Quality in higher education

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In recent decades, hard work has gone into improving the quality of higher education as well as the systems used to improve quality and enable quality assurance. Important examples of this include the further development of the accreditation system and the associated quality assessments, the introduction of the institutional review, agreement of performance targets with individual institutions, and the strengthening of the position of the examinations committee, study programme committee and the supervisory board in the design process of the quality assurance mechanism.

Although there is satisfaction with the results achieved, there is now also discontentment about the quality policy being followed, leading to criticism of the one-sided views of quality on which it is based. For instance, it is said that there is too much focus on quantitative indicators, such as return on investment and drop-out rates, while too little attention is given to the importance of a strong culture of quality. Another point of criticism is that accountability can be at odds with improving education and engagement in the education process. This raises the question of how quality in higher education can be improved and guaranteed in a responsible way.

To improve the quality of higher education, the Education Council recommends that balance be restored in three aspects of quality assurance policy: in targets, in the tool kit and in co-determination. The policy places much emphasis on uniform standards of quality with corresponding targets, leaving little space for other views of quality or targets for institutions, lecturers and students. This would allow education to be evaluated based on views of quality assurance that are not shared by lecturers and students. This could have a detrimental impact on their engagement.

Furthermore, the policy emphasises the use of quantitative instruments that focus on rules, reports and financial and legal sanctions. Attention on qualitative instruments is also needed. Furthermore, the quantitative instruments need to be better geared to achieving and maintaining a strong quality culture. In the process of achieving a strong quality culture, there are at least seven aspects that should be taken into account: (1) a clear, shared and consistently applied vision of good education; (2) an orientation towards improvement backed up by a collective and individual learning capacity; (3) leadership at the study programme level; (4) a supportive organisational structure that initiates collaboration; (5) HRM policy that supports quality policy; (6) strong engagement by students; and (7) an external orientation.

Finally, the Education Council believes that a better balance is needed between control and autonomy. Further improvements in higher education demand a clear division of roles and responsibilities. Given the layered responsibility for the quality of higher education, this is the only way to achieve productive relationships. Furthermore, a great degree of importance is attached to public accountability and independent, external supervision. Students and lecturers need to feel more engaged with their study programmes. At the same time, governors and supervisors have a role to play in strengthening the quality culture and monitoring the quality of education. The government has no role to play in directly controlling quality culture. Its responsibility should be limited to monitoring public values and creating the right conditions for quality improvements. In brief, the Education Council recommends ongoing efforts to work towards a balance between leeway rules and accountability.

The Education Council therefore makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1: work on strengthening the quality culture at the study programme level
A strong quality culture at the study programme level is the primary contributing factor to quality improvements. An important element in this is the formulation and consistent communication of a shared vision on education. Based on this vision, objectives can be formulated, that indicate the direction in which the quality improvements should proceed. For the achievement of a strong quality culture, the Education Council also calls for a focus on providing incentives for student engagement and the forming of communities, strengthening of leadership at the study programme level, and the organisation of critical reflection and feedback opportunities.

Recommendation 2: institutions should recalibrate their internal quality assurance regimes and create the essential conditions for a stronger quality culture within study programmes

There needs to be a better balance at the institutional level between accountability and ownership. The governing body and the supervisory board both have a responsibility or the quality of education and should monitor this accordingly. Governing bodies should ensure that internal quality assurance measures strengthen quality culture rather than disrupt it. They can also create the essential conditions for a strong quality culture at the study programme level and provide incentives for study programmes to improve their quality. HRM policy in particular can be used to support quality culture.

Recommendation 3: make changes to the quality assurance regime organised by the government

The role of the government should primarily be to monitor public values and create the right conditions for quality improvements. The Education Council proposes that the quality assurance assessment for institutions should be abolished in favour of a system based on agreed quality performance targets. Study programmes should continue to be subjected to a system of accreditation, but there should also be more space for study programmes to develop their own vision on education. Furthermore, the accreditation of study programmes should be limited to an assessment of basic quality standards. The Education Council recommends that a clear distinction be made between quality review and accreditation. Review — a critical discussion between peers — could then be more focused on improvements. Finally, the Education Council recommends that an exploratory study be made of how fragmentation in supervision frameworks and supervisory bodies can be tackled.