
THE CONCEPT OF EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

MANUELA BRUSONI, RADU DAMIAN, JOSEP GRIFOLL SAURI, STEPHEN JACKSON,
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Investing in excellence:

The University's vision is '(...)to create a stimulating, challenging and rewarding university experience in a world-class learning community, through sharing a unique fusion of education, research and professional practice that inspires our students and staff to enrich the world.'

Times Higher Education, Appointments, 5 September 2013

Vision:

'To achieve excellence in higher education through quality assurance'

Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council, Sri Lanka

PREFACE

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 'EXCELLENCE'

Karl Ditttrich

Historically and traditionally, quality assurance (QA) organisations have had two functions: the enhancement of the quality of institutions and programmes and the accountability of the results of teaching and learning.

The enhancement function has been executed primarily in systems of high trust, whereas the accountability function has been developed to prevent bad quality of institutions and programs, and thus to protect the beneficiaries i.e. students and society.

During the past few years, politicians and higher education institutions (HEIs) have discovered the concept of excellence. Rankings undoubtedly have stimulated this concept, both in positive and negative ways. One positive effect of rankings is the latest drive for enhancement. In addition, the rankings have removed the fiction of 'equality' between and within HEIs. The reality is much more complex than a one-dimensional structure.

A negative effect of the concept of excellence is the ease with which politicians use the word and the idea that excellence can be quickly and easily achieved. Universities play a role by asserting in their strategic plans 'that they strive for excellence in research and teaching, thereby challenging those who have to evaluate them on whether they actually deliver what they promise. HEIs might make themselves vulnerable in this way if they do not deliver outstanding quality.

As a general tendency, more and more attention will be given to the differences in the student population and the student experience. The concept of equality appears to be losing ground with students and staff. Numerous initiatives have been taken to promote excellent tracks, honours degrees and more challenging educational environments for students who are willing and who are capable of achieving higher levels of attainment.

QA agencies will be expected to engage with these developments in the near future. For this reason, the ENQA Board decided to start a working group on excellence. The working group is not looking for an alternative for ranking; it seeks the meaning of excellence in education both at the level of programmes and institutions.

The discussion on excellence aims to address a number of topics:

- What are the goals of those who strive for excellence? Do they really want to be outstanding? What are the reasons for striving for excellence? How is excellence measured?
- How could one define excellence? Is an all-encompassing definition possible or do we have to look for different definitions for different topics?
- Are there any current examples of excellence? Could we learn from the German *Exzellenz Initiativ* (although that is primarily directed towards research)? What might be the implications for teaching and learning?
- Are there any QA agencies who have experience in evaluating excellence in teaching and learning? FINHEEC and NVAO use excellence in their evaluation and/or accreditation schemes;
- Is excellence an absolute or relative concept? Are the best schools excellent by definition or have different criteria been developed in order to measure absolute excellence?

- What does excellence mean for the work of the QA agencies? Is it possible to judge excellence? What does it mean for the experts and reviewers?
- Is excellence an international concept, which should be evaluated by international panels, or might it be seen as a national concept as well?
- Does evaluation of excellence mean that excellent agencies with excellent practices must be developed? What would be the characteristics of an excellent agency?

These opinions and questions are intended to stimulate debate. They are not exclusive and they may not be accurate. However, there are many ideas to explore and much valuable insight to be gained from articulating the concept of excellence in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

ENQA launched five working groups in 2012 to respond to the needs expressed by the membership and to fulfill ENQA's work-plan and wider objectives. The working groups' main task was to elaborate ideas on a given theme and to share knowledge and experience among the participants.

ENQA working group on excellence met for the first time in June 2012. At this meeting, the group agreed on a work programme involving a mapping exercise to identify existing literature on excellence and to assess current practice. The group also agreed to draft an analytical paper to consider various approaches to the recognition of excellence in higher education and to include recommendations on how the concept could be applied in the context of the work of quality agencies.

In the initial phase of the work of the group, there was an informed and productive discussion about the concept of excellence and how it applied in the context of different higher education sectors. The group also looked at how the concept was understood in relation to the work of quality assurance (QA) agencies and the relevance of excellence as an expectation for QA.

KEY QUESTIONS

The group agreed on a number of key questions to frame the debate about excellence and to provide some structure for a working paper. These questions are:

- What is excellence?
- How is it currently recognised?
- What criteria can be used to assess the application of excellence?
- Can excellence be achieved through quality assurance?
- What current examples are there of excellence in practice?

This paper may not provide definitive answers to all these questions, but the group hopes it helps to clarify the significance of these issues. It is intended to make a contribution to the broader issue of how the concept of excellence can promote adherence to standards in higher education and drive quality enhancement.

WORK OF THE EXCELLENCE GROUP

The group has worked collectively on the production of this paper. It has met five times over the past two years and on each occasion it has progressed its thoughts and ideas about the concept of excellence. The discussions have been wide-ranging and illuminating and have revealed different perceptions of the concept. In particular, there is a significant difference between the aspiration of achieving excellence for all students and the recognition of excellence as exceptional and outstanding performance. There was a general view that the critical measures of excellence should reflect student performance and achievement.

The group also identified the difference between excellence in the management of higher education (as assessed for example, by the European Foundation for Quality Management) and excellence in teaching and research. It was recognised that there may be more than one way in which agencies could promote excellence in higher education and that it may be difficult to define sources of evidence that would be appropriate for quality review. Should and could the methods used by QA agencies be adapted or developed to identify and judge upon 'excellence'? There may be a more general

expectation that agencies do not only exercise a regulatory function in ensuring that providers meet expected standards, but also seek to promote and publicise excellence. This may be achieved if common definitions of excellence are agreed upon and adopted.

However, over time a broad consensus has emerged around the idea of excellence as an achievable goal for all institutions and the advantage of adopting a criterion referenced approach to identifying and promoting excellence. The group believes that the concept of excellence should be inclusive. It should encapsulate the values and social benefits of higher education and advocate the need for objective enquiry and the pursuit of knowledge.

All members of the group have contributed to the working paper. Where a member has drafted a significant section, this has been individually identified, but it is essentially a joint venture. The differences of perspective and opinion have helped to inform the discussion and test the conclusions. The views expressed in the paper are the opinions of the group, they do not necessarily reflect the position taken by the ENQA Board.

Individual contributions incorporated references and footnotes, identifying sources of information. These have been collected together at the end of the paper as a consolidated list of references.

CHAPTER 1:

APPROACHES TO EXCELLENCE

The concept of 'excellence' is well established in many fields of activity, and the term is used frequently to refer to very good or outstanding performance. In higher education it means different things in different contexts. Excellence may be equated with the reputation and standing of institutions, but much depends on the perception of student experience and the varying missions of institutions. There are numerous definitions suiting different purposes and different areas of quality assurance and stakeholders' involvement. The concept is vague enough to offer plentiful grounds for both theoretical and practical research. In the view of the working group, it is important to consider excellence as a social phenomenon based on theoretical and cultural considerations, but is the group also recognises that the concept has practical applications in the context of management and technological development.

There is a need to analyse excellence through the lens of different key stakeholders, including students and families, society and employers. The term has been used widely by accreditation schemes in the management field for higher education, to define the level of the quality of service provided by institutions. In this context, it is possible to define standards of performance which permit the recognition of excellence. The concept involves components which can be connected, logically and operationally, to structural and organisational issues.

It is less easy to define, in the context of academic quality and standards, where excellence relates to the quality of teaching, the capabilities of students, the scale of resource provision and the level of student achievement.

In this chapter, the use of the term 'excellence' is explored in a number of different contexts reflecting the expectations of different stakeholders.

1.1 EXCELLENCE IN MANAGEMENT

EFQM EXCELLENCE MODEL

The European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) 'Excellence Model' is a self-assessment framework for measuring the strengths and areas for improvement of an organisation across all of its activities. The term 'excellence' is used because the Excellence Model focuses on what an organisation does, or could do, to provide an excellent service or product to its customers, service users or stakeholders.

While its origins lie in the private sector, public and voluntary sector organisations have also benefited from the use of the Excellence Model. It is non-prescriptive and does not involve strictly following a set of rules or standards but provides a broad and coherent set of assumptions about what is required for a good organisation and its management. Each organisation can use it in its own way to manage and develop improvement, under the control of those who use the methods rather than an external evaluator.

The EFQM Excellence Model establishes broad criteria, which any organisation can use to assess the progress towards excellence. These nine criteria are divided between enablers and results¹:

Leadership: excellent leaders develop and facilitate the achievement of the mission and vision. They develop organisational values and systems required for sustainable success and implement these via their actions and behaviours².

1 Calvo-Mora, A. Leal, A., and Roldán, J. L. (2006), Using enablers of the EFQM model to manage institutions of higher education, *Quality Assurance in Education* 14: 2, pp.99 – 122

2 European Foundation for Quality Management, (2003), *Modelo EFQM de Excelencia*, European Foundation for Quality Management, Brussels.

Policy and strategy: excellent organisations implement their mission and vision by developing a stakeholder-focused strategy that takes account of the market and sector in which it operates. Policies, plans, objectives and processes are developed and deployed to deliver the strategy³.

People management: excellent organisations manage, develop and release the full potential of their people at an individual, team-based and organisational level. They promote fairness and equality and involve and empower their people. They care for, communicate, reward and recognise in a way that motivates staff and builds commitment to using their skills and knowledge for the benefit of the organisation⁴.

Partnerships and resources: excellent organisations plan and manage external partnerships, suppliers and internal resources in order to support policy and strategy and the effective operation of processes. During planning and whilst managing partnerships and resources they balance the current and future needs of the organisation, the community and the environment⁵.

Process management: excellent organisations design, manage and improve processes in order to fully satisfy and generate increasing value for customers and other stakeholders⁶.

These activities are not independent or isolated, they must be implemented together and in a coordinated fashion.

THE BALDRIGE MODEL

The Baldrige model has been widely adopted in the United States. It covers many of the same areas as EFQM but is more wide-ranging in scope and is more directly applicable to educational institutions. Baldrige's Education Criteria stress student learning while recognising education organisations' varying missions, roles, and programmes. The Criteria view students as key customers and recognise that there may be other customers (e.g., parents).

In the Education Criteria, the concept of excellence includes three components:

- a well-conceived and well-executed assessment strategy;
- year-to-year improvement in key measures and indicators of performance, especially student learning; and
- a demonstrated leadership in performance and performance improvement relative to comparable organisations and appropriate benchmarks.

Since 'managing for innovation' is one of the core values of the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence, it is considered as an effective tool to provide a systematic process for driving and managing change⁷.

The model allows institutions to compare their current practices against established standards in other institutions and other economic sectors. The Education Criteria for Performance Excellence, Criteria for Performance Excellence (business/non-profit criteria), and Health Care Criteria for Performance Excellence are all built on the

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Furst-Bowe, J. A. and Bauer, R. A., (2007), Application of the Baldrige Model for Innovation in Higher Education, *New Directions for Higher Education*, vol. 137, pp. 5-14.

same seven-part framework. The framework is adaptable to the requirements of all organisations.

Using a common framework for all sectors of the economy fosters cross-sector cooperation and the sharing of best practices. Recognising that education organisations may address these requirements differently from organisations in other sectors, the Education Criteria translate the language and basic concepts of business and organisational excellence into similarly important concepts in education excellence.

The core values and concepts of the Education Criteria are embodied in the following seven categories⁸: leadership; strategic planning; student, stakeholder and market focus; measurement, analysis and knowledge management; faculty and staff focus; process management; and organisational performance results.

EXCELLENCE IN THE USA

Brent Ruben's book on excellence in American higher education focuses on elements essential to establishing and maintaining an outstanding institution, department or programme⁹. The framework is built around the integration of approaches to assessment, planning and improvement. It draws on elements from management audits, disciplinary reviews and strategic planning to provide a generic model broadly applicable across all functions and levels of an institution.

The following evaluation areas are used to define excellence in higher education:

1. Leadership
2. Purposes and plans
3. Beneficiaries and constituencies
4. Programs and services
5. Faculty/staff and workplace
6. Assessment and information use
7. Outcomes and achievements

Excellence in Higher Education provides a structured guide for reviewing each of these areas as they operate within a particular institution, department or program. Evaluation areas 1–5 are fundamental building blocks in any effective organisation. Evaluation area 6 focuses on methods and procedures in place to assess quality and effectiveness in each of these five areas. Evaluation area 7 considers the outcomes and achievements that are documented through the assessment process.

The model can be used by an entire college or university and also by individual administrative, service and student life organisations. It can also be used at the level of academic departments and among programs within the institution.

1.2 EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH

THE RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

In the United Kingdom (UK), the concept of excellence has been applied to the evaluation of the quality and value of research in higher education. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) has been developed by the Higher Education Funding Councils as a replacement for the former Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The aim of the new

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ruben, B. D., (2007). *Excellence in Higher Education Guide. An integrated Approach to Assessment, Planning, and Improvement in Colleges and Universities*, National Association of College and University Business Officers, Washington D.C.

framework is to produce indicators of research excellence and to use these to benchmark the performance of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) against international standards. The exercise also places particular emphasis on the impact of research as a means for assessing the return on the investment in research activity¹⁰.

In this context, 'excellence' is assessed in terms of quantitative measures of research activity, including bibliometric indicators, external research income and postgraduate student engagement. Assessments also include an element of peer review. The methodology is based on a defined set of assessment criteria and levels:

- Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour
- Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which falls short of the highest standards of excellence
- Quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour
- Quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour
- Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work (or work which does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment)

The primary outcome of the assessment will be an overall quality profile awarded to each institution.

The purpose of identifying excellence is to assist in the allocation of research funding. The funding councils are committed to distributing funding by reference to research excellence and to fund excellent research in all its forms, wherever it is found. The consequence of this policy is to concentrate research activity in those institutions which are able to demonstrate world-class research performance.

1.3 EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

'Teaching excellence' is a contested concept. There are different definitions of what it means to be an 'excellent' teacher and these are located within a shifting social, economic and political context¹¹.

Assessing the quality of teaching has been a long-standing issue for higher education. Excellence in teaching is determined by factors such as the inspirational nature of individual lecturers, the organisation of presentations, the interaction with students as participants and how well the information provided meets the learning objectives of the course. Excellence can be identified both in terms of student satisfaction and also in terms of the performance of students in assessment. There are differences between deep and surface learning. Excellent teaching may be seen as the efficient presentation of information which maximises the students' opportunities to gain the highest marks from the course. Alternatively, excellence could be recognised as the stimulus for students to engage with the subject and to enhance their understanding and knowledge.

Graham Gibbs has identified the key features that determine a positive learning experience for students:

'What best predicts educational gain is measures of educational process: what institutions do with their resources to make the most of whatever students they have. The process variables that best predict gains are not to do with the facilities themselves,

¹⁰ Higher Education Funding Council for England (2012). <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>

¹¹ Skelton, Alan, (2007), Understanding teacher excellence in higher education, *British Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 171-183.

or to do with student satisfaction with these facilities, but concern a small range of fairly well-understood pedagogical practices that engender student engagement. In the UK we have few data about the prevalence of these educational practices because they are not systematically documented through quality assurance systems, nor are they (in the main) the focus of the National Student Survey. Class size, the level of student effort and engagement, who undertakes the teaching, and the quantity and quality of feedback to students on their work are all valid process indicators. There is sufficient evidence to be concerned about all four of these indicators in the UK.^{12'}

Elton presents teaching excellence in five parts, considering them inter-related and thus any one without the other four is useless:

- *'Teaching excellence is a multidimensional concept and its different dimensions call for different forms of recognition and reward;*
- *If teaching quality is to be maintained and enhanced, teaching excellence must be recognized and rewarded;*
- *The criteria for individual teaching excellence are no more difficult to enunciate and to evaluate than those for research excellence. They are however considerably more sophisticated than is appreciated by traditional academics, and they cannot be applied fairly as long as those who judge excellence lack the training for their task;*
- *A prerequisite for real teaching excellence at the individual level is a trained teaching profession. A way forward, which links staff development directly to the process of analysing teaching excellence, has been indicated;*
- *Individual teaching excellence is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for an excellent student learning experience. In addition there must be excellences at departmental and institutional levels. They can however be developed on the foundation of individual excellence.^{13'}*

Although many definitions of excellence in teaching can be found, some common main patterns can be discerned:

- *'A focus on the student, on student learning and on personal support for students and their development, rather than on formal teaching;*
- *A macro focus on the wider learning environment and the development of the curriculum or programme, rather than a micro focus on teaching;*
- *A traditional emphasis on the teacher themselves, and student feedback ratings on teacher, on the teacher's research record and subject knowledge, and on external recognition of the teacher, with little focus on students, on learning, on the learning environment or on the process of developing teaching;*
- *An emphasis on efforts to develop teaching, especially through innovation, through influencing others and through leadership of teaching;*
- *An emphasis on the 'scholarship of teaching' as a particularly highly valued form of the development of teaching^{14'}*

This last emphasis, however, is not consensual:

12 Gibbs, G., (2010), *Dimensions of Quality*, The Higher Education Academy, York

13 Elton, L., (1998), *Dimensions of excellence in university teaching*, *International Journal for Academic Development*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 3-11.

14 Gibbs, G., (2008), *Conceptions of teaching excellence underlying teaching award schemes*, The Higher Education Academy, York.

*'Whereas some have argued that scholarship of teaching is the obligation of all teaching staff and have equated it with excellence in teaching, others have argued that there is a distinction between competence in teaching (expected of all) and scholarship of teaching, which will only be achieved by those who apply themselves to particular forms of enquiry into their teaching practice.'*¹⁵

1.4 EXCELLENCE IN STUDENT PERFORMANCE

THE CONSERVATOIRE MODEL

One example of excellence is provided by the conservatoire model of higher education. Conservatoire education is focused on the development of high achieving, talented students, predominantly in the disciplines of music and drama. Entry into institutions is highly selective, based not only on previous academic performance but also on the audition of candidates. The purpose of the approach is to take the very best students and develop them to a level of professional performance that compares with international standards¹⁶.

Courses offer a high percentage of practical training and personal instruction. Student achievement is assessed primarily on the quality of performance. The development of technical skill is combined with academic study and professional development. Individual tuition forms the major component of course delivery, and students spend many hours in practicing and developing their technical ability. Tutors are often practicing professionals who work part-time. Students consequently have access to instructors who are highly competent and are renowned performers in their own field. Conservatoires foster a vibrant and creative ethos which supports students in the development of their artistic and academic potential.

In this context, the institutions are committed to excellence as the standard for students to achieve. The definition of threshold standards with reference to common reference points does not address the explicit requirements of high achievement and exceptional ability. Such levels of performance are achieved at a significant cost in terms of the intensive nature of one-to-one instruction and the general level of resources required.

CONCLUSION

The different approaches to excellence serve to illustrate the multi-dimensional aspects of the concept. Excellence can be identified at the level of the institution, faculty, department or individual members of staff and can be applied in the context of the many different roles and functions of higher education institutions. It applies to both management and service delivery as well as the experience of staff and students and the outputs from study and research. What is clear is that excellence is an expectation and a goal. There is a general understanding that the aim is central to the culture and values of higher education and drives the motivation for continuous improvement.

¹⁵ Gordon, G., D'Andrea, V., Gosling, D. and Stefani, L. (2003), Building capacity for change: research on the scholarship of teaching, Higher Education Funding Council for England, Bristol.
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2003/rd02_03

¹⁶ Musician's Union (2013).
<http://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/news/2013/06/07/learning-for-life-conservatoire-students/>

CHAPTER 2:

EXCELLENCE IN PRACTICE

In this chapter, the current situation regarding the various practical approaches to the concept of excellence is examined in different European quality assurance (QA) agencies.

The subject has been explored by the third ENQA Survey on QA procedures in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)¹⁷. Its results serve as a basis for the selection of examples which illustrates different approaches to the recognition of excellence and ways of promoting enhancement and improvement in their external QA procedures.

One of the purposes of this working paper is to establish a common understanding between agencies on the notion of excellence. Such general conclusions could then serve to identify the main gaps in this understanding that need to be filled, but also identify good practices of agencies and mediate them to other agencies and the general public.

2.1 THE PROMOTION OF EXCELLENCE INITIATIVES IN EUROPE

Patricia Pol, Advisor for European and International Affairs, French Ministry of Higher Education and Research (former Head of European and International Affairs, Evaluation Agency for Research and Higher Education - AERES).

A PASSION FOR EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN GERMANY, SPAIN AND FRANCE [EXTRACT]¹⁸

Initiatives launched in Germany, Spain and France represent significant examples of public policies for excellence, breaking away from the egalitarian tradition of European universities.

In Germany, as early as January 2004, the Social-Democrat government of Gerhard Schröder tabled a programme to develop elite universities based on a national competition. After a year of bitter discussions, the *Exzellenzinitiative* was launched by Angela Merkel's government with, in July 2005, a first call for proposals over the coming five years (2006–2011). With an amount of 1.9 billion euros, of which 75% were to be borne by the federal government and 25% by the Länder, it aimed at three lines of funding: *PhD training* (1 million euros/year per project), clusters of excellence (8 million euros/year per project) and *universities of excellence* (25 million euros per year). It was then decided to launch a second call for projects (2011–2015) to the amount of 2.5 billion euros.

In 2008 in France, right in the middle of the crisis in universities following the LRU legislation, Nicolas Sarkozy's government announced that the sale of 2.5% of the capital of the electric utility company EDF (5 billion euros) would enable the funding of Operation Campus with the objective of "creating campuses of excellence". In 2009, the Juppé-Rocard commission suggested "investing in the future". The Aghion Report, given to the Minister for Higher Education and Research in May 2010, specified the outlines of university excellence and of its good governance. The Investment Programme for the Future (*Programme d'investissement d'avenir - PIA*) launched its first invitation to tender in 2010. Ten calls for projects regarding higher education and research were subsequently put forward with funding composed of the interest on capital of the 16.9

17 European Association for Quality Assurance, (2012), Quality Procedures in the European Higher Education Area and Beyond – Visions for the Future, ENQA, Brussels.

http://www.enqa.eu/indirme/papers-and-reports/occasional-papers/ENQA_op18.pdf

18 Repères (2012), A passion for excellence in higher education in Germany, Spain and France, Campus France. http://ressources.campusfrance.org/publi_institu/agence_cf/reperes/fr/reperes_14_fr.pdf

billion euros invested in Treasury funds. Amongst these are the Equipex (Equipment of Excellence), Labex (Laboratories of Excellence) and Idex (Excellence Initiatives) projects, intended to fund five to ten universities of excellence.

In Spain in 2008, the Socialist government of José Luis Zapatero proposed a modernisation plan for Spanish universities. Within the framework of the University Strategy 2015 (EU 2015), the “Campus of International Excellence” (CEI) initiative was born to “promote strategic partnerships between universities and other institutions on the same site in order to create knowledge ecosystems capable of fostering job creation, social cohesion and territorial economic development”. Between 2009 and 2011, three successive invitations to tender enabled the launch of two initiatives, the “Campus of International Excellence” (CEI) of a global nature and others of a regional nature (CEIR). This choice bears witness to a wider vision of excellence which is not limited to just a few global ‘nuggets’ but is rather designed “as a movement towards healthy competition for quality and its multiple aspects concerning research but also teaching/learning, the impact on society, architecture and strategy”. However, the budgets planned within the framework of this initiative are relatively small (57 million euros for example for the 2010 call for projects) and the public financial crisis has led Mariano Rajoy’s government to put an end to this plan.

The search for excellence is no longer a new phenomenon in European universities strongly attached to the egalitarian culture of their training and research mission and to recurrent public funding. The excellence initiatives set up in Germany, Spain and France have been implemented, above all, to ensure the emergence of a limited number of institutions, laboratories or doctoral schools of a global nature capable of competing with the best Anglo-Saxon universities. This competitive approach has mobilised a very large number of players within universities who see this as an opportunity to increase both their funding and their reputation. It remains difficult to assess the full impact of these new public policies on the overall system, on university strategies, and on the quality of future graduates, researchers and teachers.

2.2 FINNISH CASE STUDY

Ausra Rostlund, Deputy Head of Study Evaluation Division at Centre of Quality Assessment in Higher Education in Lithuania (SKVC).

NATIONAL CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE

Centres of Excellence in education were selected separately for the university and universities of applied sciences sectors. The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) proposed centres to the Ministry of Education and Culture, which granted performance-based funding to the selected units.

The aim of the Centre of Excellence evaluation was to enhance the quality of university and technical education, and to make it more transparent as well as to disseminate good practice.

The method of selecting Centres of Excellence was based on national peer review. FINHEEC published a call for proposals including the evaluation criteria. Universities sent their applications to FINHEEC, and they were evaluated by panels of national, subject-specific experts. The recommendations of the panel informed FINHEEC’s proposals to the Ministry of Education which made the final decision and allocated additional funding.

The areas for evaluation included: the mission of the unit, programme and course design, a description of the teaching methods used and how they were chosen and applied, and a description of the methods used to assess learning outcomes. The

application also covered a description of the qualitative and quantitative outputs of the unit and a description of the procedures used to identify critical points in the education process.

In addition, supplementary statistical and background information was requested about the number and composition of students in the unit, the details of teaching, research and other staff, the funding available, the links with graduate schools and educational networks, and the level of international activity. Units were also asked about how they monitor the placement of graduates in work and careers relevant to their education.

INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEW METHOD

This method is based on similar principles: FINHEEC published a call for proposals and evaluation criteria for Centres of Excellence in university education. The maximum numbers of applications per university was determined by the number of registered students at the university. Universities with more than 1000 students could nominate two units.

Universities sent their anonymous applications to FINHEEC, including background and statistical information. The best applications were chosen by the international experts.

The units selected for the second round were visited by international and Finnish experts. The experts made a proposal to FINHEEC regarding which units should be awarded status as Centres of Excellence. FINHEEC then selected Centres of Excellence for 2010-2012 based on the recommendations of the evaluation team.

2.3 IMPLEMENTING EXCELLENCE IN RUSSIA

Galina Motova, Deputy Director of the National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA).

Recent developments in higher education have highlighted the importance of maintaining and enhancing quality. The movement towards a student-centred approach, and a greater focus on the learning experience of students, has emphasised the need for institutions to aim for excellence in course design and delivery. QA, to a large extent, reflects the tendencies and processes taking place in higher education.

In Russia, at the end of the 1990s, even before the Bologna Process and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) existed, a new approach was developed towards the evaluation of institutional performance. This involved a form of accreditation, based on the widespread use of new information technologies. Fifteen years later, this approach to QA has become firmly established as the principal method for assessing the performance of institutions and has become an obligatory and necessary basis for accreditation by the state authorities, focusing on strengthening the control of the quality of education¹⁹.

The current educational environment has presented new challenges for higher education institutions (HEIs) in Russia, including the demographic crisis, the increase of competition among the HEIs for prospective students and the decrease of HE reputation and prestige. New legislation and new educational policies that prescribe a new approach to the evaluation of the quality of education have been introduced.

The study programmes that surpass the threshold level requirements by the state often benefit from a more developed and specific accreditation procedure. This type of accreditation allows the HEIs to be more competitive and in line with the ESG.

¹⁹ Motova, M. and Pykko, R., (2012), Russian Higher Education and European Standards of Quality Assurance, European Journal of Education, Special Issue: Russian Higher Education and the Post-Soviet Transition, Vol. 47, no. 1, pp. 25-36.

One of the new initiatives to serve this purpose has been the national project 'The Best Study Programmes in Russia'. In addition to institutional accreditation, the project utilized results from online surveys completed by academic and professional staff to evaluate the quality of programmes. The online survey technology allows executing large spectrum sociologic surveys in the field of quality evaluation of study programmes in Russia. The programmes of distinctive excellence are chosen on a national scale. The results of the surveys are published and widely disseminated.

The project has been implemented for the last four years by the National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA), the Guild of Experts in Education and the journal *Accreditation in Education*. The project is unique within Russia and is targeted at achieving new levels of quality of evaluation procedures and enhancing the objectivity of evaluation procedures.

The results of the first two surveys showed that the evaluation of quality of study programmes was extremely in demand and involved more than 4000 independent respondents. The third survey (2012-2013) identified 2496 outstanding study programmes delivered by HEIs, out of a possible 36767. The fourth stage of the project is in development and the preliminary results are to be published in the course of 2014.

Within this framework, the experts choose the most relevant indicators out of the recommended set, according to which they identify the best study programmes. For this purpose, the system of indexes, which consists of 10 indicators, was developed. The system was designed with the help of certified experts using the 'Salmi formula'²⁰. The indicators were gathered under three criteria:

1. **Concentration of talents:** selection of the best school-leavers, prominent students' achievements, prominent scientists, successful graduates;
2. **Sufficiency of resources:** effective academic infrastructure (libraries, laboratories), excellent infrastructure of service, consistent efficient budgeting (state budgeting, grants);
3. **Effective management:** strong team of managers, effective organisation of academic process, continuous perfection and demand for the study programme.

The results of the project are used by NCPA and HEIs whose study programmes are recognised by the professional, academic and scientific community. These HEIs can apply for NCPA accreditation and are visited by international and Russian experts, including representatives from the student and professional community.

Thus, NCPA uses an excellence approach in its activity where excellence is perceived as 'outstanding quality' and recognised as practice exceeding and surpassing the threshold standards for teaching, learning and research, including both independent public opinion and professional evaluation. NCPA uses the following 'excellence formula' in its activity: minimum standards (Federal State Educational Standards' requirements) + independent public opinion of a study programme (the project 'Best Study Programmes in Russia') + professional evaluation (site visit by experts) = excellence.

One of the ways to distinguish outstanding learning results is 'The Open International Internet-Olympiads' project, based on the assessment of students' competencies and a comparative evaluation of the achievements of Russian and international students. The project has involved more than 85,000 students from 20 countries and is held annually. The results of the Olympiads are rated as outstanding student learning outcomes.

20 Salmi, J., (2009), The challenge of establishing world-class universities, The World Bank.

NCPA is much involved in the implementation of excellence practices in Russian HEIs. All of the above mentioned projects have encouraged HEIs to develop quality systems and a quality culture, and to be more open and transparent about their academic practices. Transparency of the results (both the research survey for the 'The Best Study Programmes in Russia' project and the NCPA accreditation results) establishes credibility of the HEIs, serves as a stimulating mechanism for development of academic activity and assures positive social image for those HEIs which deliver excellent study programmes. The involvement of external stakeholders in the evaluation of quality has been beneficial for both the higher education institutions and the public. It has promoted regard for the autonomy and diversity of institutions and addressed expectations from academic staff about the expert and informed nature of reviews.

CONCLUSION

These examples illustrate the various approaches which are being adopted for the recognition and promotion of excellence in higher education across Europe. Governments and QA agencies are focusing on excellence as a means for enhancing the quality of university teaching and research, and for disseminating good practices. This approach also encourages competition between institutions for recognition as centres of excellence, which may enhance their profile and standing.

There is a perceptible shift in thinking away from utilitarian notions of equity and the view of higher education as a 'social good' towards the promotion of a more competitive market for institutions in the belief that competition will improve standards and quality. By recognising the 'best' providers, it is expected that standards will be established for the sector as a whole. Not all may achieve excellence but all can benefit from the recognition of best practices and the pursuit of enhancement.

Categorisation of providers as 'excellent' is an alternative to league tables for establishing the status and reputation of institutions. It avoids the relative positioning of institutions in rank order and establishes goals to which all providers strive for. Excellent institutions may also gain recognition in an international context and demonstrate the capacity to compete with other countries.

CHAPTER 3:

DEFINITIONS OF EXCELLENCE

The previous chapters have demonstrated that the concept of excellence implies different things in different contexts and is often applied without a clear specification of its meaning. Excellence can be both a description of current provision and also a goal or aspiration for institutions, academics and students.

A common understanding of the term is as a mark of distinction, describing something that is exceptional, meritocratic, outstanding and exceeding normal expectations. It is a form of commendation commonly linked to the reputation of institutions and to the achievements of students. If some provision is recognised as excellent, it implies that the majority of other providers are simply satisfying standards. The concept has no meaning if all are excellent and there is no way of distinguishing the performance of individual institutions and departments.

However, not all would subscribe to this elite view of excellence. It can be seen as both a relative and an absolute concept. All students may have the opportunity to strive for excellence in what they do and the achievement of excellence may be measured in terms of added value and personal development.

In this chapter, four different perspectives on excellence are presented, each of which reflects different aspects of the concept, but all identify the potential significance of excellence in setting the parameters for academic quality and standards.

3.1 EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Josep Grifoll, Head of the Quality Assessment Department at the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU Catalunya).

Defining excellence in higher education is not a simple task. Besides the fact that many possible definitions can be found, the selection of a universal meaning is complicated, because it is simultaneously linked to the social and cultural environments (values and principles, for example) and to the political and economic contexts. Influence of expectations and priorities from different groups can be easily detected when statements about excellence in higher education are drafted.

Excellence in higher education, therefore, depends on the person defining the term and their motivation for doing so.

A second interesting point is about the existence of excellence itself. Excellence can be a tangible reality, a permanent movement, or just a horizon. In other words, excellence can be a certain combination of inputs and outputs (even measured in quantities), a culture in the use of inputs and cyclical progress for better outputs (ethos), or a list of expected targets (achieved or not).

When excellence is considered as a tangible reality, the question of definition focuses on the boundaries of excellence. In many different fields, the term excellence has been traditionally linked to a distinction a quality which is unusually good and surpasses ordinary or threshold standards; but is it possible to expand those limits in order to find a definition of excellence for all? Regarding excellence, when is exclusivity considered appropriate and when is inclusivity preferred?

Another question involving the definition of excellence is about the compatibility of different definitions for the same unit of analysis. A good example can be found in the

process of globalisation of societies and how global and local perspectives on excellence can be combined.

One classic definition of excellence refers to the fulfilment of a certain standard. This could be interpreted as fitness for purpose. This is a measure of performance according to a predefined set of standards. A different interpretation of excellence could lead one to a completely new landscape if the concept is linked with unexpected outcomes those which prove better than anticipated (the latter could be linked with the important role of innovation).

Finally, our definition of excellence should take into account the use of quantitative and qualitative parameters or the use of objective and subjective indicators.

The consideration of all these points will facilitate the identification of an adequate definition of what is excellence in higher education.

ELEMENTS THAT CONSTITUTE THE DEFINITION OF EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Ownership and aims	Range	Awarding boundaries	Diversity in the use of values	Use of indicators
Who is defining /measuring excellence?	Excellence is a reality	Excellence is exclusive	There is a universal definition of excellence for each reality	Preference in the use of objective indicators
Why is a definition of excellence promoted?	Excellence is a developmental process	Excellence is inclusive	Different definitions of excellence can be used for the same reality	Preference in the use of subjective indicators
	Excellence is a horizon			

3.2 WHAT IS EXCELLENCE?

Hasan Kömürçügil, Professor in the Computer Engineering Department of the Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus (former Board Member of the Higher Education, Planning, Evaluation, Accreditation and Coordination Council - YODAK).

Educating large numbers of people to a high standard and disseminating knowledge can be considered as the main objectives of today's higher education sector. Since the stakeholders (students, administrators, faculties and various public entities) are from diverse sectors of society, it makes the higher education sector very complex, demanding and competitive. In the higher education sector, being excellent can be interpreted as 'very good' or 'exceptional'.

Excellence is part of a process of which competence is the starting point. For this reason, it cannot be defined as a simple outcome. Excellence, which popularly appears in the mission statements of many universities, has not been well defined in the academic publications which makes the evaluation of excellence vague and difficult. When asked to articulate the concept of excellence, one may think of questions such as: What is excellence? Excellence for what? And excellence in what? If the definition of excellence is not properly elucidated, then the answers to these questions would vary.

Excellence can be defined fundamentally as exhibiting characteristics that are exceptional. In the explanatory context, excellence enshrines one aspect of quality, and, according to the traditional view, it links quality with the exceptional. From this point of view, quality is a measure of something special that is not always achieved. Quality refers to something distinctive and, in educational terms, it is linked to notions of excellence,

of as standard so high, it is rarely attained; it represents something that to which most institutions or scholars can aspire.

Excellence is generally defined as outstanding, or as a quality that surpasses a defined threshold in a particular field. In the case of research, there is no agreement regarding the definition of excellence and its measurement across different disciplines at the international level.

The exceptional notion of quality sees it as something special. According to Harvey and Green²¹, there are three variations:

1. **Traditional notion of quality:** the concept of quality has been linked with the notion of distinctiveness, of something special or 'high class'. The traditional notion of quality implies exclusivity, for example, the supposed high quality of an Oxbridge education. Quality is not determined through an assessment of provided data, but it is based on an assumption that the distinctiveness and inaccessibility of an Oxbridge education is of itself 'quality'. This is not quality to be judged against a set of criteria, but quality which is separate and unattainable for most people. The traditional notion of quality does not offer indicators against which to measure quality. It is assumed that one instinctively knows what quality is. Since the traditional concept of quality does not provide definable means of determining quality, then it is useless to assess it in education.
2. **Exceeding high standards:** excellence is often used interchangeably with quality and perceived as 'high' standards. It is similar to the traditional view, but it identifies what the components of excellence are, while at the same time ensuring that these are almost unattainable. It is an elitist approach in as the sense that it sees quality as only possibly attainable in limited circumstances. The best is required if excellence is to be the result. In the educational context, it is possible to produce excellent results provided that lectures are given by Nobel Prize winners, research is carried out in a well-equipped laboratory with the most up-to-date scientific devices and the institution has a well-stocked library. Excellence means excelling in input and output. For instance, an institution can excel naturally if it takes the best students and provides them with the best resources (both human and physical). Whatever the learning process is, the excellence aspect remains. Excellence, with its emphasis on the 'level' of input and output, is an absolutist measure of quality. The concept of 'centres of excellence' in higher education is based on the notion of quality.
3. **Checking Standards:** A 'quality' product is one that has passed a set of quality criteria. The criteria are based on attainable performance indicators that are designed to reject 'defective' items. Therefore, 'quality' is attributed to all the items fulfilling the minimum standards set by the monitoring body implying that quality can be considered as the result of 'scientific quality control'. At any given moment, there will be an 'absolute' indicator against which the product is checked, and those that satisfy the criteria will pass the quality threshold. Quality checking may result in a pass/fail assessment or it may also be evaluated on a scale. Reports provide a quality rating, as do final degree results in higher education institutions. The standards approach to quality implies that quality can be further improved if standards are raised. There is no doubt that when a product fulfils a higher standard, it is referred to as a high quality product. In education, quality has often been seen equal with the maintenance and improvement of standards with the

21 Harvey, L., Green, D., (1993), "Defining Quality", *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, vol. 18, pp. 9–34.

assumption that 'standards' are 'objective' and static; however, standards are often debated and continuously subject to improvement as circumstances change.

3.3 THE CONCEPT OF EXCELLENCE

Orlanda Tavares, Researcher at the Portuguese Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES).

It is possible to encounter multiple and conflicting views of excellence in higher education. Whereas 'excellence' is documented as an ambiguous and vague concept²², it is also considered as a "normative concept"²³ as well as an ideal to be pursued and assumed as a core value in higher education²⁴.

Currently, the trend towards polysemy or refraction of the concept of excellence is an outcome of the ongoing struggles to define it. Assumed by many as a 'contested concept which is historically and situationally contingent'²⁵, the definitions of excellence are located within shifting social, economic and political contexts²⁶ and are underpinned by broader discourses or ideologies of higher education²⁷. Its meanings and contents are, therefore, changing according to the global competitive environment, some manifestations of which are: the 'new managerialist' practices²⁸, as the state seeks to increase the economic return from higher education²⁹; the general shift from elite to mass higher education systems; and the 'rankings'.

In fact, global university rankings are considered as one of the main carriers of excellence, reflecting power and political interests, and assuming a traditional conception of excellence which emphasises the research dimension rather than the teaching and learning one³⁰. When one examines institutions that are classified as excellent, one can see that they are described as 'elite institutions'. Additionally, national policies tend to award excellence to institutions that are already strong and in are advantaged in the excellence game. That is why Marginson³¹ states that rankings are institutions' status makers, allowing the strong to become stronger and the weak to become weaker"³². According to Calhoun³³:

'The most 'selective' institutions are understood to be the best because selectivity is an indicator – students choose them on this basis – and because it is a cause, having outstanding students enables better performance. Excellence, thus, is more likely to be found at the 'elite' end of modern systems than elsewhere.'

22 Bruno-Jofré, R. and Hills, G., (2011), Changing Visions of Excellence in Ontario School Policy: The cases of living and learning and for the love of learning, *Educational Theory*, vol. 61, no. 3, pp.335-349.

23 Elton, L., (1998), Dimensions of excellence in university teaching, *International Journal for Academic Development*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 3-11.

24 Rostan, M. and Vaira, M., (Eds.), (2011), Questioning Excellence in Higher Education – Policies, Experiences and Challenges in National and Comparative Perspective, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.

25 Skelton, Alan, (2007), Understanding teacher excellence in higher education, *British Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 452

26 Ibidem

27 Zukas, M. and Malcom, J., (1999), Models of the educator in higher education, paper presented at the *British Educational Research Association Annual Conference*, University of Sussex, September.

28 Clarke, J. and Newman, J., (1997), The managerial State: power, politics and ideology in the remaking of social welfare, Sage, London.

29 Salter, B. and Tapper, T., (1994), The state and higher education, Woburn Press, Ilford.

30 Rostan, M., Vaira, M., (2011), "Questioning Excellence in Higher Education: An Introduction", in Rostan, M. and Vaira, M. (Eds.) (2011), Questioning Excellence in Higher Education – Policies, Experiences and Challenges in National and Comparative Perspective, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.

31 Marginson, Simon, (2011), "The New World Order in Higher Education. Research Rankings, Outcomes Measures and Institutional Classifications", in Rostan, M. and Vaira, M. (Eds.) (2011), Questioning Excellence in Higher Education – Policies, Experiences and Challenges in National and Comparative Perspective, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, pp. 3-20.

32 Rostan, M., Vaira, M. op.cit.

33 Calhoun, C., (2006), The University and the Public Good, *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 84, pp. 9.

While excellence used to be a concept closely linked with an individual virtue or quality (a result of the outstanding quality of an academic's work) over the last thirty years (due to the global changes referenced above) it has become an organisational characteristic, a result of the high level of quality that distinguishes the best universities from the others³⁴. Consequently, there is an increasing emphasis on vertical stratification, which promotes an 'aura of exceptionality'³⁵. Thus, within the vertically differentiated systems of higher education, excellence is being equated to 'being better'³⁶ which could mean, according to Altbach's list of characteristics of leading international universities³⁷, the following:

- Excellence in research;
- Top quality professors;
- Favourable working conditions;
- Job security and good salary and benefits;
- Adequate facilities;
- Adequate funding, including predictability year-to-year;
- Academic freedom and an atmosphere of intellectual excitement;
- Faculty self-governance.

Hence, excellence is currently used as a relative term, with reference to something that is inferior. It is defined as "exclusivity"³⁸, reinforces merit and positions an institution in some real or imaginary ranking³⁹. This definition of excellence is relative to the performance of others, which implies that institutions will be in competition for excellence and that not everyone can attain it. Within this scenario, the term 'excellence' is used not only in the sense of claiming a position within a hierarchy but also as a way of highlighting particular initiatives oriented towards enhancing international competitiveness⁴⁰. The term is also used to reinforce the merit of some higher education aspects not traditionally related with excellence.

The analysis of national policies for excellence allowed Rostan and Vaira⁴¹ to identify some of its dimensions:

- The international dimension in which excellence is embedded.
- The emphasis on research and its dominant role in defining excellence.
- The parallel retrenchment of the traditional link between excellence and elite education.
- The recognition of excellence through the activity of external evaluation.

Besides the categorical definition of excellence, which recognises that universities are, by definition, institutions of excellence, Bleikie⁴² points out two other notions of

34 Bleikie, I., (2011), Excellence, Quality and the Diversity of Higher Education Systems, in Rostan, M. and Vaira, M. (Eds.) (2011), *Questioning Excellence in Higher Education – Policies, Experiences and Challenges in National and Comparative Perspective*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, pp. 21-35.

35 Teichler, U., (2003), "Changing concepts of excellence in Europe in the wake of globalization", in de Corte, E., (Ed.), *Excellence in Higher Education*, Portland Press, London, pp. 33-51.

36 Brennan, J. and Patel, K., (2011), Excellence and the student experience of higher education: what it is and how to find it, in Rostan, M. and Vaira, M. (Eds.) (2011), *Questioning Excellence in Higher Education – Policies, Experiences and Challenges in National and Comparative Perspective*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, pp. 37- 53.

37 Altbach, P. G., (2004), The costs and benefits of world-class universities, *Academe*, vol. 90, no. 1, pp. 20-23.

38 Calhoun, C. op.cit.

39 Little, B. and Locke, W. (2011), "Conceptions of excellence in teaching and learning and implications for future policy and practice", in Rostan, M. and Vaira, M. (Eds.) (2011), *Questioning Excellence in Higher Education – Policies, Experiences and Challenges in National and Comparative Perspective*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, pp. 119-137.

40 Ibid.

41 Rostan, M., Vaira, M. op.cit.

42 Bleikie, I., (2011), Excellence, Quality and the Diversity of Higher Education Systems, in Rostan, M. and Vaira, M. (Eds.) (2011), *Questioning Excellence in Higher Education – Policies, Experiences and Challenges in National and Comparative Perspective*, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp. 21-35.

excellence: 1) the hierarchical, in which only top institutions are classified as excellent, and 2) the competitive, in which some units or even the whole institution compete for funding that offers them the status of excellent institutions.

A different version of excellence is presented by Readings⁴³, who considers that excellence is a notion that has been adopted in opposition to quality. He argues that whereas quality implies that a university is like a business, excellence has no ideological baggage. Therefore, what gets taught or researched matters less than the fact that it is excellently taught or investigated.

At institutional level, the term excellence is also being used in an aspirational sense, bound up with claims of enhancing students' learning, and providing an experience of high quality through the promotion of excellence in teaching and learning. However, exploring both the staff and students' perceptions on excellence, Percy and Salter⁴⁴ argued that although the development of excellence may be the standard of success in higher education courses, teaching staff think that they can do nothing to develop excellence in a student if there is no potential at all. The staff saw around them many unmotivated, average, and definitely non-excellent students. While for the staff, higher education is largely a learning situation and that the essence lies in the student learning, for many students, higher education seems to be perceived as a teaching situation: if the teaching is not good then little can be done to redeem it.

This led to a tension that seems to persist today. Institutions are encouraged both to strive to become excellent knowledge production sites (the traditional research function) and to give access to such knowledge to an increasingly diverse range of learners (the teaching and learning functions)⁴⁵. In order to overcome this tension, some patterns of excellence in teaching and learning were pointed out by Gibbs⁴⁶:

- a focus on the student, student learning and personal support, rather than on formal teaching;
- a macro focus on the wider learning environment and on the development of the curriculum or programme, rather than a micro focus on teaching;
- a traditional focus on the teachers themselves, and student feedback ratings of the teacher, on the teachers' research record and subject knowledge, and on external recognition of the teacher, with little focus on students, on the learning environment or on the process of developing teaching;
- an emphasis on efforts to develop teaching, especially through innovation, through influencing others and through leadership of teaching;
- an emphasis on the 'scholarship of teaching', as a particularly high valued form of the development of teaching;
- at a system level, excellence is being used in a performative sense – increasing the efficiency of HE systems and using teaching and learning to meet national economic goals.

Also, Sherman et al.⁴⁷ indicate five characteristics that have been regularly and consistently attributed to teachers classified as excellent: enthusiasm, clarity, preparation and organisation, stimulating, and love of knowledge. However, these characteristics

43 Readings, B., (1996), *The University in Ruins*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

44 Percy, K. A. & Salter, F. W. (1976). Student and staff perceptions and the "pursuit of excellence" in British higher education. *Higher Education*, vol.5, 457-473.

45 Little, B. and Locke, W. op.cit.

46 Gibbs, G., (2008), op.cit. pp.19-20

47 Sherman, T. M., Armistead, L. P., Fowler, F., Barksdale, M. A., and Reif, G. (1987), The Quest for Excellence in University Teaching, *The Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 58, no. 1., pp. 66-84.

are not only difficult to describe but also difficult to assess. Moreover, excellence may ultimately be about 'matching the aspirations of students to the offerings of different universities'⁴⁸.

An alternative version to the relative concept of excellence, far from the implied competition, elitism, and exclusivity of some higher education institutions, should make it possible for everyone, in principle, to attain that status⁴⁹. This alternative version would define excellence in relation to a standard, a set of criteria, thus avoiding competition. The definition of excellence in relation to a standard is proposed by Strike⁵⁰:

'Let me summarize the argument to this point. I have claimed that we should distinguish between norm-referenced and criterion-referenced conceptions of excellence. A norm-referenced conception will define excellence relative to the performance of others. Thus people will be in competition for excellence and, as a matter of logic, not everyone can attain it. A criterion-referenced view, however, will define excellence in relation to a standard such that people are not in competition for it and, in principle, if not necessarily in fact, everyone can attain it.'

Second, I suggested that our conception of excellence will tend to be defined by our purposes. If our purposes are to develop human capital, we are going to have a norm-referenced conception of excellence. If our purposes are those of the Jeffersonian ideal, we may be able to have a criterion-referenced concept of excellence.'

What seems to be relevant from Strike's argument is that excellence should be a concept available for every HEI and not only for a few of them. A criterion-referenced conception of excellence would be more equitable and the definition of those criteria should also, as Little and Locke suggest⁵¹, be more closely related to the purposes, the missions and the values of different HEIs. Therefore, instead of perceiving excellence as an univocal concept, one might conceptualise 'excellences', not as a polysemic or ambiguous concept, but as a concept that incorporates different modalities according to the type of institutions, their different contexts, purposes and missions.

3.4 UNDERSTANDING EXCELLENCE

Marie Malmedy, Project Coordinator at the executive unit of the Quality Agency for Higher Education in the French-speaking Community of Belgium (AEQES).

Definitions of excellence identify a range of different characteristics:

- high level of perfection that a person or a thing has in its own kind ("Degré éminent de perfection qu'une personne, une chose a en son genre")⁵²;
- features of a thing or a person that corresponds, nearly perfectly, to the ideal representation of its nature and its function, or that shows a neat superiority in one or the other domain ("Caractère de la chose ou de la personne qui correspond, presque parfaitement, à la représentation idéale de sa nature, de sa fonction ou qui manifeste une très nette supériorité dans tel ou tel domaine")⁵³;
- the quality of being outstanding or extremely good⁵⁴;

48 Brennan, J. and Patel, K. op.cit.

49 Strike, K. A., (1985), Is there a conflict between Equity and Excellence?, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 409-416.

50 Ibid.

51 Little, B. and Locke, W. op.cit.

52 Dictionnaires Le Robert, (2009), Le Nouveau Petit Robert de la Langue française.

53 Atilf, Le trésor de la langue française informatisé. <http://atilf.atilf.fr/>

54 Oxford English Dictionary. <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/excellence>

- the state or quality of excelling or being exceptionally good; extreme merit; superiority⁵⁵.

Excellence is two-faceted: on the one hand, excellence is a concept that applies to one person, entity or thing regarding itself and its own capacities. On the other hand, the excellence of that entity, person or thing is always measured against the capacities of the other people, things or entities of its kind⁵⁶.

Excellence means that a person, thing or entity is very superior to others in its own genre. The self and the others are part of the concept of excellence and none of the two can be eluded when talking about excellence. This relation is closely linked to the notion of competition which is a direct consequence of the concept of excellence⁵⁷.

Is excellence an all-encompassing definition, or do we have to look for different definitions for different topics? Its definition can apply to all domains, without any change in meaning.

Is excellence absolute or relative? If you are the best, are you excellent by definition or have different criteria been developed in order to measure absolute excellence? Excellence is a highly relative concept. It implies a judgment that evaluates if and to what extent something or someone possesses some definite intrinsic characteristics to be considered excellent (in relation to oneself and others)⁵⁸. The definite characteristics can follow a detailed scheme or a more general framework⁵⁹.

We can thus make the following statements about the way excellence is attributed to someone or something:

- Excellence is closely linked to an evaluation.
- Someone or something is always declared excellent 'in context', not in itself but in relation to a reference framework that entails criteria.
- The judgment of excellence depends on the criteria that have been chosen.
- Those criteria evolve through time, space and perspective but are not arbitrary⁶⁰.
- The judgment of excellence thus depends on the person or the society that makes it.
- Moreover, this judgment can be emotionally distorted (personal interests, ignorance of certain realities, bias, inconsistency, passion)⁶¹.

According to this operating cycle, we can conclude that even if excellence is an all-encompassing concept, the judgment of excellence is highly relative to the reference framework on which it is based. Each moral system or theory has its corresponding ideals, its own notion of what makes someone or something excellent in a given field⁶².

How are the evolving criteria of the excellence judgment chosen? Throughout history, the perception of the way the criteria at the basis of any judgment of excellence are chosen has evolved. Below are some models describing how criteria for excellence are decided:

⁵⁵ Collins Dictionary. <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/excellence>

⁵⁶ Strike, K. A., op.cit.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Rosati, C.S., (1998), *Ideals*, in Craig, E. (ed), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Routledge, London.

⁶⁰ Strike, K. A., op.cit.

⁶¹ Rosati, C.S., op.cit.

⁶² Ibid.

- According to Plato, these criteria emerge from an innate knowledge of ideals as goodness and justice⁶³.
- According to Aristotle, these criteria can be chosen while analysing the ideals in the human nature⁶⁴.
- Nowadays, moral scepticism is the preeminent way of looking at this topic⁶⁵. 'Moral Scepticism' names a diverse collection of views that deny or raise doubts about various roles of reason in morality. 'Different versions of moral scepticism deny or doubt moral knowledge, justified moral belief, moral truth, moral facts or properties, and reasons to be moral'⁶⁶. Excellence is, in this view, based on choices that are relative and not grounded in any kind of moral values.

There is another way of understanding how these criteria are chosen: they are built on the basis of the observation of what currently happens in the concerned field⁶⁷. The attention is drawn to what brings good to society and how helps it or individuals progress. The choice of the criteria for excellence entails the notions of 'good' and 'progress'. The criteria resulting from this benchmarking are then positioned on a scale, the highest ones determining excellence⁶⁸.

The notion of excellence can be in conflict with other values or moral obligations, presenting a number of dilemmas:

Excellence and individual freedom are for instance conflicting concepts. As excellence is based on a reference framework entailing criteria, it can be opposed to the individual freedom of choosing one's own set of criteria. Candidates seeking the title of excellence are forced into a competition in which the criteria they should meet are foreseen, hence, the importance of letting the candidates contribute to the definition of the criteria. This can be achieved through a bottom-up approach.

Excellence and equity can also be mutually exclusive. As a matter of fact, achieving excellence is in most cases related to having the access to and the availability resources. As far as resources are concerned, the situation of the candidates seeking for excellence is often unequal. Far from dealing with this problem, the quest for excellence often fosters competition, which reinforces inequities. This problem can be solved by delegating to a third party the task of regulating access to resources.

Some models of excellence present various ways of taking individual freedom into account or handling resources while achieving excellence. They include these values in the choice of the criteria. In these models, equity and individual freedom are a part of what it takes to be considered excellent. The Jeffersonian ideal on education, which tackles the issue of excellence in education and integrates equity and individual freedom, is one of these models.

Two major arguments can be drawn from this research: Firstly, when dealing with excellence, one should always be aware of the two-sided meaning of this term. Excellence is always measured in relation with others and entails in itself a notion of competition.

Secondly, the criteria for excellence, and the operating cycle through which those criteria are elected, are at stake in the quest for excellence, whatever field is concerned. They should thus both be constructed with great attention and should be concerted among all stakeholders. The way these criteria include the promotion of equity and

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Plato., Moral Skepticism. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-moral>

67 Strike, K. A., op.cit.

68 Ibid.

individual freedom is one of the key factors to lessening competition in the quest for excellence.

CONCLUSION

These four complementary views on the concept of excellence demonstrate the different contexts in which the term is applied. If excellence is to be used as a means for identifying the standards and quality of academic provision that goes beyond a basic threshold that applies to all institutions, then there needs to be a way in which it can be recognised and assessed.

It is not sufficient to accept that excellence is a reflection of the reputation of institutions and academic departments, or for that matter, the ranking of institutions in university league tables. Reputation is earned over an extended period of time and is strengthened through research experience, accumulated knowledge, social interaction and the formation of a vibrant and productive academic community. Education is a socialisation process and students are influenced by the values, culture and ethos of their institutions. This, however, does not guarantee an excellent learning experience for students or pre-determine their achievements. Elite institutions often attract the most able students but do not necessarily guarantee the highest levels of educational gain.

The principal conclusion from the discussion is that the concept has the greatest relevance and value if it is applied in the context of defined criteria. Excellence can be evaluated against agreed standards that apply across the range of different academic disciplines and different types of institutions. It is a relative concept and can be applied to reflect the variability between institutions and the student context.

CHAPTER 4:

CRITERIA FOR EXCELLENCE

4.1 WHICH CRITERIA FOR EXCELLENCE?

Excellence in higher education may be widely recognised and appreciated, but it is not readily measured or assessed. There are a few quantifiable factors or performance indicators that adequately express excellent practice, or simple 'quality metrics' which encapsulate the various manifestations of excellence in the range of institutional activities. In this chapter, the characteristics of excellent institutions (or faculties or departments) are examined and discussed in an attempt to specify the dimensions of excellence in relation to what institutions do, what they stand for, and how they conduct their business.

A criterion-referenced approach to excellence implies that there are standards which are commonly acknowledged and which are appropriate for all institutions. Some institutions may have strengths in some specific areas and may have courses and programmes which display the characteristics of excellence, but to achieve the status of excellence, institutions, in general, would be expected to demonstrate good practice in a range of different areas.

The following are intended as a guide to the recognition of excellence rather than a 'check list' of necessary conditions. An institution (or department, or programme team) that makes a claim to be excellent would be expected to provide evidence that it meets the following criteria:

- **Robust and progressive strategic governance and management.** Institutions may be expected to demonstrate a strong commitment to excellence in institutional mission and purpose. Strategic direction influences decisions on planning and resourcing as well as setting the ethos and style of institutional practice. Both executive management teams and governing bodies would be expected to set and support goals for the institution which promote excellence. One of the characteristics of an excellent institution is the self-knowledge of strengths and weaknesses and the willingness to improve. Excellent institutions demonstrate a determination to strive for the highest standards of achievement.
- **High standards of academic achievement.** A key measure of the success of institutions is the academic performance of students and staff in degree studies and research. An institution's reputation is determined by the achievements of its students and staff. Students should demonstrate key skills including intellectual ability and practical competence. Excellent students will be motivated, independent and focused in their studies, and able to apply their knowledge in practical situations. The measurement of achievement involves the award of qualifications and records of student performance. For self-accrediting institutions it may be difficult to establish absolute measures of success that apply across the higher education sector, but external verification and the requirements of professional bodies may help to assess the relative performance of institutions.
- **A strong track record in student destinations.** Another way of assessing the performance of institutions is to consider the success of students in securing employment and pursuing career opportunities or further study. Well-trained graduates might expect to do well in labour markets and succeed in professional occupations. In the UK, a national survey of student destinations is conducted

approximately six months after graduation⁶⁹. Although it primarily tracks first destinations and does not indicate longer-term career progression, it nonetheless gives an indication of the 'employability' of graduates. In these terms, excellence is seen as achievement in preparing students for the world of work, rather than reflecting purely academic goals, but it is an objective that often fits well with the expectations of governments and employers.

- **An exceptional student experience.** Excellence can be claimed for high quality teaching and learning, and student support, including learning resources. Traditionally, excellence in teaching has not been widely regarded and has not achieved the same degree of esteem afforded to research. However, many institutions have developed a focus on pedagogy and have developed innovative ways of enhancing the learning experience of students. The 'process' of education is recognised as the most significant factor in determining educational gain by students⁷⁰.
- **Positive stakeholder satisfaction.** The concept of excellence is linked to the perceived performance of institutions, evaluated through feedback from stakeholders. This will include a wide range of different employers, and other users of research outcomes and knowledge transfer. A high performing institution is one where students fully meet the expectations of employers and other interested parties and where institutions are focused on the needs and expectations of stakeholders.
- **High levels of student satisfaction.** An important group of stakeholders are the students themselves. Excellence can be viewed in terms of the service provided to students and their satisfaction with the quality of their learning experience. Many institutions conduct student satisfaction surveys or exit surveys of students on completion of their studies. Some countries conduct national surveys of all higher education providers to judge the level of student satisfaction⁷¹.
- **Commitment to research and academic development.** An excellent institution would be expected to demonstrate evidence of a well-found, vibrant academic community involving academic staff, researchers and students. The quantity and quality of research output would be one important measure of research activity, but it is also important to take into consideration the extent to which academic staff are engaged in their academic discipline through individual studies and participation in the wider subject community. It is expected that staff are knowledgeable and participating in wider academic debate.
- **Support for social, economic and cultural development.** One function of institutions is to promote and sustain social, economic and cultural development, meeting the needs of the local and regional community and fulfilling their missions through curriculum development, applied research, knowledge transfer and social welfare. Higher education institutions are recognised as a 'social good' fostering intellectual development, technical skills and promoting the values of equity, inclusion and citizenship. An indicator of excellence is the extent to which institutions are integrated into their regional systems and play a central role in the life of communities.
- **Recognition of the social benefit of education.** A key function of higher education is to foster the values of a civilised society and to promote social mobility and social justice. An excellent institution will demonstrate commitment to social and cultural

69 Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/>

70 Gibbs, G., (2010), op.cit.

71 The National Student Survey in the UK provides evidence about the quality of teaching and student support.

inclusion and to widening participation in higher education to all who have the ability and motivation to benefit from the experience.

- **Commitment to internationalisation.** Excellent institutions will promote a global perspective as part of their mission and purpose to recognise the importance of competing on a world stage and engaging in the development of an international knowledge economy. Institutions should benchmark their performance against comparable institutions in other countries and take part in international cooperation in research and academic development.
- **Promotion of equity and academic freedom.** The essential feature of higher education is the commitment to the value of objective enquiry and to the pursuit of knowledge, without the restraint of political determination or other forms of intervention. Institutions should safeguard the equality of opportunity and regard for individual expression. All students should be encouraged to achieve and fulfil their full potential.

These criteria should reflect the characteristics of an excellent institution. It is not an exhaustive list. There are many other ways in which institutions and academic disciplines may define their purpose and personality, but hopefully these features give a sense of what an excellent institution might look like.

CONCLUSION

The question about who should identify excellence and who has the authority to ascribe the status to institutions still remains. As noted, the concept does not lend itself to measurement or quantification in terms of simple metrics or performance indicators. Could it be something that is claimed by institutions and tested by external reviewers? Or could it involve expert judgments by peer quality reviewers with extensive knowledge and experience of higher education? Alternatively, it could be a decision involving the views of students and staff, or the perceptions of other stakeholders and the general public. However arrived at, any judgment of excellence will need to be seen as credible and appropriate, and will need to be substantiated by reference to accessible evidence. One approach would be to establish a 'framework for excellence' based on the key criteria and values and incorporating qualitative assessments of the extent to which expectations are being addressed.

CHAPTER 5:

EXCELLENCE AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Building on the discussion of criteria for excellence, this chapter explores the question of whether excellence can be achieved as a result of the development and implementation of quality processes. The expectation is that institutions will progress 'through quality to excellence'. The famous basketball coach, Rick Pitino, states that excellence is the unlimited ability to improve the quality of what you have to offer. The definition of excellence adopted by the working group is the demonstration of high levels of achievement against a defined set of standards which reflect the range of institutional practices and values.

In a general sense, 'excellence' is linked to the idea of social responsibility and activity directed to the improvement of conditions for individuals. It is based on an understanding of the social, economic and cultural contribution of higher education. At a personal level, it is enriching and encourages the realisation of human potential. There should be a link between excellence and quality and how it affects quality assurance procedures and improvement of quality. Universities may be expected to integrate the concept of excellence in their internal quality systems and culture. The concept and approach applies both to external quality assurance and internal quality procedures, but essentially institutions have more control over their own procedures and can focus on internal processes to secure expectations around quality. Excellence is derived more from external perceptions and can be established through benchmarking one university with another.

One of the main orientations of QA procedures is to check the current status of excellence in terms of external quality and also to foster excellence. This section will consider how QA procedures can help to define excellence in a particular university and thus, improve the quality culture. Excellence will be described here as a result of QA procedures.

5.1 EXCELLENCE AND METHODS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

Radu Damian, Director for International Relations, Projects and Cooperation at the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS).

In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), QA is widely understood as a developmental process. Standards, criteria and performance indicators are the starting point for the process of evaluating quality at a given point in time, leading to recommendations for improvement. Therefore, the methods of QA agencies are not currently focused on identifying or promoting excellence. They assess whether or not threshold standards have been achieved. An excellence model would set goals for institutions in terms of exceeding minimum expectations.

As indicated earlier in the paper, there are many definitions of excellence, but the most commonly used are those that relate to the rankings of institutions and the visibility of research. Looking at the missions and purposes of most QA agencies in the EHEA, it is obvious that accreditation as well as quality enhancement are at the core of their activities, as main priorities. Identifying excellence is not a declared priority and the methods most QA agencies use have not been developed for this purpose.

There are some exceptions, related mostly to 'centres of excellence', defined as centres of advanced research with visible results in the national and international context. A number of specific standards, criteria and indicators have been developed to evaluate these centres nationally, and some agencies have made use of them. However, the link with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) is not clear and it may be necessary to consider additional standards for excellence that could be applied in these circumstances and which would become incorporated within the ESG.

If agencies are ready to include excellence in their mission and statements of intent, then they should be very precise in defining it. A distinction should be drawn between activities such as excellence in teaching and excellence in research; the educational structure to which excellence refers, including study program (Bachelor, Master or Doctoral); the higher education institution (HEI) as a whole or part of the HEI – for example, a centre of excellence or department.

Also, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the word 'method' as used by QA agencies. Method includes a set of standards, criteria, performance indicators, procedures or any other type of activity aiming at evaluating an institution, a study program or a department, with the purpose of making judgments on the quality of activities such as teaching, research and student support.

STANDARDS FOR EXCELLENCE

What are the standards for excellence? If excellence is seen as quality exceeding the current threshold standards defined by the ESG, then different standards should be used for excellence. The standards for excellence will need to be higher than the current ones for quality and will require new criteria and performance indicators.

This limited definition of excellence is easier to apply to excellence in research. Doctoral study programmes, centres of excellence in research, and also some other educational study programmes provide comparative data that can be used to establish the standards in a quantitative manner. Most rankings are currently based on this type of approach, but QA agencies should make a clear distinction between the quality enhancement approach and the use of 'league tables'. Thus, for QA, the result could be that several educational or research structures are qualified as being excellent whereas rankings would arrange them in an order which justifies the parallel with league tables in sports competitions. In addition, we should also note that the QA approach gives a judgment for a longer time interval, for instance for five years, whereas rankings are published annually, in most cases.

In one of his contributions, Brent Ruben, Executive Director of the Center for Organisational Development and Leadership at Rutgers University, proposes an inclusive perspective on excellence in higher education, underlying the importance of services and other operational dimensions as well as academic and support staff. In his book, he defines eight internal key factors for the university which determine its success in a decent external environment⁷². One important key factor is to consider a broader definition of excellence. Indeed, when the educational and research structure is the institution as a whole, looking at its policies and activities to implement it, one must use a broader definition of excellence – one in which additional standards (most of them of a different nature than those when the limited definition of excellence is used) are considered.

The difference lies in the fact that for the limited definition of excellence, the standards are mostly, but not exclusively, comparative – as in the case of evaluating

72 Ruben, B. D., (2004), *Pursuing Excellence in Higher Education: Eight Fundamental Challenges*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

research. For excellent institutions, the standards refer to other parameters which justify looking at excellence in the broader sense, such as for institutional policy. If excellence is deemed a priority then what is the leadership doing to implement this policy in terms of management, administration and resources allocation?

Standards for excellence can be found in the literature. A recent survey in Romania, under the framework of an EU funded program, showed that in the United States, one group of standards refer to the institutional context and another group of standards to educational efficiency. The first group of standards looks at: mission and objectives of the institution; planning methods, allocation of resources and innovation; leadership and governance; administration; integrity; self-evaluation and external evaluation. If properly met, this group of standards, would set the “obligatory (but not sufficient)” conditions under which the institution would be “eligible” to be considered as “excellent” (see Chapter 1 section on the Baldrige Model).

The second group of standards examines the educational efficiency and is thus directly related to the educational activities and other services the institution offers its students: admission of students and their performance, including graduation rates; support services for students; quality of curricula and faculty; quality of educational offerings, including academic content, coherence, learning objectives, expected learning outcomes and expected skills of graduates; general education learning outcomes, including communication skills, critical thinking, technological skills etc; evaluation of achieved learning outcomes of students; and other standards related to study programmes.

A recent study of the World Bank, led by Jamil Salmi, lists, in a given order of importance, the external and internal conditions that, if met, lead to proper functioning of an educational system: equity, teaching, achieving the expected learning outcomes, research, knowledge or technology transfer to society and the acceptance of a set of values.

CURRENT METHODS OF QA: CAN THEY BE USED TO IDENTIFY EXCELLENCE?

The evaluation and the judgment should start from the basic question: are there HEIs that are excellent as a whole or only in some study programs? The answer is related to the two types of definitions of excellence as suggested before – a broad definition and another one with a more limited scope. Starting with the standards related to the institution as a whole gives an advantage when evaluating study programs or parts of the institution: when the institution can demonstrate a clear mission, sound policy, performing leadership, adequate resources, student services and their social dimension etc. at levels exceeding the normative requirements used, it has a chance to be judged as excellent. If the institution has a significant number of study or research programmes that can also be judged as excellent, in most cases, according to the limited definition of excellence, that will also confirm the excellence judgment.

Judging study programmes or researching the limited definition of excellence leads to a process of benchmarking. This would be a positive answer to J. Salmi’s question: ‘If ranking is a disease, is benchmarking a cure?’ If one accepts that the benchmarking process is a cure, one must also be aware that excellence is a moving target. However, especially in the case of institutions, tradition and reputation are important factors for the overall judgment. Is anyone daring to question excellence of Oxford or Cambridge? Here we find a real problem. Are the current methods of QA agencies fit for benchmarking? In some cases and for some standards, there are good examples in that sense which are in accordance with the ESG and require follow-up procedures, comparative and

system analyses. Overall, the problem is more difficult: benchmarking requires extensive, detailed and permanently updated databases at the universities which must be compatible with the database of the QA agency.

Using such databases raise another problem: if higher standards for excellence are met by many programmes or HEIs, in time these become the state of the art, the norm. When this happens, is it acceptable that the study programmes or institutions still qualify as excellent? Defining excellence in accordance with the broader definition would lead to an affirmative answer, whereas according to the limited definition of excellence, the answer would be negative.

This raises not only the question, could all study programmes and institutions be excellent in a higher education system? but also, could all study programmes of an institution be excellent? One could accept a positive answer to the second question, especially for smaller size institutions with less diversified study programmes. However, the answer to the first question would be more likely to be negative. The insatiable appetite of the public for rankings is a proof of this.

5.2 EXCELLENCE AND ACCREDITATION

Galina Motova, Deputy Director of the National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA).

Excellence in accreditation procedures has become a noticeable trend in quality assessment, and this trend is bound to become especially relevant after two or three rounds of accreditation. After the accumulated experience and practice, it is desirable to review and adjust the existing approaches used by any agency.

There are a number of reasons for the focus on excellence in the academic community. When a HEI applies for re-accreditation, especially for the third or fourth round, agencies and experts anticipate something more than what they experienced previously and search for improvement and development. Thus, it is important to see the progress in a HEI's performance, not stability but the movement forward (not to prove but to improve). Additionally, the accreditation system itself has to evolve too.

In most cases, the first evaluation round establishes minimum requirements, so re-accreditation implies progress in evaluation. It means that not only do experts expect high quality and development from educational institutions, but a HEI itself expects more profound goals, requirements and standards from the accreditation procedure.

The practice of excellence is not just a case of using good practice, but the philosophy of outstanding and distinguished practice.

Unlike the practice of excellence, accreditation agencies set minimum and sufficient requirements for the quality of education. It is important that these requirements could be achieved if not by the majority of HEIs but at least by half of them. Accreditation, being a social norm, is supposed to set initially achievable results. On the contrary, the practice of excellence becomes vitally necessary for efficient, well-run HEIs which easily meet accreditation standards and for which threshold standards cannot be considered as the vector of development. Strong universities search for other approaches and methods. If accreditation agencies could offer such procedures, they would be much in demand. Such approaches already exist, and the practice of excellence can serve this purpose perfectly.

For those national QA systems and those accreditation agencies that have worked in the system of evaluation, audit, accreditation, or other similar activities more than for 15 years, there is a possibility to combine and develop two procedures:

1. The first procedure is the accreditation process, which includes the establishment of norms and standards for quality of education and ensures the proper level of quality for immediate consumers (students).
2. The second procedure involves the practice of excellence for those HEIs and study programmes which have already passed the first round of accreditation and moved to the next review cycles. Its function is to strengthen the competitiveness and/or marketing and to set the development vectors for strong universities. Implementing this procedure indicates to the entire national education system that certain institutions are beacons and can serve to inspire others.

To sum up, excellence in accreditation procedures is seen as a voluntary but separate procedure of external QA activities which can bring only benefits. Thus, excellent accreditation practice can help move forward experts, HEIs and agencies.

CONCLUSION

Relating the methods of QA to excellence is probably one of the most difficult tasks for QA agencies. This is probably the reason why the vast majority of ENQA member agencies do not include the word excellence in their own presentations on the ENQA website.

There are however, four exceptions: one agency states 'Our agency is highly committed to quality and excellence in all its activities'. Another one presents itself as 'Your Centre of Excellence for Quality Management in Higher Education', while a third one claims that it is performing 'evaluations of quality units in education and adult education in the university sector, and quality units in education and centres of excellence in regional impact in the polytechnic sector'. Finally, the fourth agency states 'Our mission is to establish standards of excellence for the education and training of (name of the profession).'

The approach to excellence is progressive. Not all agencies will recognise excellence in existing institutions and study programmes, but the specification of excellence provides a framework for QA and a focus for enhancement.

The development of a commonly accepted 'framework for excellence' would provide a basis for a more strategic approach to quality improvement, allowing institutions to measure their performance against defined criteria and facilitating the comparative analysis of institutional performance as an alternative to league tables and rankings.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

This working paper records the discussions of the working group over a period of two years and reflects the progress made in describing, evaluating and defining the concept of excellence in higher education. The debate within the group has been lively and well informed and has led to a consensus of view on how the concept should be assessed and how it could be incorporated into approaches to the assessment of quality in European higher education.

The group began its discussion with a review of the common perceptions of excellence and the prevailing view that it referred to examples of meritocratic practice and exceptional achievement. In these terms, excellence is something that is confined to relatively few institutions and subjects. It is analogous with the idea of an elite higher education system and the performance of researchintensive universities. It is a norm-referenced model in which the performance of individual institutions is relative to practice more generally within the higher education sector.

As an alternative, the group took the view that excellence is a concept that can be applied to all types of institutions and subject disciplines. It defines a goal to be achieved and can be recognised in terms of the value and worth of institutional practice. A criterion-referenced model defines excellence in relation to defined standards that in principle can be attained by all institutions.

The reasons for choosing a criterion-referenced model include:

- Recognition of the importance of institutional achievements – particularly with regard to the ‘value added’ to student development and performance;
- An appreciation of the role and purpose of HEIs in promoting social justice and the values and benefits of higher education;
- An understanding that excellence should apply holistically to institutions and not just to selected aspects of what they do;
- The promotion of higher education as a social good for all those who are able to benefit rather than a means of reinforcing social divisions;
- The desire to establish high standards for teaching, learning and research, and to encourage all institutions to aspire to achieving them.

The criteria identified for excellence could be incorporated and referenced within the methods used for the conduct of QA activities. Some relate directly to the European Standards and Guidelines, others deal more generally with the context for the support and development of academic programmes. The specification of expectations for excellence would provide a focus for the development of strategies for quality enhancement.

The methods currently used by QA agencies are not primarily focused on identifying excellence. Agencies could include explicitly in their missions a statement such as ‘identifying and developing excellence’. Consequently, the current set of standards could be re-organised and/or revised to make a definite distinction between the ‘normative part’, used for licensing or accreditation and the developmental part which could eventually lead to excellence. The overall intention would be to raise the level of institutional performance beyond the threshold standards set for the minimum requirements of common practice in academic quality and standards.

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ANNEX I

ENQA EXCELLENCE WORKING GROUP BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

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Stephen Jackson is Director of Reviews at the Quality Assurance Agency in the UK with overall responsibility for the Agency's review activities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. He was previously Executive Director for Partnerships and Assistant Provost for Learning and Teaching at Liverpool John Moores University.

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Marie Malmédy holds a Master Degree in Multilingual Communication and has also completed a Master in Cultural Studies at KULeuven. Since September 2011, she acts as project coordinator at the executive unit of the Quality Agency for Higher Education in the French-speaking Community of Belgium (AEQES).

Oxana Matveeva is the Deputy Head of Accreditation Office of National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA). She is also studying for a PhD in social and economic management with a specialisation in quality assurance systems in higher education and excellence in external evaluation.

Galina Motova (PhD, D.Sc.) is the Deputy Director of the National Centre for Public Accreditation and Editor-in-Chief of the journal Accreditation in Education. Prior to this position, she was Deputy Director of the National Accreditation Agency of the Russian Federation (NAA). Galina has participated in several national and international review teams and projects and is the author of more than 150 publications in the field of quality assurance.

Patricia Pol is the Advisor for European and International Affairs at the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research (former Head of European and International Affairs, Evaluation Agency for Research and Higher Education - AERES).

Ausra Rostlund is the Deputy Head of Study Evaluation Division at Centre of Quality Assessment in Higher Education in Lithuania (SKVC). Since 2000, she is working with quality assessment in education. Her research interests include study of quality assurance, external study of quality assessment and the management of quality of higher education.

Orlanda Tavares is researcher at the Portuguese Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES). She has participated in the project 'Identifying barriers in promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at institutional level' (IBAR) and is currently taking part in the project 'Global Challenges, National Initiatives and Institutional Responses – mapping the transformation of higher education institutions at the dawn of the twentieth-first century', funded by FCT.

