that monitoring processes should be collaborative and not perceived as something being ‘done to’ an institution. The process needs to be one that encourages willing engagement and positive use of the process to help HEIs to improve their outputs. External quality assurance mechanisms should include “institutional and system-wide *interactive* debriefing – not just summary reports – as, for example, in the New Zealand system”.

124. Successful external site visits must provide the necessary supplement and perspectives to the self-assessment, provide participants with the opportunity of expressing their viewpoints on strengths and weaknesses of the programme, ensure that institutional representatives have already by the end of the visit been provided with input to further quality improvement by the themes brought forward for discussion by the steering committee, and finally that institutional representatives and the steering committee all interpret the evaluation process as a quality improvement process and conduct the visit accordingly (Thune, 1998).

125. It is argued that a “balance of power and trust needs to be established between key stakeholders, supported by open communication and negotiating machinery”. Different purposes and interests must be accommodated at all levels of the system and serious imbalances of power should be avoided since they risk to damage both the quality and the integrity of the higher education sector (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). Horsburgh (1999) suggests that “a partnership between the centre and the teachers must be established, with the centre arbiter of key values and principles and the ways of doing decided by people who must actually to them”.

126. As cited in Stensaker (2003) “arguing for leadership improvement is an old issue highlighted in the external quality monitoring literature: the role of leaders is seen as important for introducing and promoting external quality monitoring schemes at their own institution (Kells, 1992; Vroeijenstijn, 1995a)”. Stensaker (2003) argues that leadership involvement in itself is insufficient. He refers to a former study from Norway (Stensaker, 2000) showing that where they are not able to add anything to the EQA process, institutional leadership can lead to disappointing outcomes when it comes to internal quality improvements. “On the other hand, the same study showed the importance of institutional leaders when they display a range of strategic and interpretative skills for fitting together the formal objectives related to EQA and the mission and history of their own institution. In this ‘translation’ process they contributed to change both their own institutions and the external evaluation systems. Thus, a dynamic interaction was created between the EQA systems and the development needs of the institutions” (Stensaker, 2003).

127. **Flexibility, confidence in HEI and more focus on internal processes.** It is argued that in order to achieve quality improvement, trust in higher education needs to be re-established, and more attention should be paid to internal processes (Harvey and Newton, 2004). Similarly, Thune (1996) highlights the importance of trust, commitment and understanding in successful quality assurance arrangements. It is also essential to take into account the expectations and values of the staff, particularly if it is assumed that lasting quality improvement is based on the energies and initiatives of staff (Newton, 2000).

128. Horsburgh (1999) underlines the importance of internal mechanisms and proposing some general principles that should guide internal accountability. It is suggested that quality processes must be non-burdensome and responsibility for quality should be delegated to teaching units and other teams involved in providing student services since they are able to effect change in teaching and learning. Similarly, Vroeijenstijn (1995a) argues that quality is foremost the responsibility of HEIs, thus they must have the ‘ownership’ of the quality assurance system.

129. Informal internal quality monitoring, such as professional dialogue and exchange of ideas seems to be the most valuable in terms of improvement of student learning (Horsburgh, 1999). It is suggested that peer observation of teaching should be separated from other university processes such as those for

probationary staff, for under-performance or promotion. Feedback to individual staff must be confidential (Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001) and the outcomes of the process should be the identification of the further developmental needs of the department (Gosling, 2000). Drawing on research undertaken at the University of East London Gosling and D'Andrea (2001) argue that "when using these principles, the objections to having teaching observed become much weaker and objections largely disappear (Kemp and Gosling, 2000)".

130. So that self-assessment can serve the objective of improvement, De Vries (1997) suggests that it should be an individual and a private activity. Making the self-assessment individual allows to avoid the contestation over values imposing on the process, and making it private eliminates the competition and the striving for reputation from the process. "The main caveats are that administrators need to provide time for academics to carry out self-reflective processes in their own way, to give them space to effect the enhancements as they deem suitable and to trust the individuals". According to De Vries "written reports carry the stamp of compliance", hence a genuine self-reflective process does not necessarily result in a written report.

131. **Adequate follow-up procedures, feedback linked to action.** It is argued that "a series of well-executed evaluations do not in themselves bring any merit to the concept of systematic evaluations. The proof of success is the impact and follow-up in the longer term of a quality improvement programme launched from a successful evaluation" (Thune, 1996). It is necessary that effective action and appropriate change flow from monitoring (Horsburgh, 1999). Student feedback should be linked to action and empowerment, since it is an essential element of quality assurance, especially if the emphasis is on internal processes (Harvey, 2002). However, it should not be used to make judgements about the personal performance of academics but should be part of a dialogue to improve the programme (Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001). Concerning the question of who should be responsible for follow-up, Vroeijenstijn (1995a) argues that governments must leave the follow-up to the HEI and avoid direct actions based on the outcomes of the review. The government should take measures only when a HEI does nothing with the recommendations.

132. **Regular and cyclical quality monitoring, viewed as a process.** It is argued that EQA must be regular and cyclical; it does not make sense to have a unique quality review. One of the strengths of the quality assurance system is the ability to look at improvements after a certain period of time (Vroeijenstijn, 1995a). If quality monitoring is seen as an 'event' rather than as a 'process', it is likely to lead to performance and game playing, instead of making much long-term impact. In order to achieve lasting internal benefits, the process should less comply with external requirements (Harvey, 2002).

133. **Prudence and flexibility in linking results to funding.** A controversial issue concerning quality assurance systems is how quality and funding should be linked. Ewell (2002) describes some characteristics of 'best practice' organisations in planning and evaluation. It is argued that best linkages between results and consequences are indirect; there should be a careful balance of performance and consequence. Reportedly, linkages adopted by 'best practice' organisations present the following characteristics: keep the flexibility to allocate resources toward both good and bad performers, allow local variations in context and avoid negative sanctions on individuals wherever possible. Finally, not all of the linkages between performance and outcome involved money.

134. Numerous analysts suggest that there should not be a direct link between the results of quality monitoring and funding of education. [*Arguments pro and con: see Table 4*] Proponents of direct linkages between quality and funding argue that linking funding to evaluation results serves the objective of accountability, but can constitute an obstacle to quality improvement and lead to a compliance culture. It is also argued that EQA should not aim at ranking, though it has a certain comparative aspect (Vroeijenstijn, 1995a).

135. Ewell (1999) suggests that information-driven funding approaches should be based on the following policy guidelines: First, policies should be clear about purposes in order to move institutions in particular desired directions. Second, policy components should be tailored to fit purposes, since different policy purposes require different kinds of budgetary mechanisms. Third, simple and robust performance measures may be better than elegant and precise, and should be employed in ways that take their inherent imprecision and statistical instability into account. Fourth, approaches that punish HEIs for things that they cannot control should be avoided; negative sanctions of facts that cannot be influenced by institutional action produce frustration rather than improvement. Finally, the process should be regularly reviewed and revised over time.

6 Conclusion

136. Though quality assurance practices in tertiary education vary among countries, there are some common elements of quality assurance systems that apply in most or, at least, several major types of mechanisms can be identified -- approaches to quality, level and scope of quality review, key stakeholders involved in the process, methods and instruments, and the consequences of quality monitoring. Growing internationalisation of higher education serves to reinforce tendencies in establishing commonalities between national quality assurance frameworks.

137. However, the question of how effective quality assurance systems should be designed and implemented is subject to wide debate. There is, for instance, a lack of clarity about what the purpose of quality assurance should be, about the adequateness of diverse methods and instruments used by quality assurance mechanisms, or concerning the consequences of quality monitoring results. Identifying the features of effective quality assurance systems is rendered more complicated by the difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of such systems. It is also difficult to know how the quality of education would have changed without the implementation of quality assurance processes. Moreover, it is not easy to measure the outcomes of quality in higher education. Hence, numerous analysts seem to agree that the impact of quality assurance systems on teaching and learning is difficult to assess and is thus in need of further research.

List of acronyms

CEEC	Central and Eastern European Countries
EQA	External quality assurance
HEI	Higher education institution
PI	Performance indicator
QA	Quality assurance
QAA	Quality assurance agency
TQM	Total quality management

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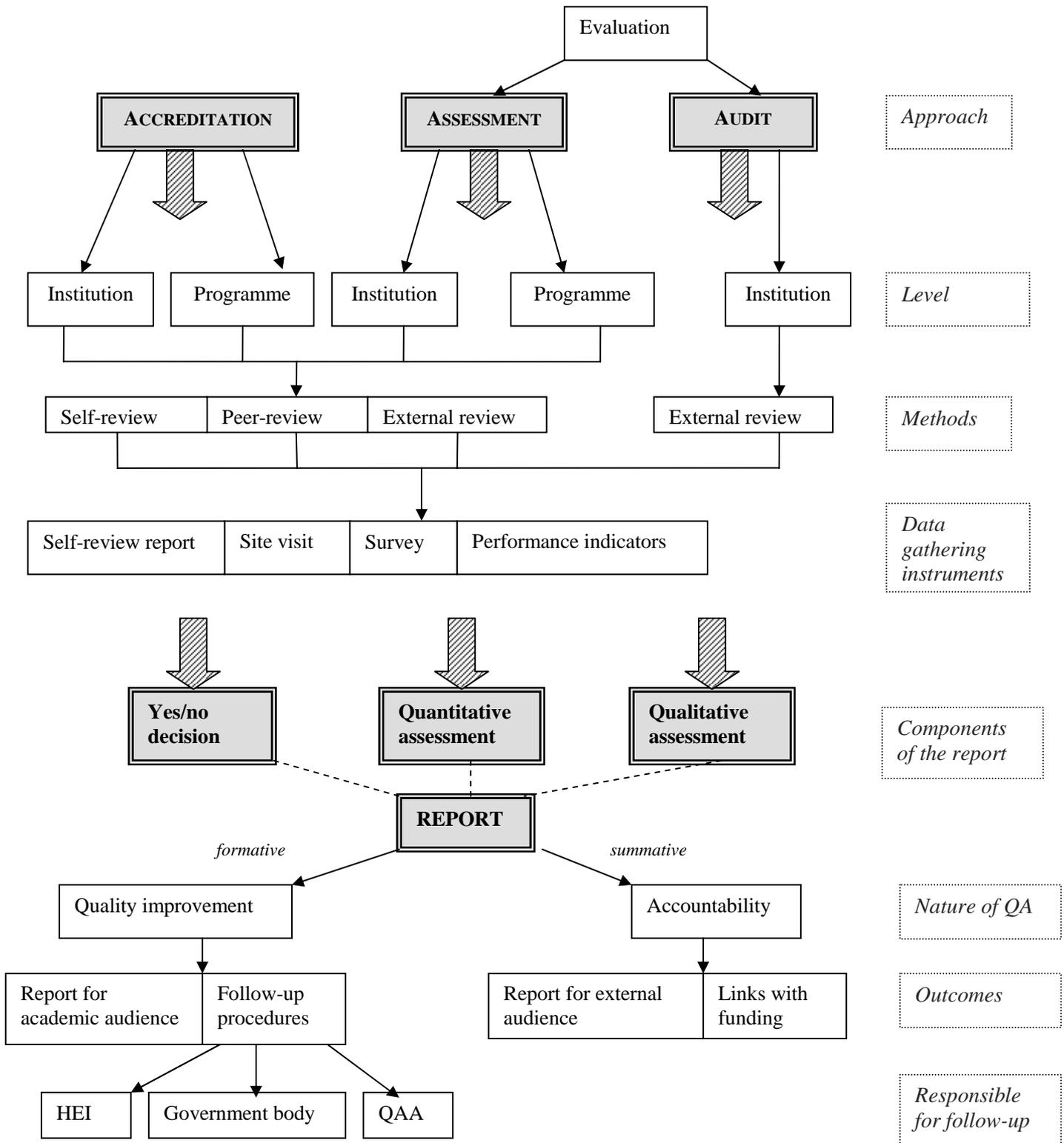
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Annex 1: Major elements of quality assurance systems in tertiary education



Annex 2: An overview of quality assurance systems in practice in selected countries

138. This annex examines quality assurance systems in tertiary education found in selected countries. The data are drawn principally from Vroeijsenstijn (1995b), the other sources are indicated in the footnotes. One limitation of Table 7 should be noted: national quality assurance systems are subject to change, therefore data presented here may not necessarily be up-to-date. For this reason, please note dates as indicated in the references; all data from web resources date from August 2005.

Table 7: An overview of national quality assurance systems in tertiary education in OECD countries

Country	Agency	Focus education/research	Approach and level	Methods and instruments	Use of PI	Nature of QA	Public report	Links with funding
Australia ¹	Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) Universities Australian Universities Quality Agency Commonwealth Government State and Territory Governments	Teaching/learning, research, management, QA processes	Programme (self-) accreditation Institutional audit Performance data Institutional accreditation ('recognition' of self-accrediting universities)	Self-review, peer-review, site visit Self-review, site visit Survey	Yes	Quality improvement, accountability	Yes	Yes ²
Belgium, Flemish community	Flemish Interuniversity council (VLIR)	Teaching/learning	Programme assessment	Self-review, peer-review, site visit	No	Quality improvement, accountability, self-regulation		No direct connection ³
Chile ⁴	Comisión Nacional de Acreditación ⁵ Consejo Superior de Educación	Teaching/learning	Institutional and programme accreditation Institutional accreditation	Self-review, peer-review, site visit Principally peer-review and site visit		Quality improvement, accountability, self-regulation		
Croatia	National Council for Higher Education ⁶	Teaching/learning	Institutional assessment, programme accreditation ⁷	Self-review, peer-review, site visit		Quality improvement	No	

¹ Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Australia, 2000

² Brennan, 1997

³ Government can organise meta-evaluations and comparative research on the quality of education through a committee of independent experts, the results of which are public. If after repeated negative evaluations a programme does not meet the standards, government can stop financing this programme until it does. (Bellefroid and Elen, 2001)

⁴ International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

⁵ Comisión Nacional de Acreditación

⁶ Campbell and Rozsnyai, 2002

⁷ The Ministry of Science and Technology initiates and makes accreditation decisions, based on the recommendations of the National Council for Higher Education.

Country	Agency	Focus education/research	Approach and level	Methods and instruments	Use of PI	Nature of QA	Public report	Links with funding
Denmark	Danish Evaluation Centre (EVA)	Teaching/learning	Programme and institutional assessment, institutional audit, programme and institutional accreditation ⁸	Self-review, peer-review, site visit	No	Quality improvement, accountability, self-regulation		No direct connection ⁹
Estonia ¹⁰	Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre Higher Education Quality Assessment Council ¹¹ Archimedes Foundation	Teaching/learning, research separately	Programme accreditation, some institutional accreditation. ¹²	Self-review, peer-review, site visit ¹³		Quality improvement	Not broadly but sent to institutions and to student organisations ¹⁴ .	
Finland	Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council ¹⁵	Teaching/learning	Programme and institutional assessment, programme and institutional accreditation, audit of QA systems of HEI ¹⁶	Self-review, peer-review, site visit	No	Quality improvement, accountability, self-regulation	Yes	No direct connection
France	Comité National d'Évaluation Independent; directly responsible to the President	Teaching/learning, research, community services combined	Institutional assessment. Sometimes programme assessment	Institutional: questionnaire, site visit Subject: self-review, peer-review, site visit	Yes	Quality control, accountability, assessment of contracts with government	Yes ¹⁷	No direct connection with funding, but influence on contracts with government. No direct connection

⁸ Danish Evaluation Institute

⁹ Brennan, 1997

¹⁰ Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

¹¹ Under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Research, Estonia.

¹² Campbell and Rozsnyai, 2002

¹³ Campbell and Rozsnyai, 2002

¹⁴ Campbell and Rozsnyai, 2002

¹⁵ International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

¹⁶ Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council

¹⁷ Ottenwaelder, 1997

Country	Agency	Focus education/research	Approach and level	Methods and instruments	Use of PI	Nature of QA	Public report	Links with funding
Greece	National Council of Education (overseen by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs) ¹⁸						Yes	No direct connection
Iceland ¹⁹	Division of Evaluation and Supervision (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture)	Teaching/learning, research	Programme and institutional evaluation ²⁰	Self-review, peer-review, site visit	Yes	Quality improvement, accountability, self-regulation	Yes	
Japan ²¹	Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation Japan University Accreditation Association	Teaching/learning, research	Institutional accreditation and evaluation ²² Institutional accreditation ²³	Self-review, site visit, survey ²⁴ Self-review, external review ²⁵			Yes	
The Netherlands	VSNU (association of universities) HBO-road (association of polytechnics) Netherlands Accreditation Organisation	Teaching/learning, research separately	Programme assessment Programme accreditation	Self-review, peer-review, site visit	No	Quality improvement, accountability, self-regulation		No direct connection

¹⁸ Kaplanis and Nanoussi, 2001

¹⁹ Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Iceland (2003)

²⁰ Van Damme *et al.*, 2004

²¹ Kimura *et al.*, 2004

²² National Institute for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation, Japan

²³ Japan University Accreditation Association

²⁴ National Institute for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation, Japan

²⁵ Japan University Accreditation Association

Country	Agency	Focus education/research	Approach and level	Methods and instruments	Use of PI	Nature of QA	Public report	Links with funding
New Zealand ²⁶	Ministry of Education New Zealand Qualifications Authority				Yes	Accountability, self-regulation		
Norway ²⁷	Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT)		Programme and institutional evaluation and accreditation					
Portugal	Evaluation Council (Foundation of Portuguese Universities) ²⁸	Teaching/learning	Programme assessment	Self-review, peer-review, site visit	No	Quality improvement, accountability, self-regulation	Yes ²⁹	No direct connections
Russia ³⁰	National Accreditation Agency of Russia Accreditation Council (Ministry for General and Professional Education)	Teaching/learning	Institutional and programme accreditation	Self-review, peer-review, site visit		Quality improvement	Yes but not widely distributed	
Spain		Teaching/learning, research management	Institutional audit and academic programmes	Self-review, peer-review, site visit	No	Quality improvement, accountability, self-regulation		No direct connection
Spain ³¹	Agencia Nacional de la Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación		Institutional assessment and accreditation	Self-review, peer-review, site visit	Yes	Quality improvement, accountability		
Sweden	National Agency for Higher Education (headed by the University Chancellor) ³²	Teaching/learning, quality management ³³	Programme assessment	Self-review, peer-review, site visit		Quality improvement, accountability, self-regulation		

²⁶ Woodhouse, 1997

²⁷ Van Damme *et al.*, 2004

²⁸ Conselho de Avaliação, Fundação das Universidades Portuguesas

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ Campbell and Rozsnyai, 2002

³¹ Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación, Spain

³² National Agency for Higher Education, Sweden

³³ *Ibid*

Country	Agency	Focus education/research	Approach and level	Methods and instruments	Use of PI	Nature of QA	Public report	Links with funding
Switzerland ³⁴	Accreditation and Quality Assurance Board	Teaching/learning, research ³⁵	Institutional accreditation ³⁶ , institutional audit	Self-review, peer-review, site-visit	Yes	Quality improvement	Yes ³⁷	
United Kingdom	Higher Education Quality Council owned by universities Funding councils	Especially internal quality assurance processes and policy Teaching/learning, research separately	Institutional audit Programme assessment	Self-review, peer-review, site-visits Self-review, peer-review, site-visits	Yes Yes	Meta-evaluation, Internal quality management systems Accountability, quality control and quality improvement		No connection. Connection.

³⁴ Schenker-Wicki, 2002

³⁵ Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Swiss Universities www.oaq.ch/pub/en/04_00_00_qualitaetsicherung.php

³⁶ Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Swiss Universities www.oaq.ch/pub/fr/03_02_00_akkred_begleitinstrumente.php

³⁷ Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Swiss Universities www.oaq.ch/pub/downloads/Anerkennung_f.pdf