New directions for Quality Assurance: Transparent Outcomes for Industry Collaboration, Research Training and Student Success

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Abstract

Prevailing approaches to quality assurance which were developed decades ago are no longer sufficiently fit for purpose. Quality architectures are not yielding evidence that key stakeholders like students and industry need, and they are not spanning let alone spurring innovative improvements in practice. This paper signals the need to shift beyond constrained approaches to assuring quality and instead embrace transparency as a lens for understanding and creating higher education. This perspective is exemplified by considering three hitherto underemphasised facets of the broader quality agenda—university/industry collaboration, research training outcomes, and student success. The paper concludes by summarising the directions outlined and charting steps ahead for quality work in Asia.

Keywords: Quality and transparency, University/industry collaboration, Research training, Student experience, Student success

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1. Introduction

Higher education in Asia has experienced rapid growth and diversification over the last decade with forecasts of continued expansion to come. It is expected that by 2020 China and India together with the United States and Brazil will account for more than half of the world's total tertiary enrolments, with Indonesia becoming an increasingly significant player (British Council, 2012).

Issues associated with sustaining and scaling quality assurance systems intensify as the Asian region grows. To be most effective quality assurance architectures must be appropriately aligned with contemporary and emerging policy and practice. As higher education becomes increasingly international in nature, transparent information about the value and quality of higher education institutions, systems and regions is necessary to maintain and advance progress. The importance of proving higher education outcomes is acknowledged in the region (Hou, 2014), as is the need for more robust system-level accountability frameworks.

Recent redesigns of higher education quality frameworks have highlighted the need for increased transparency. Greater transparency carries potential to increase efficiency, build staff capacity, increase collaboration with private industry and firms, and enhance the student experience (ADB, 2011; Saunders & Dempster, 2014). Work which seeks to align quality frameworks to current and future practice is crucial as traditional measures are challenged by the emergence of data-driven solutions and decision making, digital platforms and environments, greater corporate engagements and partnerships, and diverse student demographics.

This paper seeks to propel and align quality assurance in Asia by charting frontiers relating to the core academic areas of engagement, research and education. The next section advances the analytical lens, charting a shift from 'quality' to 'transparency' to underscore contemporary notions for facilitating the assessment, evaluation and effective benchmarking of higher education. The following section focuses on development required to improve the capacity of higher education institutions to engagements with industry, collaborations which are fast becoming important indicators of research impact and economic growth at the institutional and national level. The section after that turns to research and doctoral education in particular. As doctoral numbers grow and opportunities for graduates becomes less clear, the relevance and outcomes of research training will continue to be an important measure of institutional capacity, quality and research impact. Finally, we examine opportunities for enhancing the student experience through effective, integrated and continuous data collection. The paper concludes by summarising the directions outlined and charting steps ahead for quality work in Asia.

2. Shifting from 'Quality' to 'Transparency'

Aspects of higher education are ancient in nature (Barnabus, 2007), yet the rational organisation of sectors, institutions and individuals is relatively new and still morphing fundamentally. While in most parts of the world the contemporary quality movement in higher education is barely a few decades old there would already appear to be a transition from 'quality' to 'transparency' (Coates, 2016a). Changes with markets, institutions, workforces and academic business are reshaping the nature and needs of work in this space (Dill, 2015). Such transition carries important implications for understanding the contributions made by higher education institutions.

Higher education institutions have always been interwoven with collegial systems which have evolved to engineer and assure quality. The movement of people and knowledge between institutions and across national borders has helped ensure broad comparability of expertise, approaches and outcomes. Given the niche role of higher education in society, a more formal approach to standard setting and assurance was not required.

The formal idea of 'quality in higher education' coalesced in the 1980s as systems began to enlarge beyond a boutique scale of provision (Shah, Nair & Wilson, 2011). Higher education was a late starter in the field of quality given the growth of the broader field of quality from the 1950s, mainly in response to the manufacturing boom following the Second World War (Shah, Nair & Wilson, 2011). As the quality field grew in higher education, key developments included establishing quality agencies, international and regional networks and protocols. Institutions many hundreds of years old were asked to submit to formal external evaluation and review that expanded beyond the oversight provided by councils, industry or professional associations. Another layer of external assurance was added by funding agencies to ensure compliant acquisition and use of resources (Billing, 2004). Accordingly, institutions established internal systems to assure the quality of institutional inputs and processes through measuring, monitoring and reporting mechanisms. The outcomes of professional fields were monitored via niche channels, with less regard to monitoring the broader economic contribution of higher education.

The 'quality movement' was institutionalised in the late 1980s and 1990s (Shah, Nair & Wilson, 2011) primarily according to regional models developed in Europe, United States and the United Kingdom (Dill, 2010). Many national agencies were established, such as the United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). A formula was perpetuated: internal review involving consultation and documentation, followed by

external audit and reporting. These assurance activities were almost always run by national quality agencies, albeit with frequent involvement of international auditors mainly sourced from pools of academic peers. A broad range of data was considered, with quantitative information focused on inputs and processes (Billing, 2004). While the review teams may have had a remit to delve within, the institution was the unit of analysis and reporting. Reports were written for soft public release, though drafted in industry jargon and pitched to an insider audience for quality improvement rather than to report outcomes designed to inform student choice (Dill, 2010). Essentially, therefore, this evolution reified the shift beyond the institution but held to largely qualitative analysis of each institution's own mission within the realm of each nation's academic peers.

For perhaps two decades, the process of internal review followed by external audit has been the dominant approach to quality assurance. A parallel stream of disclosure arose after the turn of the century, signalled by the rise of the international institution rankings (Hazelkorn, 2007; Rauhvargers, 2014). For a range of reasons, such initiatives provoked new insights and discourse regarding quality. They were produced—for the most part—by academic or commercial agencies without vested interests in particular institutions or systems. They seeded a decidedly quantitative shift in reporting performance (Rauhvargers, 2014). They imposed an invariant, unidimensional and somewhat atheoretical common external frame across institutions and nations (Hazelkorn, 2007). They exploited data on institutions from public or third-party resources. They pitched easily readable results to a broader public audience. These disclosures highlighted the shortcomings of existing quality arrangements and demonstrated potential for additional information to provide new insights into institutional activity and performance.

Over the last decade the evolution of the quality assurance and rankings movements has spawned anxiety for tertiary policy, leadership, management and work. System-level agencies in charge of funding and quality have sought to diversify institutions in their jurisdictions while clawing concurrently for territory in generic 'world class' terrain. Leaders have endeavoured to distinguish institutions strategically (Brewer, Gates & Goldman, 2001) while at the same time genuflecting to decontextualised rankings. Managers have tried to craft academic and support roles to ensure education quality while at the same time propelling increasingly particularised and extended research frontiers. Academics have faced tensions between external and individual performance metrics, and the often highly nuanced requirements of a role (Grainger & Weir, 2016; Billing, 2004). In each case, the tensions are between diversity and commonality, between particularity and universality. For instance, how is it possible for even very expert and well-informed peers to say a system, institution,

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workforce or individual is achieving excellence if a suite of robust quantitative indicators suggests otherwise? In the inherently malleable world of academic critique, it has become commonplace to argue such tensions away by attacking technical foundations, substantive relevance or practical alignment. Even more boldly, grand narratives have been forged to negotiate perceived inconsistencies—for instance, that 'quality is above indicators', and that 'indicators are not about quality'. While flirting with occasional interplays, the quality and rankings communities have nourished distinct futures and sought rickety compromises to hold their respective worlds at bay.

Transparency is a force for unifying collegial quality systems and broader public metrics. With further innovation it seems reasonable to predict that novel blended approaches will emerge. Such development is already evident in recent key reforms to national agencies in countries like Australia and the United Kingdom. In Australia, for instance, replacing AQUA with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) signalled a shift from peer-based and process-oriented audits of each institution's delivery against strategy, and to an assessment of risk based on quantitative (optimally outcomes) indicators and adherence to generalised standards (Probert, 2014). Consultation on future approaches to quality assessment has flagged a related shift in the United Kingdom, nudging higher education quality assurance beyond boutique and into broader alignment with practices in other industries. Efforts by United States senators to establish an alternative, outcome-based quality review process (CHEA, 2015) are another example. At the same time, ministries and supranational agencies are seeking greater governance input into hitherto largely commercial rankings initiatives. The European U-Multirank (van Vught & Westerheijden, 2012) and OECD's AHELO (Coates & Richardson, 2012) initiatives reflect this institutionalisation or nationalisation of the large-scale metrics agenda, as does the European Commission's recently launched project titled Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe (CALOHEE). Rather than being sidelined as background information, activity and performance data is increasingly being embraced as core to accountability, productivity and quality.

Scaling quality procedures via specification and quantification carries enormous potential to manage a larger and more diverse range of institutions, quality complexities and stakeholder interests. Making public once-private conversations about academic standards, for instance, creates new insights into what institutions are doing and achieving. Aligning education and institutional management metrics with broader quality deliberations can redress the concerning lopsidedness of research-fixated planning and performance reporting. More expansive, dynamic and robust reporting nuanced to key interests can demonstrate and enhance the value of

higher education. People with little vested interest in higher education might learn to value the returns from substantial investments made by government and households. A market for education or quality might start to function, and not just at the margins. Asia has enormous potential to play a leadership role in this area given the fast-developing nature of change.

3. Spurring University/Industry Engagement

Better understanding how universities engage with society will play an essential role in the emerging transparency agenda. Higher education institutions are paying a greater role in public life, and are being induced through decreased government funding as well as broader commercial opportunity to not just look beyond academic walls, but to make such boundaries more porous and in many instances dissolve barriers.

While universities engage with almost every conceivable area of society, links with industry are particularly important. University/industry engagement is of growing importance to higher education, business and society at large. Such engagement encompasses a vast and eclectic range of activities traversing core university missions of education, research and service. For working purposes, we define industry engagement as including research and education partnerships and other corporate-level interactions but excluding public affairs and marketing. Example activities include, guest lecturers, commercialisation, student placements, staff exchanges, advisory panels, and supervision.

There is considerable evidence affirming the benefits of more coordinated collaboration between the education and business sectors (Morandi, 2013; Perkmann et al., 2013). The changing nature of work and organisations calls for high level skills and requires a world class research base and a culture of innovation. Engaging with universities offers corporations many development opportunities including upskilling of their professional workforce. Corporations report being confused about what universities have to offer, not seeing how and why to engage. In many instances, partnerships are project based and driven by individual academic or business interest, rather than broader institutional vision.

Even given the apparent lack of engagement, but partly due to this no doubt, it is perplexing that very little is known about university/industry engagement (University of Oxford, 2015). There remain few national pictures of the nature or extent of current practice, and policies and strategies are often confidential or non-existent (Morandi, 2013). The lack of baseline data really hampers progress. Looking beyond baseline data there remains a broader opportunity to take stock of different models of

engagement—to explore the value and constraints of each type, and to look at facilitators and blockers. What are the prospects for growing particular forms of engagement, and for boosting university/corporate linkages overall? What different approaches result in different partnerships and outcomes? What new forms of quality assurance are possible, and required? Enormous value would be derived from knowing more about the implications for engagement on shaping the future of higher education, professional work and corporations.

Current quality assurances measures do not sufficiently measure university and industry collaboration. Work continues to establish shared definitions and indicators in this area (E3M, 2015; Tijssen, 2012). Much existing research on this facet of engagement has been orientated towards outcomes without enough research devoted to the inputs and processes that stimulate practice. Studies have evaluated engagement through research commercialization, technology transfer, science parks, intellectual property and patenting, and incubators. Not enough research has focused on barriers and, importantly, how to overcome barriers (Bruneel, D'Este & Salter, 2010).

One barrier identified to blocking engagement is the training and knowledge of relevant staff and faculty. Not all academics are able or willing to participate in engagement (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). Research has found that industry collaboration is often facilitated through faculty who are more established and connected in the academic community, and have been awarded substantial grants or worked with industry partners previously (Perkmann et al., 2013). For example, Hertzfeld Link and Vonortas, (2006) found that research collaboration experience has shown to overcome barriers, and Bruneel, D'Este and Salter (2010) found that inter-organization trust further lowers barriers. In a study of the typologies of orientations of academics, Lam (2010) found that most academics identify as neither traditional nor entrepreneurial, but rather fall in between the spectrum.

Siegel et al., (2003) found that barriers to implement and encourage university/industry engagement included culture clashes, bureaucratic inflexibility, poorly designed reward systems, and ineffective management of technology transfer offices. They and other scholars note that many of these barriers stem from the varying motivations of academics versus industry personnel (Bruneel, D'Este & Salter, 2010; Siegel et al., 2003). For example, of the three main stakeholders who participate in university-industry engagement, academics are often driven by the discovery of new knowledge for publication or ongoing research, while technology managers are interested in the progress of intellectual property rights and patenting, with firms chiefly interested in the commercialization of knowledge (Siegel et al., 2003). Moreover, time frames between stakeholders often differ, with academics more

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interested in long-term research yet firms more motivated by short-term outcomes (Perkmann, Neely & Walsh, 2011). To emphasize these varying motivations, D'Este & Perkmann (2011) additionally found that commercialization was for university faculty the least important motivation for participating in collaboration with industry. While alternate research has shown that industry partners may harbour negative perceptions of academics as partners in potential collaboration (Kaymaz & Eryigit, 2011).

Previous research has highlighted the importance of not only academic but also general university staff to fully understand and see the benefits of engagement before they can actively promote or participate in it (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Siegel et al., 2003). Because engagement does not necessarily need formal contracts or relationships to occur, informal networks can also be a key source of knowledge spill-over (Agrawal, 2001; Ponds, van Oort & Frenken, 2010). The critical factor for engagement has often been shown not to be the type of relationship, rather the closeness or intensity of the relationship (Gertner, Roberts & Charles, 2011; Perkmann, Neely & Walsh, 2007). Gertner, Roberts and Charles (2011) further found that knowledge transfer often occurs most strongly through communities of practice with multiple stakeholders having strong relationships with one another.

Therefore, if universities and industries are to continue to work together they may choose to do so in variety of ways and not only with a singular goal of commercialisation. These informal and good faith transfers will be key to facilitating the relationship between university and industry away from a competitive race to only commercialize knowledge, and instead forge stronger, deeper bonds (Van Looy et al., 2003) This is especially important in Asia, where knowledge transfer between varying groups is often hampered by the informal or familial networks, such as the Chinese tradition of 'guanxi' (Hong, Heikkinen & Blomqvist, 2010). Moreover, it is crucial for quality assurance mechanisms to increasingly form and implement measures for better understanding university industry collaboration. Substantial policy and infrastructure development is required to create the information and disclosures required to advance this area of quality work. It is necessary to build frameworks, data collections, interpretive mechanisms and improvement agendas.

4. Evidence to assure research training outcomes

Research training is a core function of universities. Higher education in Asia is enrolling record numbers of higher degree research students in masters and doctoral programs (OECD, 2015; UNESCO, 2014). Such students are valuable as they foster the future academic workforce, bring additional revenue for the university, and help to

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co-produce research. Significantly for the Asian region the establishment of thriving research hubs is key to success due to undeveloped research capacity within institutions that have until recently provided undergraduate education primarily (Shin, Postiglione & Huang, 2015). Hence research training is a core matter for future quality assurance measures globally and in particular Asia.

As graduate research training increases globally, so too do the challenges for institutions to adequately equip graduates for a competitive and crowded market. Opportunities for graduates have become less clear and concerns continue to grow regarding graduate outcomes (Coates & Goedegeburre, 2012; Probert, 2014; Goldman & Massy, 2001; Go8, 2013; Neumann & Tan, 2011; Rubio and Hooley, 2010). As the sector responds to increased pressure to develop employability skills within traditional research training models, a lack of coherence is beginning to characterise research training further creating broad uncertainty about the value and purpose of advanced research qualifications. Without strategic and sustainable efforts to develop coherent but flexible model of research training that promotes institutional capacity, aligns with broader economic imperatives, and demonstrates outcomes, a risk to quality will endure.

There remains a need and opportunity to bolster and enhance mechanisms for assuring the quality of research training programs. Traditional quality measures have included provisions for research training with respect to process-driven elements including supervision, research infrastructure and protocols such as ethics. There is an evident need to strengthen quality assurance frameworks to assure the transparency of outcomes for research training. The relevance and outcomes of research training is an important measure of institutional capacity, quality and impact. Yet, a lack of transparent, reliable and comprehensive data that provides meaningful insights into the individual, institutional and national impact of research training limits certain conclusions. Further, available data and research samples that measure long-term outcomes for research training—including doctoral education—is variable, and at times contradictory and incomplete.

There are many rationales for more robust quality assurance of research training. Significantly, research training and particularly doctoral education is preparing the future academic workforce (Boud & Tennant, 2006). Yet, within individual institutions and at the faculty level, variances in policies, practices and processes for research training limit the effectiveness of quality assurance systems. For example, variances in research methodology training, curriculum design, admission procedures, supervisory arrangements, formality of milestone requirements and publication expectations exist within institutions and across disciplines, and are often subject to

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individual discretion of faculty staff (Pearson, 2005). Despite a lack of coherence, institutional outcomes of research training are significant and include publications, intellectual property, research output, patents, funding, industry partnerships, commercial ventures, capacity building and institutional reputation.

Research training in the Asian region is of significant importance to many countries hoping to improve the research capacity of both their higher education sector and research and development within industry. Through programs such as Brain Korea 21 (BK21) training for doctoral students is reaching levels of national importance and supported by broad funding schemes (Park & Leydesdorff, 2010). This highlights the broader national and industrial contexts that have seen shifts from agricultural and manufacturing based to globalised and mobilised knowledge work (CEDA, 2015). Research-intensive universities play a crucial role in national economies. The development of higher skilled research capabilities is increasingly seen as an important driver of national and global innovation (UNESCO, 2014). The outcomes of research training are perceived broadly as having positive effects on labour productivity, economic prosperity and social health of a nation through research and development (Hoareau et al., 2012; Larkins, 2001; UNESCO, 2014). In this context, the outcomes of research training to advance economies and solve complex global challenges are crucial. Therefore understanding the impacts and outcomes of doctoral graduates is increasingly seen as international priority (Auriol et al., 2012).

In part the emergence of the professional (or in some cases 'industrial') doctorate is a response to the diminishing impact of traditional research training for producing knowledge workers required for a knowledge economy (Usher, 2002). Additionally, with a focus on developing professional skills and attributes aligned to contemporary employment, the professional doctorate is considered a mechanism for redressing the concerns voiced by employers outside academia about the quality of doctoral graduates (Kehm, 2004; Nerad, 2004).

As the academic profession evolves, increasing numbers of research graduates do not find employment in academia (Auriol et al., 2012). The emergence of add-on coursework units or embedded lower qualifications within doctoral degrees reflects the acknowledgment that graduates require broader employability skills including generic or 'soft skills' (Allen Consulting, 2010) or what are increasingly being labelled 'transferable skills' (Probert, 2014). Similarly, growth in professional doctorates reflects an increasing market in developing further expertise in established professions (Boud & Tenant, 2006; UNESCO, 2014). The effects of increasing professionalization of the doctorate remain to be seen, however, it seems reasonable

that accreditation and quality networks responsible for protecting the interests of professional practice will evolve.

In a global, mobile, competitive and uncertain global economic environment, the outcomes of research training are increasingly being scrutinised. Pressure from government on universities to demonstrate the economic and social benefits of research training towards an innovative nation have intensified in Australia, Asia and Europe since the 1990s through a series of strategies and priorities for economic growth, innovation stimulation and institutional accountability (McWilliam & Sinh, 2002; Cuthbert & Molla; 2015). So while the research outcomes of doctoral training have long been of interest to governments, evidence of direct impact has been opaque. Not surprisingly, as economies shift to knowledge-based and as investment in research training grows so too the expectations for evidence of returns.

With established and emerging differentiation in research training both in Asia and globally, the challenge for institutions will be to demonstrate the value of this advanced qualification and to protect the quality and relevance of research trained graduates. Most significantly, a commitment to the collection, analysis and dissemination of longitudinal data on research students will facilitate best practice and improve quality. Regulatory and quality agencies and networks have an important role to play in spurring development in these areas.

5. Reframing Insights into Student Success

Building data-driven systems to help students succeed is a major front for institutions and quality experts alike. Foundation stones have been set with collection of information on student attendance and interaction with learning management systems. Yet, in many ways satisfaction surveys have become baseline proxies that can enable mediocrity to prevail. In a competitive, global and technologically enabled environment, students expect to interact with ease.

There remain serious constraints in current mechanisms used to understand tertiary students, despite development of student-related data systems in recent decades. For instance, while the student experience is obviously highly individual in nature, prevailing myths emphasise crude group-level generalisations. Compared with other service sectors higher education is lagging, stuck in batch-like mindsets that undervalue the agency and potential of individual co-creation. As well, the dominant methods used to study the student experience have waning utility. Student survey response rates are low and shrinking, variance explained is small, and more effective electronic footprints seem available. Most work on this front is framed within the

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context of institutions and fields, even though higher education is increasingly trans-disciplinary and trans-institutional in nature, signalling a need to break through bureaucratically entrenched barriers and look instead through the eyes of the student. It is common for institutions to find a lack of interoperability between datasets both within and across institutions, and gaps in data collection from non-official platforms used by staff and students alike. These issues are compounded with practical problems, particularly in terms of the capacity for insights into the student experience to shape practice. Institutions and stakeholders are increasingly unresponsive to results from student surveys, which in many instances are detached from lived practice and increasingly used for external purposes (Porter, 2011). As a result of these constraints, we lack insights into just who students are, how people approach higher education, the ways in which they learn, and how people change as they progress.

Effective application of new forms of quantitative evidence should be seen as a core facet of quality higher education, hence for quality assurance activities more generally. As technological systems become more integrated into many aspects of institutional life and people see value in using data for more than internal compliance or external regulation, institutions can extract valuable information to inform a range of improvements, actions and reviews (Picciano, 2012). More sophisticated reports can be provided to a host of stakeholders, most particularly academics as well as prospective and current students.

While the application of such quantitative analysis is developing, current practices are fragmented, opportunistic and the pedagogical benefits are uncertain. For instance, a recent national study in Australia (Coates, Kelly & Naylor, 2016) exposed significant issues related to institutional adoption including the lack of integration across data systems, particularly administrative and learning systems, and the inability to capture online experiences in non-institutional environments. The focus on student activity in online environments as a proxy for engagement also ignores offline learning activities. Further, a complex set of institutional, academic, pedagogic, social, ethical and cultural issues associated with the design and use of such metrics needs to be resolved.

The Australian study also showed that unlocking new insights into how students experience education has the potential to help institutions and systems take the next step in helping students succeed. To date, much information explicitly sought by institutions about students has been designed to facilitate the identification of 'at risk' students. If institutions and by extension governments and other agencies are able to identify students through more diverse descriptors with greater information about their learning contexts that go beyond blunt demographic instruments, it will be

feasible to apply new forms of evidence to enhance the student experience. For example, the use of social media and sensing devices in teaching and learning provides rich behavioural and highly personal information. Academics leveraging such information can enable more student-preferred environments. While the increase and diversification of information sources to better reflect the whole picture of learning activities is desirable, as Chatti et al. (2014) note there are of course challenges for institutions as they seek to integrate larger amounts of data from heterogeneous sources in different formats is significant.

Higher education is no longer a rite of passage for school-leavers or professionals seeking to get ahead. Students invest heavily in higher education to realise a multitude of outcomes. Students in higher education are diverse learners in increasingly diverse and evolving environments. The advent of new forms of data and analysis promise to provide personalised, adaptive and real-time learning environments for each individual student. These developments hail important opportunities for quality research, management and assurance.

6. Potential Steps Ahead

This paper has sketched three facets of higher education that are increasingly becoming signposts of quality: university/industry collaborations, evidence on the outcomes of research training, and an enhanced student experience. Underscoring shifting notions of quality and standard-bearers of excellence is the need for transparent data and information for review and evaluation by a range of stakeholders including government, business, peer-institutions, institutional leaders, employers, graduates, students, prospective students and the broader community.

Higher education providers are ultimately responsible for ensuring and demonstrating quality outcomes. But the role of regional quality agencies and accreditation networks in influencing practice is crucial (Hou, 2014). Networks such as APQN, ASEAN, CHEA/CIQG and INQHAAE have already initiated important work for shared principles for Asian and international higher education. While principles provide a positive foundation in influencing perceptions about quality, however, there remains a need to identify targeted, relevant and urgent measures that will ensure the region leads quality education in the areas that matter most.

Asia has an enormous opportunity and need to develop in this area. Higher education is fast changing in the region and growing new approaches is often easier without the entrenched hang-ups that result from decades of entrenched practice. The region has a proven track record of innovating and creating new quality technologies. There is a deep commitment to education in most communities, creating markets

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which seek information about activity and delivery (Altbach & Umakoshi, 2004). With a complex tapestry of institutional types and accreditation systems there is a marked need for more information and clarity about the nature and standards of higher education.

Nonetheless, significant challenges to realising a regional system for quality assurance in Asia are acknowledged. Of note, cultural attitudes and practices that inhibit transparency (Altbach, 2009; Hong et al., 2010) remain a persistent barrier to developing opportunities for effective collaboration, demonstrating graduate outcomes and the dissemination of information to enhance the student experience. Furthermore, historical relationships and tensions within the region that may hamper progress is an issue (Neubauer, Shin & Hawkins, 2013). Some regard a re-design of traditional higher education systems a necessary response to a higher education future that is mass, global, technologically driven and competitive (Shin & Teichler, 2009). Shifts towards greater transparency to demonstrate quality are beginning to develop given growing investment in higher education by individuals, institutions, industries and governments. New approaches to quality are emerging globally as state-based, regional and even national systems are becoming more de-centralised and aligned to broader economic, cultural and technological concerns. In this climate, it is important for quality frameworks to reflect contemporary and prospective practice for higher education to protect and advance the contributions of higher education.

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