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Quality and the Battle of Legitimacy – Discourses, Disputes and Dependencies

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External Quality Assurance (EQA) - A success story...

- EQA – addressing privatization, efficiency, internationalization and relevance issues
- EQA – useful for public authorities, higher education institutions, and students
- EQA – balancing external and internal needs, although the improvement – accountability debate is still ongoing...

Turbulence for EQA ahead?



Discourse 1: Can EQA be trusted?

- Regardless of purpose and method, EQA relies heavily on input/output data, governance and procedures
- Questions asked whether EQA dig into the `real` quality of higher education
- EQA = bureaucracy?
- Qualification frameworks/learning outcomes `taking over` ..

Discourse 2: Is EQA efficient?

- Governments increasingly focused on costs and how to save public money
- Risk-based/`lighter touch` approach differentiating between institutions, but `risk` also transferred to institutions
- From programme to an institutional focus
- Alternative data: National student surveys

Discourse 3: Who should be responsible for EQA?

- Ownership and responsibility for EQA increasingly questioned
- Global rankings – the new competition
- Deregulation in EQA – a global market emerging where a number of private or non-public agencies compete
- From an expertise to a consumer orientation?

From turbulence to trust...



Legitimacy – key insights (1)

- EQA historically been given legal status
- Deephouse & Suchman (2008):
 - Legitimacy is cultural support for a given organization or practice by the environment
 - Legitimacy is a relational phenomenon, and given – not taken
 - But legitimacy may be manipulated...

Legitimacy – key insights (2)

- Suchman (1995): three forms of legitimacy
 - Pragmatic (experience)
 - Normative (shared values)
 - Cognitive (rational, modern)
- The forms not mutually exclusive...
 - Legitimacy easier to achieve if all forms are covered
 - It is also easier to be exposed to critique if some forms are missing

Where to go...?



Scenario 1: Continuation?

- EQA agencies demonstrated flexibility in the past, they can do so in the future – adaptability and mobilization
- Make sure that all forms of legitimacy is covered
- EQA agencies as producers of global standards
- Dependencies: Public authorities

Scenario 2: Cooptation?

- Governments are re-thinking their approach to EQA, looking for more efficiency and more accountability regarding outcomes
- EQA coopted by new tools and approaches (national student surveys, employer focus, etc.)
- From EQA to funding focus?
- Dependencies: Higher education institutions

Scenario 3: Competition?

- EQA no longer a public responsibility – a (global) market emerging
- New agency roles: consulting, marketing
- New strategic alliances emerging: with student interest organizations, ranking bodies?
- Need for innovation in the `business`
- Dependencies: `The paying customer`

Final reflections

- Most likely many national and regional variations taking place
- Legitimacy as an analytical approach – and a strategic tool?
- The dangers of being too strategic...maybe the different forms of legitimacy reflect the diverse set of stakeholders increasingly involved in EQA

