

The Internet and Education Conference

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What is Quality?

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Introduction

It is a great pleasure to attend this Forum on the Internet and Education and to give a short presentation on different ways of evaluating the quality of universities and other higher education providers. The quality of higher education is of great importance to all its stakeholders. Young people know that higher education is the key to good work opportunities. Those already working understand the need constantly to upgrade their competencies. This creates both challenges and opportunities for higher education institutions (HEIs) to provide high quality education to their students and also to find the best methods for assuring quality.

My title is “*What is Quality*”. This is a million dollar question and there is no single answer. I shall not attempt to enter into definitions. Instead, I will give examples about different ways quality is assessed. I will do so by asking the following five questions:

1. What is quality?
2. What is quality assurance?
3. How is quality assurance changing?
4. How to assess the quality of alternative/post-traditional providers?
5. Do rankings measure quality?

What is Quality: The CHEA Seven Quality Principles

In the attempt to provide a common understanding of quality across the world, we at CHEA articulated seven fundamental international quality principles that underpin all forms of higher education, whatever the curricula or delivery mode. They are available on the CHEA/CIQG website (<http://www.cheainternational.org/members/index.asp>) and will soon be available in Chinese.

These principles underpin the various approaches to quality and evaluation of higher education around the world, beginning with principle #1, which states that: “assuring and achieving quality in higher education is the primary responsibility of higher education providers and their staff”. This principle applies both to face-to face teaching and online learning, which is the topic of today’s Conference.

The other six principles address the relationship between quality and its main stakeholders, students, government, society, quality assurance and accreditation bodies but also include its functions such as accountability or adapting to change.

What is quality assurance: the process

Quality assurance evolved and developed strongly in the 1990s. By the beginning of the 2000s a general model of quality assurance had emerged with the following elements:

- Regulations and guidelines produced by the QA agency
- A self-evaluation prepared by the institution
- Appointment of a peer group to review the institution or programme, starting by reviewing the self-evaluation
- Site visits by the peer group
- Publication of the report or, in some cases, only the decision

This basic model now seems to be spreading throughout the world, with some variations, through the development of international and regional quality assurance networks, demonstrating convergence or what some call “the spread of the familiar”.

How quality assurance is changing: from inputs to outputs

While QA methods may be converging, the focus of quality assurance is changing. Not very long ago quality was judged by measuring inputs – grades of new students, qualifications of teaching staff, number of books in the library and so on. Today the assessment of quality focuses more on the outputs: students' learning outcomes. What have the students really learned?

Multilateral organisations are supporting this development with international initiatives. One example is the OECD project AHELO (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes), which aimed to assess what graduates **know and can do** at the global level across cultures, languages and institutions. So far AHELO has not progressed beyond a feasibility study.

A similar project has now emerged in the European Union. It focuses on Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe and has the acronym CALOHEE.

Quality assurance of post-traditional providers: the CHEA Quality Platform

Students' Learning Outcomes also provide the basis for assessing the quality of alternative providers of higher education. A new sector of higher education is emerging with offerings from private companies, such as DeTao, and other organizations, often online, an example being MOOCs. We call this “post-traditional higher education”.

We published *A Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education* in 2014, in English and Chinese.

In the same spirit, CHEA/CIQG has developed a Quality Platform with the aim of assuring and improving quality as this post-traditional sector develops and serves more students. It is a review based on students' learning outcomes using standards established by the Platform, a self-review

by the provider and peer (expert) review. Successful providers are designated as “Quality Platform Providers” by CHEA/CIQG for a three-year period.

The Quality Platform is based on four simple standards:

- Are learning outcomes articulated and achieved?
- Do they meet post-secondary level standards?
- Can credits be transferred?
- Is transparent information available?

The DeTao Masters Academy applied to become a Quality Platform Provider in June 2015. It conducted a self-evaluation from September to June and had an external site-visit by a team of international experts in November.

CHEA accepted their report and DeTao received the Quality Platform certificate for its Advanced Classes at ceremony in Washington in January 2016.

All good quality assurance has a formative element. The process of going through the Quality Platform assessment led the DeTao Masters and their teams to put even more emphasis on student learning outcomes in their future courses.

The Quality Platform applies to the DeTao Advanced Classes in partnership with SIVA and we are pleased that this model will be extended to other higher education institutions.

We are eager to see DeTao’s online teaching develop and hope that it can also be subject a Quality Platform review.

Being recognised by CHEA/CIQG as a Quality Platform provider has enhanced DeTao's image in the very conservative world of Chinese higher education.

Do Rankings measure quality?

Recently, our DeTao colleagues were proud to announce that last year SIVA was ranked in QS top 100 Art and Design institutions, which, certainly reflects the contribution of the DeTao Advanced Classes. This brings me to my last question, whether rankings are a measure of quality?

Over the last decade, rankings have had significant impact on higher education. Although the US system has had rankings for 100 years, global rankings are more recent.

Today, major global rankings, include: *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China), *QS World University Rankings* (Quacquarelli Symonds, UK), *THE World University Ranking* (Times Higher Education, UK), and *U-Multirank* (European Commission, Brussels).

Rankings claim to measure and compare higher education performance and “quality”. But in fact the measures do not focus very much on the quality of teaching. Determining “which university is best” depends upon who is asking the question and what their criteria are. There are over

18,000 HEIs worldwide, but the most well known rankings focus mainly on the top 100 - less than 0.5% of the world total. An alternative such as *U-Multirank*, which embraces a greater diversity of HEIs, looks at the over-all benefits to society of complete higher education systems.

Does it really matter which HEIs get in the top 100? What difference does it make to students' learning outcomes? The reason for the success of rankings is their visibility and simplicity, based, however, on questionable methodology, focusing mainly on research outputs.

One should measure what matters and quality assurance is a more reliable way of doing this.

Conclusion

I have described quality assurance processes around the world by presenting international quality principles, exploring traditional and emerging trends and alternative QA methods and looking at rankings, where I questioned whether they really measure quality. I hope this has given you some useful ideas for future developments in China.