

# Assuring and Improving Quality in Tertiary Education

## Pointers for policy development

### WHY ASSURING QUALITY MATTERS

- Improved quality assurance could help countries achieve their goal of ensuring high quality provision in tertiary education and preparing their populations for participation in the knowledge economy
- The transition from elite to mass participation in tertiary education has increased the burden on national budgets
- The move towards the New Public Management (NPM) approach requires policy makers to demonstrate the effectiveness of public spending
- Governments have agreed to provide more autonomy to tertiary education institutions (TEIs) so as to improve TEIs' central management in exchange for quality assurance
- New private educational offerings have called for better protection of consumers
- Quality provision in TEIs is important to attract students and secure revenues in competitive environments
- The role of tertiary education in training knowledge workers contributes to economic growth
- Ensuring quality in tertiary education beyond the elite segment is also important for employment and social cohesion
- The shift towards the new economy has increased students and employers' expectations of tertiary education
- The growing internationalisation of tertiary education calls for a closer monitoring of cross-border education quality
- Quality assurance can be defined as the “process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process and outcomes) fulfils expectations and measures up to threshold minimum requirements”

### DESIGN OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

- Design a quality assurance framework consistent with the goals of tertiary education whereby:
  - each student is provided with quality education
  - the overall system is contributing to the social and economic development of the country
  - TEIs' activities foster equity of access and outcomes
  - quality assurance contributes to a better co-ordination within and integration of the overall tertiary system
- Build consensus on clear goals and expectations of the quality assurance system
  - distinguish improvement and accountability conceptually and practically, while allowing for close contact between them
- Ensure that quality assurance serves both the improvement and accountability purposes
- Combine internal and external quality assurance mechanisms
- Build capacity and secure legitimacy
  - collection of data and processing of quality indicators to be used in accountability checks should ideally be developed outside the quality assurance agency/body
  - ensure that the staff involved in external evaluations are adequately selected and trained to analyse the information gathered during the evaluations
- Make stakeholders such as students, graduates and employers visible in the evaluation procedures
- Increase focus on student outcomes
  - refer to the desired outcomes of tertiary education for the design of tertiary programmes' curricula
  - develop indicators of teaching quality and include them in performance appraisals of TEIs
- Enhance the international comparability of the quality assurance framework

## INTERNAL EVALUATION

- Develop a strong quality culture in the system
- Put more stress on internal quality assurance mechanisms
  - academics in each study area could gather systematic feedback from students, assess their programme's effectiveness and carry out improvements in areas where weaknesses are identified
  - national quality assurance agency/body could organise technical assistance materials and sponsor workshops
- Ensure that internal accountability is guided by some key principles
  - encourage peer observation of teaching
- Undertake the external validation of internal quality assurance systems

## EXTERNAL EVALUATION

- Commit external quality assurance to an advisory role as the system gains maturity but retain strong external components in certain contexts
  - external quality assurance could offer advice and consultation to TEIs, undertake research on quality, disseminate best practices and provide benchmarking data across the sector
  - concentrate monitoring and improvement efforts on TEIs most in need of improving their quality
- Implement adequate follow-up procedures and view quality assurance as a continuous process
  - the quality assurance agency/body should step in when a TEI does not act on the evaluation recommendations
- Allow for selected assessments to be initiated by an external quality assurance agency
- Avoid direct links between assessment results and public funding decisions
  - minimum quality thresholds should be demonstrated *ex-ante* to become eligible for public funds
  - find balance between reward mechanisms and funding directed to correct deficiencies in low-performing TEIs

## METHODS

- Align quality assurance processes to the particular profile of TEIs
- Improve co-ordination between the evaluation of teaching and research
- Engage in constant innovation, e.g. periodic change in both objectives and in the quality assurance agencies
- Develop quality assurance expertise in new areas

## PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

- Avoid fragmentation of the quality assurance organisational structure
- Avoid excessive costs and burdens
- Improve quality information base
  - build a better national information system on tertiary students and their later employment experience
- Improve information dissemination with reports easily accessible and comprehensible to non-experts in the field

## FURTHER READING

These general pointers for policy development are drawn from the Thematic Review of Tertiary Education, which covered tertiary education policies in 24 countries. The findings of this review are presented in *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society*, published in September 2008. Background reports prepared by 21 countries, *Reviews of Tertiary Education* in 14 countries and other documents of the review are also available on the OECD website [www.oecd.org/edu/tertiary/review](http://www.oecd.org/edu/tertiary/review).