Interview on Quality Education

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Partner of ARC6
How does EUA define quality education?

EUA does not have a single definition for “quality education” for all universities – and we doubt that it is possible, or useful to have one. We would rather argue that quality is contextual and needs to be fit for purpose. Higher education is a sector where institutional diversity is cherished, where institutions operate against diverse national and cultural backgrounds, and where different stakeholders may value different things. In this context, defining quality must take into account the specific institution and the national, local, and/or regional context. It is important that each higher education institution is aware of what education it offers, has the means to assure its quality (quality assurance, or QA), and engages in continuous quality enhancement.

Improving the quality of higher education teaching and learning has been at the heart of the Bologna process reforms¹. Together with other European stakeholders representing institutions, students and quality assurance agencies, EUA has been working on developing common tools for quality education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for more than a decade now. It is worth noting that the common framework for quality assurance in European higher education has been defined by these stakeholder groups, including EUA. This framework is called the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (or ESG²). ESG were adopted for the first time by the European Ministers of Higher Education gathered in the Bologna process in 2005, and revised in 2015.

The ESG provide guidance on how quality assurance processes in the EHEA should be carried out, but they do not present standards for quality in higher education per se. The ESG note that quality, although complex to define, would mainly be the result of the interaction between teachers, students, and the institutional learning environment. The ESG can be seen as providing guidance on a quality learning environment – thus contributing towards the development of quality higher education. The ESG acknowledge the diversity of QA approaches across the EHEA, and leave room for defining the purpose of QA according to the context. QA processes should ensure a learning environment in which the content of study programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpose. Standards, in the context of the ESG, are agreed and accepted practice for QA in higher education in the EHEA. Each standard is followed by guidelines to explain why the standard is important and describe how it can be implemented. For instance, one standard stipulates that institutions should have a policy for QA that is made public, and forms part of their strategic management. The ESG leave a lot of scope for the institution to use it in an enhancement perspective – which can be regarded as a formidable freedom, but also as a duty or obligation for the institution.

As part of their commitment to quality education and responsibility to society, higher education institutions should also be prepared to provide accurate information about their institutional mission, activities and performance, for transparency purposes. But transparency tools, such as rankings or classifications, should not, to us, be used as a proxy for quality or quality assurance – although data provided under some indicators may also serve for quality assurance processes. Rankings or classifications serve as a means for comparing universities and indicating their relative positioning in relation to others, using chosen indicators. They do not serve the same purpose than quality assurance processes, which examine the purposes, underlying processes and outcomes, and strive for quality enhancement.

Striving for quality enhancement is not only about procedures and processes. With its member universities, EUA has started working since 2002 on the concept of “quality culture” within institutions. “Quality culture” could be defined as including two elements: on the one hand, tools and processes for defining, measuring, evaluating, assuring and evaluating quality; and, on the other hand, an individual and collectively shared commitment towards quality, which is a more cultural element. For a university, defining quality education in its own context, in a fit-for-purpose way, is not only about working towards formal processes. It is also about how to enable communication, participation, and build trust, and how to devise a collective agenda for change, together with all members of the university community – including students - and in dialogue with external stakeholders (employers, society, quality assurance agencies, higher education authorities). EUA’s position on quality and quality assurance focuses on the need to promote cultures of quality at the national level as well as at institutional level. At institutional level, ownership of quality processes among the university community is crucial.

Ultimately, education is what should allow students to grow, learn, further develop, and fully play their role as active citizens and professionals within the society. It should equip students with competences, skills, and knowledge to cope with changing professional and social environments. In that regard, a quality education should always be future-oriented, or future-ready.

Share your vision of a future-ready university.

Universities count among the oldest institutions in the world – which proves that they are resilient, but this might not guarantee that they are “future-ready”. Universities do not exist as stand-alone institutions. They also contribute to inclusive, innovative and prosperous communities. They stand as examples of the importance of civil society, and play a role in the construction of future-ready societies and economies.

In a future-ready university, the university community is actively engaged into defining the quality education it strives to offer, and strongly committed towards it. It is a place where cutting-edge knowledge advancement and innovation can take place in a favourable environment. Where students can develop forward-looking perspectives through learning, research opportunities, mobility opportunities, and other community-based activities.

Society, communities and labour markets will undoubtedly continue evolving. Active learning and teaching

¹ http://www.eua.be/policy-representation/higher-education-policies/the-european-higher-education-area-and-the-bologna-process
² http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/
approaches, such as project-based, community-based or research-based learning, could act as a powerful driver for stimulating future graduates’ attitudes towards their own learning. This should be done in a lifelong learning perspective, ensuring that graduates are able to act as informed citizens, capable of critical and reflexive thinking, and as fully-fledged professionals.

It is worth recalling where we have come from, and where we are at now. The European higher education sector has seen unprecedented structural reforms over the past two decades. At the same time, pressure to enhance learning and teaching has been increasing. Increased levels of higher education participation lead to increased and more diversified student populations. We live in times when technological developments impact on delivery modes and educational goals. Methods and modes of knowledge production and dissemination are changing, with growing emphasis on open access, interdisciplinarity, and lifelong learning. Institutions are operating globally in an increasingly connected and interdependent world. And, last but not least, emerging post-factualism has increased distrust towards, and disengagement from established and traditional places of knowledge production and circulation, such as universities. Against this background, European universities have to take action. This is already happening (as demonstrated in EUA’s Trends 2015 study), for instance by rethinking pedagogies, methods and modes of provision, but also in rethinking strategically the role of education as part of their institutional mission.

I would like to point to two examples of EUA’s work in supporting the development of “future-ready” universities:

- Based upon our own analyses and also on policy discussions at European level, EUA has launched a new initiative focused on learning and teaching as a means of promoting sustainable reform across the European higher education sector. We organised the first European and Teaching Forum in September this year, in Paris, with the aim of facilitating the exchange of experience among the higher education community in a changing learning landscape.

- EUA recently called for more ambitious funding for excellent research in Europe after 2020. The Association urges all actors to step up investment in the next EU framework programme for research (2021-2028). From EUA’s perspective, more investment is needed to fund excellent research and to help bridge the ‘participation gap’ across different EU countries, which remains one of the key challenges facing the European Research Area (ERA). Far from lowering quality, more investment will strengthen excellence, boost scientists’ motivation, and ensure support for more risk-oriented research.

Why is Asia-Europe collaboration in the field of education important, and what areas are to be enhanced? Why are interregional rectors’ conferences important, such as ARC?

As mentioned above, we live in an increasingly connected, interdependent and globalised world. This means that many developments impacting upon European higher education are also common to institutions in other parts of the world - even although these trends may be differently perceived and addressed, against different national and academic backgrounds. For instance, the need for regional cooperation, the impact of digitalisation on education, or the importance of lifelong learning and interdisciplinary knowledge and skills, are common concerns and hence undoubtedly gain from exchange and collaboration across regional borders. This is why interregional meetings of university leadership, such as ARC, are relevant and important for enhancing mutual understanding and cooperation. Such meetings create possibilities for different stakeholders to meet colleagues from other countries, and build communities of common interest. This is also an example of how civil society can facilitate people-to-people dialogue at global level, in a way that complements other, more formalised international relations.

So, if you ask me: what excites us about ARC? These would be the reasons. We look forward to ARC6 in Singapore.
The 6th edition of the ASEF Rectors’ Conference and Students’ Forum (ARC6) will address the topic of “Future Universities and Graduate: Quality Education Beyond the Horizon” and invites over 280 representatives from academia, governments, business and industry, students and youth associations as well as NGOs and IGOs.

The ARC6 consists of 2 programme elements: 1) a Students’ Forum 2) followed by a Rectors’ Conference. Close linkages between the Rectors’ and the Students’ is assured through a synergetic exchange in which 4 Rectors’ attend the Students’ Forum as Mentors and 4 Students’ participate throughout the Rectors’ Conference.

Specifically, ARC6 aims to:
- Contribute to the policy dialogue on higher education in Asia and Europe and provide input to the agenda of ASEM Education Ministers
- Support the implementation of the SDGs
- Facilitate cooperation and long-term partnerships among universities across Asia and Europe
- Enable collaborations among student networks and associations
- Strengthen the linkages between universities, governments, business and industry, IOs and NGOs, and local communities

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) promotes understanding, strengthens relationships and facilitates cooperation among the people, institutions and organisations of Asia and Europe.

Since 1997, ASEF has contributed as part of its rich thematic portfolio to education policy dialogue and capacity building, and facilitated youth networks. Run by ASEF’s Education Department (ASEFEdu), our projects strengthen collaborations between education institutions and exchanges among young people, academics and educators through interdisciplinary and pragmatic approaches. In doing so, we directly link these key players in education to the ASEM Education Process and ASEM Leaders’ Meetings. Find out more at www.ASEF.org

A premier university in Asia, the Singapore Management University (SMU) is internationally recognised for its world-class research and distinguished teaching. Established in 2000, SMU’s mission is to generate leading-edge research with global impact and produce broad-based, creative and entrepreneurial leaders for the knowledge-based economy. SMU education is known for its highly interactive, collaborative and project-based approach to learning, and for its technologically enabled pedagogy of seminar-style teaching in small class sizes.

Home to around 10,000 undergraduate, postgraduate, executive and professional, full and part-time students, SMU is comprised of six schools: School of Accountancy, Lee Kong Chian School of Business, School of Economics, School of Information Systems, School of Law, and School of Social Sciences. SMU offers a wide range of bachelors’, masters’ and PhD degree programmes in the disciplinary areas associated with the six schools, as well as in interdisciplinary combinations of these areas. Find out more at www.smu.edu.sg

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