

The UNESCO Global Forum: Continuing Conversations About Quality Review and Higher Education

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On October 17 and 18, 2002, some 120 people from more than 30 countries gathered in Paris at a meeting of UNESCO's Global Forum on Quality Assurance, Accreditation, and the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education. The purpose was to address the challenges facing quality assurance of higher education in a global setting. UNESCO provided a comprehensive agenda that included sessions on accreditation and quality assurance, quality standards, access and equity, higher education and the public good, borderless higher education, for-profit higher education, public and private higher education, and degrees and qualifications.

Driving Themes

Several themes emerged repeatedly during the two days of discussion. These included the growing dominance of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the current round of negotiations under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) with regard to higher education and quality assurance in an international setting, the interest in establishing a framework by which national quality assurance professionals in various countries can position themselves to assure quality internationally, and the issue of addressing fundamental values in quality review, in a sector such as higher education that serves the public good and the public interest.

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WTO and GATS

The current GATS negotiations are intended to liberalize trade in services among the 144 WTO member coun-

tries. Some WTO members may wish to offer higher education and quality assurance programs, while others may wish to set conditions for such services. While some groups in higher education and quality assurance support the efforts of the WTO to ease restrictions on the import and export of higher education and attendant services, others have raised serious concerns about the danger of treating higher education and quality assurance as items of trade like other services such as insurance, computers, or banks.

What of the future and the emerging dominance of the WTO and GATS?

What are higher education and quality assurance doing in a trade agreement? Why (using an example from GATS) does a supranational organization of countries care about the number of cosmetology schools in the state of Kentucky in the United States? A technical answer would refer to the fact that higher education and quality assurance fall within the broad definition of "services" used in negotiations: to paraphrase the language of GATS, human activity to satisfy a human need and not a tangible commodity. A political answer would point to the fact that importing and exporting higher education involves billions of dollars. There are many groups seeking to expand this market in the hope of gaining even greater profits. Those parts of the higher education and quality assurance sector that support the GATS provide another answer: that the presence of quality assurance sectors in the negotiations can enhance access, equity, and student mobility.

Although only one session of the meeting was formally devoted to GATS, the subject came up in session after session, rapidly becoming an influential and sometimes defining presence in talks about quality assurance and higher education on an international scale. Sometime, this pattern took the form of suggestions that decisions about quality assurance in an international setting required subordination to determinations made under GATS. At other times, the issue of GATS evoked expressions of concern, sometimes combined with articulations of helplessness because the GATS negotiations are not open to the public. There were frequent comments such as "Well, what about GATS?" and "We have to deal with GATS."

What of the future and the emerging dominance of the WTO and GATS? Whether one supports or challenges

the appropriateness of negotiating the quality of higher education as an item of trade, these negotiations will likely drive at least some of the international conversation about quality assurance in higher education.

Establishing an International Framework

A second theme driving the discussions at the UNESCO meeting was “What framework, structure, or mechanisms do we need to assure the quality of higher education?” It was largely accepted that higher education and quality assurance assume additional responsibilities in the international sphere, although how this should be accomplished has become the subject of much debate.

Of the key leaders in quality assurance and accreditation in various countries, some prefer quality review structured around a single set of international quality standards, whether for institutions, programs, or quality assurance agencies. International standards can build common understanding and form the basis for agreement about quality.

Others believe that assuring quality in an international setting should build on the capacity of existing national quality review procedures to establish relationships, broker agreements, share information, and assure communication about quality review practices among countries. Those focused on a nation-based framework remain committed to national models for higher education and quality assurance, arguing that judgments and expectations of education and quality are inseparable from the cultural and social contexts in which they develop.

“How can we assure that quality review in an international setting is about more than market forces?”

Still others believe that relying on regional approaches makes sense, maintaining that areas of the world that share geographic proximity or a common history and culture can work together effectively. Thus regional frameworks are seen as a key means to work together internationally.

As for how best to create an international framework for structuring relationships to serve higher education and quality assurance, the realization may grow that there is space for a range of mechanisms—national, regional, and international—to meet specific needs and challenges to assure quality.

Fundamental Values

During the two days of the Global Forum, values questions about international quality review were raised repeatedly—including “How can we assure that quality review in an international setting is about more than market forces?” “What is our commitment to the public good?” “What is the ‘public interest’ in an international setting?” “What are the potential good and the potential harm of the ‘market’ in an international higher education context?” The discussions have focused on access and equity for students as well as the relationships between developed and developing countries.

“How can we assure that quality review in an international setting is about more than market forces?”

The values discussions also examined the issue of establishing frameworks that allow higher education and quality assurance to reflect the culture and values of a single society while operating in an international environment.

Perhaps the conversation on public good issues will result in the identification of values held in common across countries, accompanied by fresh notions of the “public interest” that are not confined to nations but encompass the international sphere. Progress in this area may alleviate some of the tension between a policy of upholding nation-based values and culture that have defined higher education and a consideration of international standards of quality.

Continuing Conversations

The UNESCO meeting demonstrated the key themes in the ongoing conversations concerning higher education and quality assurance. It will be necessary to address the many questions associated with establishing a framework within which national, regional, and international structures and standards of quality can be developed and implemented. These conversations will proceed against the backdrop of a worldwide commitment to rearrange both opportunities for and barriers to trade among nations—including, for better or worse, higher education and quality assurance.

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