

Chapter 11

Seven Factors for the Quality Assurance of International Higher Education

Ciarán O'Leary
Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

ABSTRACT

As education becomes accepted as a service like any other, the market for trade of education services has developed significantly, with a diversity of providers competing to provide education outside their national boundaries. As well as providing an international experience to students, this can facilitate the sharing of expertise among students, educators, and policy makers who can learn from successes in other countries. This appears to be particularly important in the education market for software engineers and computing professionals, where the knowledge base is rapidly evolving. This requires, however, careful management of the service provision, which results in increased focus on quality assurance. Assuring quality is made difficult by many factors, some shared with quality assurance of education in general, and others unique to the international context. We present seven factors that represent the core challenges for the quality assurance of international higher education, and as such, represent a valuable tool for computing educators and others either currently involved in, or intending to become involved in, the international education market.

INTRODUCTION

The Single European Act (European Community, 1986) recognised the European Union as an area for free movement of goods, persons, services and capital. Twenty years later, the EU Services Directive (European Commission, 2006) defined

a path into the future where education services are provided outside of the national context within which the qualifications to which they lead are awarded. This mirrors the effect of the World Trade Organisation's General Agreement on Trade in Services (World Trade Organisation, 1995) which first recognised education as a service in the international context, and attracted a diversity

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of education providers to the international market to compete for students and status.

Countries with large, established education systems such as the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) have been the most significant participants in the international education market, with other countries, which benefit from their geographic location, such as Australia, matching both the US and the UK for innovation outside their national boundaries. More recently, countries such as Ireland have increased their efforts to engage with the international provision market. The motivation for participation in this market is driven by both financial and academic considerations. Clearly, the ability to charge fees to students and attract students to the home campus to pay international fees is a key motivator for this provision. However, it is also the case that engagement with this type of provision has the potential to develop and share expertise in various aspects of education, including curriculum design, learning and teaching methods and specific research areas. It also offers the potential for countries to share education experiences and learn about each other's successes and routes to success.

The past two decades have seen a significant increase in focus on quality assurance for education, whereby methods such as external review, audits, self-study and performance indicators have been employed to ensure that the service provided by an institution is of an appropriate standard. This has led to a series of debates about what quality means in the context of education, with some authors arguing that quality, like beauty and excellence, is something without tangibility that can only be assessed subjectively (Doherty, 2008). The more widely accepted definition of quality is as *fitness for purpose* whereby a programme, team, department or institution is assessed on its ability to meet a specific need in a type of graduate, with the need often encoded in a framework of qualifications or set of learning outcomes.

Outside of the national context, we must examine how the definition of quality as *fitness for*

purpose impacts on quality assurance of education provision in the international context. Does the programme designed by the European provider which is being delivered in Africa, for example, address the needs of the local market, the European market, or both? Is the education being provided as a European education, and if so, is this even possible when it is removed at such distance from Europe? Is it important that the education is delivered by staff from the source country, or is it more important that the source institution is involved in the design of the programme and its outcomes? These questions address the purpose for international education, and until we understand the purpose for the provision, we do not have a means to assess or assure its quality.

Countries such as Ireland which emerged in the 1990s as important and influential participants in specific markets, such as the software market, attributed much of their success to the quality of their education system. Now as Ireland looks to share its lessons internationally by providing education outside its boundaries, informed by its own experience, it needs to develop its understanding of the context within which that education will be delivered. This approach represents a valuable approach to internationalization of education, and a great opportunity for countries to learn from each other. However, for education to be a success it must be appropriately supported by quality assurance methods, and it is perhaps these methods which currently represent the weakest link in the international education chain.

We propose seven factors which must be considered by teams, departments or institutions which engage with the international education market. These seven factors frame quality assurance, providing a framework within which international provision can be evaluated. The factors, listed below, form the core contribution of this chapter, with a discussion of each expanding and highlighting how the debate about quality might usefully be conducted in the international context.

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