SWISS QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACCREDITATION SYSTEM IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
PERSPECTIVES & DISCUSSIONS FOR SOUTH EAST ASIA
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Introduction

The aim of this brief paper is to present the Swiss quality assurance and accreditation system (QAA) and to understand what are its key advantages and disadvantages. From the analysis of the Swiss case, some perspectives will be proposed for Asian situations. This paper has no intention to compare national contexts that are not comparable, but rather proposes some 'food for thoughts' and general points for discussion in QAA procedures and governance systems. After having presented the general context and rational for accreditation today, the paper describes the Swiss QAA system and analyses its advantages and drawbacks. It then offers also some key points for a discussion in the perspective of South East Asian situations.

The global context of quality assurance and accreditation

Higher education has tremendously changed over the last 20 years. The increasing needs of the global economies for flexibility, cognitive skills, professional behavior, competencies and the emergence of the so-called 'knowledge-economy' have changed the context during the last two decades. Concurrently, the enrolment in higher education (HE) has been democratized in many countries. Today, countries like Finland, the USA, UK and others have gross enrolment rates (GER) in higher education, which are between 80 and 90%. This 'massification' has put to some extent pressure on the quality of the services delivered by higher education institutions. At the same time, mobility of people and ideas has become a clear trend of 'globalized societies' and has largely affected HE and quality standards. In Europe, over 160'000 students are joining the Erasmus program every year arising a series of problems when it come to recognize, validate, the semesters or full academic years that they have spent in foreign universities.

Another clear trend is that HE has turned into a commodity. Facilitated by international agreements like the GATS, HE systems has been the first segments of educational systems to be open for marketization and competition. Most countries have considered this as a solution to cope with the increasing enrolment figures in HE. Obviously, this has

not only contributed to change the higher education offer (which is now much more diversified than it was 20 years ago), but has also changed the relation between the 'student' and the education provider. As a matter of fact, a client relation has appeared between the education consumer and the provider. This situation has thus generated the need for a quality assessment system for the clients and providers, as the competition was getting fiercer in HE and the demand for quality changed. QAA operations were also needed to deal with competitors based abroad, and regional solutions were necessary for harmonization and mutual recognition in Europe. Obviously, the QAA also answers another growing concern in Europe, which is to know what kind of education quality tax-money funding is supporting. The main *credo* behind this neo-liberal type of approach was that by increasing the responsiveness of universities through QAA procedures, their quality and effectiveness would also improve. In that sense, QAA procedures are also getting popular because they introduce some sort of accountability principles for HE institutions.

However, at this point, it might be useful to briefly define the terms. Quality assurance is seen as an attention on quality maintenance and improvement (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). In other words, it's a process, with a clear educational objective, improving quality. What it's not: a benchmarking. The primary purpose of quality assurance is not about specifying standards or benchmarks against which measure quality but to have workable mechanisms-processes to create an awareness of the existing situation so that the desired standards (decided by the authorities) can be attained (Tan, 2007: 161). The question of the nature of quality has also to be raised. Some European legislations define 'basic' or 'minimal' quality, some others 'high' quality that has to be attained through QAA. These issues have probably to be solved in local contexts as the notion of quality may refer to different budget level dedicated to education, educational situations and priorities, cultural contexts, etc.

Regarding accreditation, the situation looks simpler: it's the legitimating of institutions to award degrees, granting quality mark indicating that certain standards are met (Vroeijenstijn, 2003).

The Swiss QAA system in a nutshell

The higher education system in Switzerland consists of 9 universities and 2 Federal technological universities. There is a Federal law on universities, but the funding of the

universities is largely coming from the 'cantons' and not from the central State (except for the Federal universities). The academic world is rather small (100'000 students) and homogeneous. Switzerland has implemented in the late 1990s the Bologna agreement that has reformed and harmonized the higher education systems in Europe. Following its adoption, Switzerland has implemented a QAA procedure in the early 2000s after some long and difficult negotiations with all the key stakeholders.

In the Swiss QAA system, the 'Organe d'Accreditation et de Qualité' (Quality and Accreditation Organization, QAO) is the central agency in the QAA procedures. It has been established by law on universities in 1999 and it is co-financed at 50% by the Federal State and the Cantons. The law guarantees the independence and evaluations of the QAO. The Cantons are sitting in the Swiss University Conference (SUC), which delivers the mandate to the QAO to make the QAA. The QAO does not take any decisions: it gives certain recommendations and SUC decides. In other words, we are in a bottom-up approach and in a close-circuit.
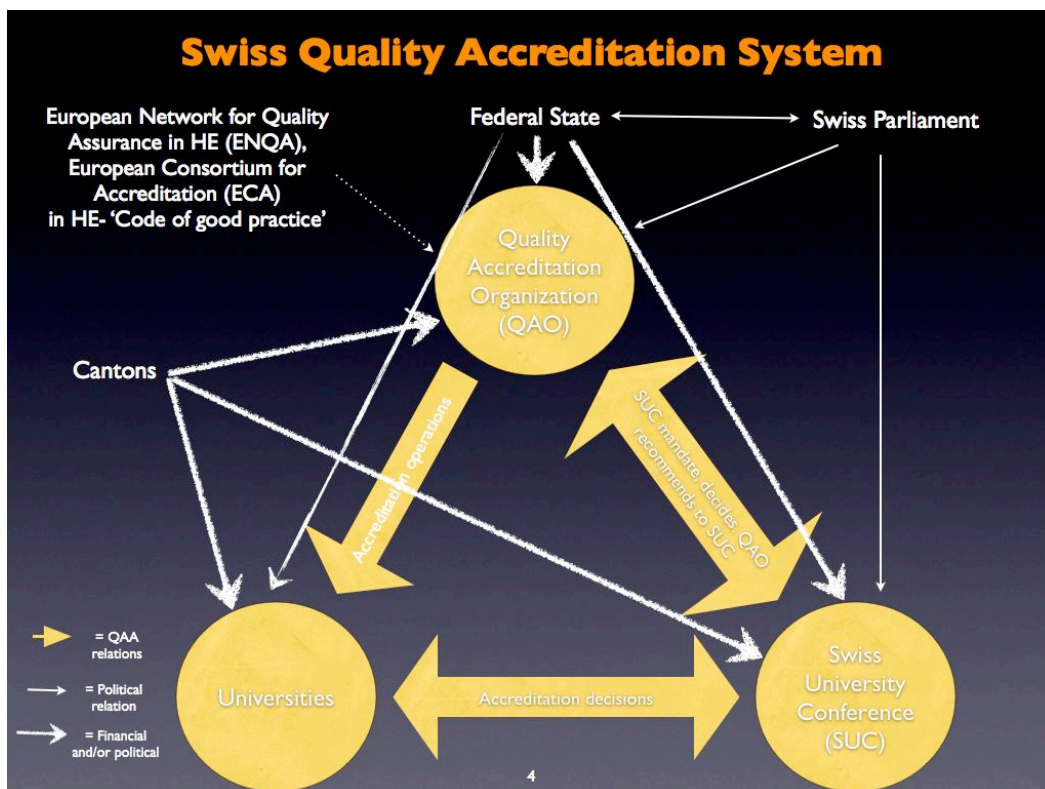
The graph above describes the mechanisms, relations and financial bounds between the various actors of the QAA governance system. The Cantons are the main actors: first, they finance 50% of the QAO, almost entirely the universities (with some Federal fund however

in some cases), and the SUC (together with the Federal State). In the SUC, the Education Ministers of the Cantons having a university are members together with the Federal State Secretary of Education and some representatives of Cantons without universities. The Swiss Parliament, through the laws, poses the general framework of the procedure. One can also notice that the Swiss system fits into the 2 main European QAA systems: the ENQA and ECA. The former discusses mainly political aspects of QAA and has received a mandate from the Bologna agreements to do so while the latter, ECA, focuses mainly on mutual recognition issues and accreditation decisions. As any other European country, Switzerland strives for an international dimension.

Three stages exist in the assessment procedure:
1. Minimal norms that are elaborated on structures, internal results like objectives definition, internal governance, infrastructure, curriculum, research results, stakeholder participation, etc.). Self-assessment is required on those various dimensions.
2. External experts assessment, to verify whether norms are reached.
3. Report, verification, validation and position proposed to SUC

Eventually, the SUC can take 3 decisions: accreditation granted, accreditation subject to conditions, accreditation denied. The accreditation decision is valid for a period of 7 years, and the QAA is the same for public and private institutions. The Swiss system offers also the possibility to evaluate a program, a faculty, department, not necessarily the whole institution. In this QAA, an important place is granted to the evaluation of teaching, whereas in other European countries, research results tend to gain more and more importance. To the contrary of many other European countries, the QAA is not obligatory, but the law gives some strong incentives to do so. External experts and QAO staff honorarium have to be supported by the accreditation seeker.

Some advantages and shortcomings of the Swiss System
Some of the advantages of the Swiss QAA system:
1. *Result of a consensus among stakeholders involved.* In the Swiss QAA system, the accreditation agency is subordinated to the Swiss University Conference (SUC), a joint organization of the cantons and the Confederation for university politics. To some extent, the parliament has also an indirect control and the QAA system integrates all the stakeholders at various levels. This institutional setting is an answer to fears expressed by

the universities to have some kind of totally autonomous bureaucratic agency solely in charge with the accreditation.

2. *Clear chain of accountability, responsibility sharing, transparency.* The governance and actors roles are clearly identifiable. The results of the QAA are public.

3. *Flexibility.* QAA not only for institutions, but also for departments, programs, etc.

4. *Separation between operational activities and strategic activities.* QAO does the operational activities for assessment, quality assurance and accreditation. The strategic aspects are under the SUC and the Swiss parliament. The QAO only gives recommendation.

5. *A 'simple' and identifiable structure.* This is suitable for the small size of the country, and a Federal system.

6*. No direct link between results of QAA and funding.* To avoid funding support that would only be based on the QAA criteria without taking into account other criteria, there is no automatic link between the funding and QAA results. In a Federal system, Cantons (in charge with education) have not the same ability to develop higher education institutions.

Some others aspects of this QAA system are more disputable:
1. *No direct link between results of QAA and funding.* This could also be regarded as a soft system with a limited effect on quality improvement and effectiveness.

2. *QAO has a monopoly.* Administrative control from Cantons through SUC on the QAO is the result of the controversy in the late 1990s when decision was taken to introduce QAO. Universities were afraid to loose funding support, and both the 'monopoly under control' and lack of automatic link with funding was a compromise made by Federal authorities

3. No external inputs, no critical approach, close-circuit. This tends to be only partly true as mutual recognition and other supra-national initiatives seem to break the isolation of this system. But the national governance QAA systems remains 'closed'.

4. QAO is financed by Cantons and Federal State, accountability controversial. Cantons are funding the universities and the QAA organization. What is the margin of maneuver? Is this 'good governance'?

5. QAO assesses institutions funded by SUC (the decision authority in QAA) own members. The limit of a 'close-circuit' approach and this shows the governance limits of the current QAA system.

Several issues remain under discussion. When it comes to governance principles, it seems that financial, decisional roles are mixed up with the accountability chain. However, due to the size and specificities of the country, this solution seems to fit into the context. Regarding the monopoly and accountability issue, several solutions have been proposed like the association of other QAA organizations under the scrutiny of the SUC.

Perspectives for SEA

From the Swiss example, various perspectives and discussion topics can be proposed for the Asian context. Obviously, making comparisons *per se* doesn't make much sense when it comes to QAA procedures. The quality framework to be implemented is strongly related to a cultural and national context first. The perspectives below should not be understood as recommendations either, but just as few hints from the Swiss case for further discussion.

1. *National QAA policies have to be integrated in a regional framework.* Aiming at easing mobility, QAA procedures need to overcome purely domestic procedures. Mutual recognition is important to achieve at early stages of the QAA. In that matter, since its debut the Swiss national model is integrated in a regional model with variations, which is commonly seen as the best solution.

2. *Antagonistic dimensions: self-determination vs. needs of convergences.* As stated earlier, QAA procedures have their roots in specific cultural contexts. Hence, strong historical and social differences in QAA exist among countries, which justify variations in QAA systems. However, we are today witnessing the rapid spread of one model, the Anglo-Saxon, with all the dangers linked to importing foreign models. Two main related problems can be identified: 1. Cultural differences on what quality is, and how to measure

it; 2. educational objectives may vary.

3. *Convergence and emerging global consensus on QAA?* There is a trend of international convergence given the increasing impact of globalization and international competition. Anyway, *per se* the various models have similarities (like transparency, self-assessment, a national QAA agency, external peer review, etc.). In other words, there is a natural tendency of convergence and the main differences (at least in Europe) are to be found in the research assessment and institutional levels and governance principles of the QAA system.

4. *What quality matters?* Some countries use the notion of minimal standards, other of high quality standards, how to define it? In Europe there's the 'code of good practice' and ENQUA proposes 23 standards and guidelines (which are guiding all the members including Switzerland) based on 3 main dimensions: 1. internal quality assurance (e.g. policy and procedures, staff, assessment of students, etc.), 2. external quality assurance procedures (e.g. decisions, follow-up, etc.), 3. external quality agencies (e.g. official status, resources, activities, etc.).

5. *Transparency.* It's a common feature of many QAA procedures, together with the creation of a dedicated agency or organization. Decisions and results of the QA&A agency have to be built on trust. This trust is resulting from governance principles (accountability, responsibility, transparency), and it is important to build it among various actors, especially within a regional frameworks.

6. *Independence of QAA agencies.* The QAA agency has to be independent, however, as the Swiss case showed, it cannot be without any form of accountability towards other organizations. Other question: should there be a competition among various national and/or regional QAA agencies?

7. *Separation of levels.* Another point praised in the Swiss model is the separation between the strategic and operational levels. The QAO is clearly located at the operational level: it *executes* the QAA operations. The political decisions and strategic visions in QAA are to be found in other hands: the SUC and the parliament.

8. *Binding the QAA results and the funding.* As said earlier, this point is open for discussion. To what extent the results of the QAA should impact on the funding of the assessed institutions/program?

9. *Check and balances in the QAA governance.* Participation from all the stakeholders is important in the QAA procedures, including and its governance system.

10. *Framework assessment.* Key question raised also in Switzerland: who, which organization, determines the framework assessment? In some cases it's the law, the parliament, in some others the QAA agency.

Many aspects remain open for discussion and analysis in the QAA procedures. However, a certain consensus seems to emerge on various points proposed above. Again, what is relevant in European contexts may not be relevant in Asian contexts.

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