

## **IMPACT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE ON UNIVERSITY WORK. AN OVERVIEW IN SEVEN IBEROAMERICAN COUNTRIES**

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### Abstract

Most countries have set up quality assurance processes, and higher education institutions spend a lot of time, money and energy in carrying out self assessments, preparing for external reviews, reading and analyzing the reports and action letters they receive, and finally, putting in place the recommendations received. There is little evidence about the actual impact of these processes on institutional practice; this chapter summarizes the result of a research project, carried out with the support of the European Union. Research focused on Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Portugal and Spain, with the purpose of finding out whether quality assurance is perceived as making a difference.

Not surprisingly, results show that there is a clear impact in the way quality and its implications are seen at the national or higher education system levels; there is evidence of development of public information systems, which can influence the direction and focus of policy decisions. At the institutional level, there is some impact on managerial aspects, especially in the quality of decision making processes, in the consideration of the results of evaluation in institutional planning, and in the increased valuing of teaching as a core function of universities (which in turn, is seen in new modes of assessing academic staff, different ways of addressing academic development, and other similar aspects). Academic staff and students also report interesting and positive changes in teaching and learning, which they link to accreditations processes, but they also link quality assurance to increased bureaucratization and a heavy administrative workload.

## **A DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY**

Increased coverage and institutional diversity have led most countries to set up mechanisms to assess and to provide public assurance about the quality of higher education. In Latin America, this process started at the beginning of the 1990; by the end of the decade, Mexico, Costa Rica, Argentina, Colombia and Chile had well consolidated quality assurance processes in place; other countries, notably those adhering to the MERCOSUR free trade agreement, were involved in a regional quality assurance (QA) mechanism which not only set up common standards for specific programs but also ensured that QA agencies operating in the region followed specific guidelines. In 2003, QA agencies in Latin America joined forces with Spain, and established RIACES, the Iberoamerican Network for QA in the region.

These efforts have meant significant investments, both in time and financial resources, for governments and higher education institutions. However, even though most stakeholders would agree that QA has proved beneficial for higher education, no systematic study has been made on the impact of this activity on the actual operation of universities in the region.

In 2008, the Interuniversity Center for Development, CINDA<sup>1</sup>, with the support of the European Union under its ALFA Program, implemented a project focused on the effectiveness and relevance of quality assurance mechanisms in Latin America from the point of view of institutional quality, in order to provide national and institutional leaders with information leading to policy decisions.

The first stage of the project was dedicated to the development of a frame of reference, which focused on an operational definition of quality, and on the dimensions where the impact of QA

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<sup>1</sup> CINDA is a network of prestigious universities in Latin America and Europe, with forty years of experience in developing and implementing joint projects on institutional management and higher education policies. See [www.cinda.cl](http://www.cinda.cl)

process would be measured. The second stage involved methodological development. The first thing that was evident to all participants was the impossibility to isolate the impact of QA processes on actual university operation. Therefore, a decision was made to focus on the perception of significant stakeholders, and to report on any changes that had happened after QA processes had been in place for a previously specified number of years. In a way, the study would be a set of case studies, with a common framework. This made it necessary to be very selective in terms of cases to be studied, and in the selection of respondents.

In the first place, it was decided to focus on those countries where QA processes were in place for at least five years, to select as units of analysis universities that had been involved in these processes for at least that period of time, and to focus on a wide range of respondents, both at the national and institutional levels.

A pilot study was carried out in Chile and Colombia, which led to several methodological adjustments. The results of the pilot suggested that the study should focus on two levels: national, or system level, and institutional level; instruments were adjusted in accordance to the results obtained, and the definition of respondents was improved, as follows:

At the national level, information would be sought from the leading authority on higher education; the head of the national quality assurance agency, and representatives from professional associations<sup>2</sup>.

At the institutional level, a wider range of institutional leaders was involved, including the leading academic authority (academic vice-rector), planning, deans and heads of department.

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<sup>2</sup> The pilot included employers. However, the information they provided was not significant, and it was decided to focus on other stakeholders, thus excluding them from the final study.

Academic staff, students and graduates from programs that had been involved in QA processes were also included. The instruments used were interviews, focus groups and questionnaires, as can be seen in the following table:

Stakeholders	Instrument	Sample size
Governmental authority	Interview	1 (national)
Leader of QA agency	Interview	1 (national)
Representatives professional associations	Interview	4-5 per country
Institutional leaders	Interview	4 per institution
Head of institutional QA	Interview	1 per institution
Academic staff	Focus group	2 focus groups per university 10-15 persons each
Students	Questionnaire	100 per university
Graduates	Questionnaire on line	50 per university

Seven countries were included in the study: Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Spain and Portugal. In each country, four universities were selected (six in the case of Mexico), taking care to have public and private universities, as well as some located in the metropolitan areas and in the regions.

## FRAME OF REFERENCE

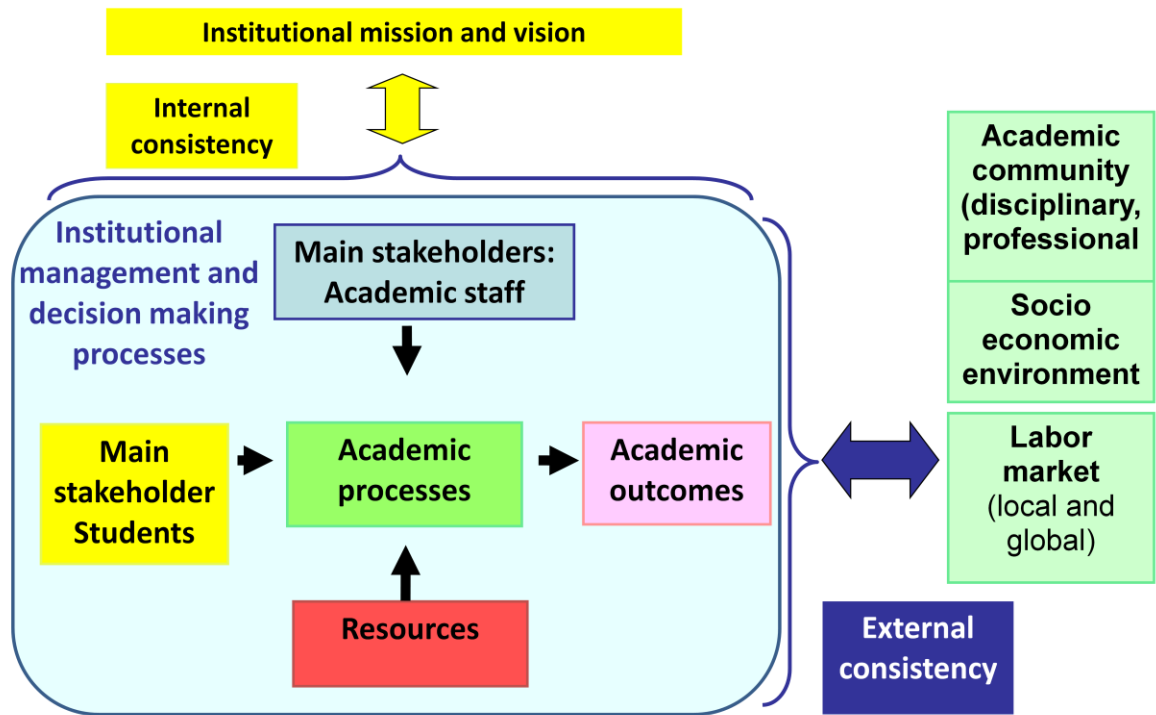
The frame of reference was built taking into account information gathered from international studies (which, unfortunately, were quite few), and the experience of the partners in the project. Based on a discussion of current definitions of quality and a characterization of the different purposes of QA processes, a basic model for the analysis of institutional operations was developed<sup>3</sup>.

As a result, it was agreed that quality, within the framework of the project, would be understood as a combination of external and internal consistency. External consistency, also conceived as relevance, meant the capacity of an institution to respond effectively to a set of external requirements or demands (from the disciplinary, academic or professional fields; social needs; norms and regulations). Internal consistency meant the capacity of an institution to translate its response following its guiding principles and the priorities set up in its mission statement. Thus, quality followed a ‘fitness for purpose’ approach, with external consistency providing the necessary ‘fitness of purpose’ component.

This can be represented in the following diagram:

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the frame of reference, or for more information on the project, see [www.cinda.cl](http://www.cinda.cl). The information provided there is in Spanish, but questions may be addressed to [mjlemaitre@cinda.cl](mailto:mjlemaitre@cinda.cl).



(Adapted from J.R.Toro)

On the basis of this definition, and following extensive consultation with the partners in the project, the project identified three dimensions for assessing the impact of QA, and a series of aspects in each of them:

1. Impact at the HE system level
  - Institutionalization of QA
  - Information systems for higher education
  - Internationalization
  - Role of the Government in QA
  - Articulation mechanisms for improved mobility
  - Public awareness about quality in HE

## 2. Institutional management

- Institutionalization of QA mechanisms within HEI
- Development of internal information systems
- Management, governance and administration
- Management of teaching
- Management of academic staff
- Administrative and financial management
- Participation of external stakeholders

## 3. Teaching practices

- Definition of expected learning outcomes/study plans/curricular development
- Information on student progress
- Assessment of learning
- Teaching strategies

## **MAIN FINDINGS**

The findings are organized following the identified dimensions; general opinions are registered, with special mention of any significant differences, either among countries, respondents or type of institution.

Impact at the HE system level

*Institutionalization of QA.* All countries had operating national quality assurance agencies, with clear standards and procedures, which are deemed to be reliable and effective (outstanding in the case of Colombia and Argentina). Most of the respondents had a good understanding of the processes and mechanisms involved; they considered that QA processes had made a significant contribution to a more systematic approach to quality, the identification of strengths and weaknesses in the system and provided a general overview of higher education. However, there was strong criticism to the operation of private agencies (which are authorized in Mexico and Chile), mainly because of poor consistency in the application of criteria, the use of indicators and the accreditation decisions. Other critical comments related to the work of peer reviewers and to the accurate and timely dissemination of accreditation results.

*Information systems for higher education.* Information systems address three different types of users: Government officials or policy makers, higher education institutions and the general public. There is a generalized opinion that information systems have improved substantially, with better data being made available and thus making it easier to support policy decisions both at the national and the institutional levels. However, at the level of public information, respondents in most countries (with the exception of Chile), consider it is still difficult for the public to find it, and to understand its meaning; at the same time, the fact that information can be used by the competition raises doubts about its reliability.

*Internationalization* included issues of mobility of students and staff and mutual recognition of studies or qualifications. This is one of the areas where least impact was reported. There is no perceived link between QA and mutual recognition, and bilateral agreements, when they exist,

are widely unknown. The two European countries included in the study highlight the role of mobility as a significant influence behind quality assurance, but do not recognize its impact in improving mobility either of students or professionals.

*Role of the Government in QA.* All countries state that QA processes began as a result of public decisions and link participation of HEIs in QA to the existence of incentives (such as special access to funding for students or for institutional development, hiring policies, or other similar mechanisms). The establishment of a regulatory framework is seen as a responsibility of the Government, and most countries consider that the current regulations related to QA are adequate and that they contribute to institutional improvement.

*Articulation mechanisms for improved mobility.* Articulation, understood as the elimination of barriers for intra and interinstitutional mobility, the existence of mechanisms to recognize prior learning or an increased flexibility in the curriculum, is reported as a necessary development, still in its very first stages in all countries. Any initiatives in this respect are seen as the result of decisions made by specific institutions, with no relationship to QA with the exception of Colombian and Mexican respondents, who reported that, due to requirements emerging from program accreditation, curricula had become more flexible, thus facilitating some measure of articulation.

*Public awareness about quality in higher education.* There is a general agreement that there is an increased concern about quality, probably as a result of increased access to higher education and to the diversification of its provision. There is concern about the type and degree of

information reaching the public, and a feeling that although QA processes have led to an increased awareness of the need to address quality issues explicitly within higher education institutions, no clear information about quality has been provided to prospective students, their families or employers.

### Institutional management

*Institutionalization of QA mechanisms within HEI.* All countries report the establishment of units to support quality assurance within HEIs, mostly through the hiring of technical staff to provide necessary data and to support periodic assessment processes and the organization of dissemination and capacity building activities. In general, there is a positive perception of the institutional support to QA, which is stronger in the intermediate levels (deans, heads of department). Most respondents consider that there is clear link between participation in accreditation processes and the above mentioned institutionalization mechanisms, and report that QA can be seen in improved curricula and study plans, increase academic staff with terminal degrees and improved facilities.

At the same time, they complain about an increased bureaucratic load of work as a result of the need to engage in mostly formal processes linked to QA.

*Development of internal information systems.* This is one of the areas where stronger impact of QA is perceived. All countries and all HEIs report significant advances in the quality, availability, coverage and timeliness of information for institutional and academic management,

with Costa Rica, Colombia and Chile leading the positive opinions. This is more strongly emphasized by Vice-rectors, Directors of Planning and Deans; academic staff report changes but do not always perceive their usefulness.

There are differences in perception between public and private institutions, with some criticism to the lack of participation in decision making in private universities.

*Management, governance and administration.* Several countries reported favourable changes, with Costa Rica and Colombian institutions leading the way. The main changes attributed to QA have to do with a clearer specification of institutional purposes, dissemination of its main aspects, follow up on the achievement of goals and making necessary adjustments. There is also a stronger link between assessment and improvement actions and their consideration in institutional planning. As could be expected, institutional leaders are the ones to have a clearer view of these relationships, and they report professionalizing managerial processes as well as improved protocols for decision making.

The link between improved governance and management and QA processes is more clearly perceived in Costa Rica, Colombia and Chile; the other countries report similar changes, but they do not associate them with QA.

*Management of teaching.* Deans and heads of department report significant improvements in the management of the teaching function. These are mostly seen in an improvement of teaching

related services, attention to students needs, teacher coordination and improvement in the provision and use of teaching and learning resources.

Academic staff also highlight that there is a clearer recognition of teaching as an institutional priority. Curricular changes are also seen as a consequence of participation in QA processes, mainly in Colombia, Costa Rica and Chile. They are less evident in Argentina and Mexico and not significant in Spain and Portugal (where the requirements for alignment with the Bologna agreement has been the real trigger for these changes).

*Management of academic staff.* Most respondents reported that QA processes had had an effect on hiring practices and criteria, by strengthening the requirements for academic qualifications and, in some degree, for pedagogic training; academic staff report an increasing recognition of teaching practices in their assessment, but no impact is perceived on salary levels.

There are interesting differences among countries in this aspect: Respondents in Spain, Portugal and Mexico recognize changes, but consider that they are mostly a consequence of other policy mechanisms; Colombia, Costa Rica and Chile state that QA criteria, which focus on the number, qualifications and management strategies of the academic staff, have had a strong impact in the way in which higher education institutions have reacted.

Argentina is the only country which reports a strong impact on the level of involvement of academic staff in research activities and in the number of publications; this is clearly a result of

criteria that demand that all programs must show a significant level of research activity to be accredited.

These results are mostly perceived by deans, heads of department and teachers. University leaders, who also recognize that they have taken place, tend not to consider them a direct result of QA.

*Administrative and financial management.* The focus of responses was on financial management. They highlight improved planning practices and report increased efficiency and effectiveness. However, responses again vary by country: Colombia and Costa Rica consider that QA processes (and mainly the self assessment exercises) have led to improvement plans, which then feed into administrative and financial priorities. In Mexico, Portugal and Spain there is a clear recognition of improved efficiency, without attributing it to quality assurance. In Chile and Argentina, opinions are mixed: some institutions consider that there is strong impact, mostly in terms of improved planning, performance agreements, increased administrative organization) but this is not the case in all of them.

At the same time, there is a complaint about quality assurance imposing an increased bureaucratic approach and demanding much administrative work, mainly from the teaching staff.

*Participation of external stakeholders.* The study focused on their role in different levels of decision making within HEIs. Responses were scarce, and quite varied; some respondents mentioned that employers, professional associations or graduates responded to questionnaires

during internal or external assessment, or participated in the definition of quality criteria. Others mentioned that they participated in curricular committees or other similar bodies, where they provide an external view on the curriculum, but did not link these instances to quality assurance.

## Teaching practices

*Definition of expected learning outcomes/study plans/curricular development.* All respondents recognize that the definition of expected learning outcomes, as well as that of curricula and study plans have been adjusted taking into account the views of graduates and employers, and they highlight the need to take into account market requirements.

Changes in expected learning outcomes are emphasized by Colombia, Costa Rica and Chile; Chile and Mexico also refer to changes leading to competency based curricula. Portugal and Spain, on the other hand, recognize significant curricular changes, with Bologna being the main reason for them.

Vice-rectors and Deans minimize the role of QA in these adjustments, stating that curricula are the subject of permanent revisions. Heads of Department and teachers, however, clearly link these changes to accreditation procedures, through the requirements of quality criteria, the implementation of self assessment practices and the implementation of improvement plans resulting from these exercises. Students perceive satisfactory improvements in this respect.

Of course, changes and adjustments in curricula and study plans cannot be attributed solely to QA processes. The interesting result here is that QA has provided a strong incentive to these adjustments, with an added sense of urgency.

*Information on student progress.* This is one of the main areas of concern for all institutional respondents, and they report that the figures on student progress, pass/fail rates, retention, time to completion, have become visible and relevant as a consequence of accreditation. At the same time, they also emphasize that actions to improve these figures are the responsibility and the work of universities, not of quality assurance agencies.

It is interesting to mention that the discussion in this respect focused mainly on the need to improve the available information on attrition: numbers, students at risk, causes, and actions to be taken. University leaders and staff recognize that some actions have been taken, but that their impact is still unknown; there is no valid and reliable information, and therefore, this is an area where improvement is badly needed.

Several types of actions were mentioned: mentoring programs, improved curricular flexibility, smaller classes, counseling for students, scholarships and financial support, improved teaching materials, foundation courses, specialized teachers for some types of study, follow up and early monitoring among them.

Students have strong opinions in this respect. The percentage of students reporting that there has been improvement in institutional support to students with academic problems is low in Chile,

Portugal and Spain with less than 30%; medium in Argentina (55.8%) and high in the other countries (ranging from 68.5% in Mexico to 75% in Costa Rica).

*Assessment of learning.* This is recognized as a key aspect for the improvement of teaching. At the same time, most respondents state that only recently this has been addressed from an institutional perspective. Before, most of the initiatives came from individual teachers, with little evidence of actual improvement.

Heads of Department and teachers emphasize that currently a strong preoccupation with this issue is apparent, although not exclusively linked to QA. Again, Colombia, Costa Rica and Chile are the countries where this link is most evident; the other countries report that there is a link, but much weaker. Students recognize that there are improvements in this area.

*Teaching strategies.* This is considered an important factor from the point of view of quality assurance, and in general, has received significant consideration from the universities. Deans, heads of department and teachers report important changes, both as a result of institutional initiatives and the work of individual teachers.

Reports deal with a wide range of strategies, some dealing with very basic matters (such as improved reading lists and the provision of needed reading materials; increased provision of teaching and learning resources; better allocation of facilities). Others address teaching innovations, such as the introduction of ICT to teaching, new teaching methodologies, practical

work. Quality assurance is seen as having a direct link with the first kind of improvements, and having promoted the second type.

In public universities, which are larger and more complex, these changes are seen mostly as the result of the initiative of individual teachers; in private universities, they are promoted by a central administration.

Students recognize some improvements in this respect, although they consider them still insufficient.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study was organized based on the assumption that if there were significant differences, these would be associated mainly to the basic features of the national QA systems; the different roles actors played within the system; the private / public institutional division.

The results showed that indeed, there are important differences linked to the features of the QA system, but the two main factors are (1) the degree to which quality assurance is easily identified with a centralized agency, and (2) the focus on program accreditation. In the first case, it seems essential to higher education institutions to be able unambiguously to identify who is responsible for QA. In countries such as Mexico, where there are many different agencies and levels of QA, their impact is much less clear than in countries such as Colombia, or Argentina, where there is a strong national agency. Decentralization, understood as the possibility for multiple agencies offering accreditation services (Mexico, Chile) is strongly criticized. In the case of program accreditation, all the countries included in the study had at least some instances of program

accreditation, in different models. However, the strongest impact is seen in those countries where the focus is on programs leading to professional degrees, and where academic staff and students are involved both in self assessment and external reviews.

The role each respondent played made a very important difference in the way in which the impact of QA is perceived. National authorities are relatively uninformed, which is not surprising in a region where the autonomy of higher education institutions is almost an article of faith. However, it is interesting to note that in countries such as Colombia and Argentina, and recently also in Chile, governmental officials are taking an increasing interest in the definition of QA standards and procedures, or in the regulation of QA agencies.

At the institutional level, representatives from the central administration (vice-rectors) recognize changes in management practices, but they tend to link them to their own managerial priorities and decisions, and not to external factors such as QA or national policy.

The most interesting comments come from mid level authorities, that is, Deans, and to a lesser degree, Heads of Department. They are in a position to see and understand institutional priorities and policies, and at the same time, to have a thorough knowledge of what is happening at the program and department levels. They see a strong influence of QA both in managerial practices and in the teaching and learning processes, and can also identify areas where QA has had a negative impact.

Academic staff and students have a more limited view, but they are the strongest supporters of QA in terms of promoting important changes in staffing, the provision of learning resources, curriculum and teaching practices. Academic staff are also those complaining more strongly about increased bureaucratization and administrative workload.

External stakeholders have an ambiguous role. They are considered important by most academics, but there are no concrete and systematic instances for ensuring their participation or contribution. They report to be interested in the quality of teaching, but there is no evidence of any significant efforts to access relevant information, or to take a more active role either in the development of quality standards or in external reviews.

There was no evidence that the distinction between private and public institutions made a significant or consistent difference.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The first recommendation that comes up is the importance to keep up and strengthen program accreditation. Most of the positive consequences identified in the study are linked to processes happening at the program level, especially when the discussion about quality involves academic staff and students; this approach makes changes more manageable, and in any case, much more visible. While an institutional focus is important, its impact is clearly lower, or at least, much harder to recognize.

A second recommendation refers to the need to improve and redesign information systems, to take into account the needs and concerns of a wider range of users, including potential and actual students, or employers. Most of the information provided is designed to serve decision makers, researchers, or other specialized groups, and ends up being illegible to non specialists. One of the most important roles of QA is to provide information about the degree to which a program or an institution meets quality standards. If this information is not available, or being available, is not easily understood by users, then it could just as well not exist.

It seems also important to strengthen the capacity of national leaders, or governmental officials, to make use of the information obtained through QA to revise and improve higher education policies. There is little understanding that QA is a policy instrument, and that in order to be effective, it must be aligned with other instruments, in such a way that anticipated and unanticipated interactions are taken into consideration in the revision of higher education policy decisions.

At the institutional level, it seems essential to work on the promotion of quality management, and to work with institutional leaders to link quality assurance processes with their own managerial decisions. The lack of perceived links between the results of self assessment and external reviews (at the institutional and program level) by Vice-rectors or Directors of Planning generates concern about the efficiency and effectiveness of institutional management, and of the difficulties to integrate these different processes with a view to increased quality. Institutions should also pay attention to quality assurance units, and the way in which they carry out their

work. While they can provide important support, they also tend to impose excessive formal requirements for self assessment, thus turning it into a heavy burden for many academic staff.

Quality assurance agencies need to revise and improve their mechanisms for selecting, appointing and training peer reviewers, as well as determining clear guidelines for their work which is one of the main areas of concern for programs and institutions. The coexistence of national and private agencies must also be carefully evaluated, in order to set up clear guidelines and requirements, and ensure the consistency in their decisions, and the rigorous application of sound standards and procedures.

There are many other issues that should be addressed: the need to find means to involve external stakeholders and to get their interest in promoting and enhancing quality; the need for QA agencies to revise frequently their criteria and procedures, and involve internal and external stakeholders in this work; the links between QA and mutual recognition of qualifications, mobility and other forms of internationalization; the ways in which QA can contribute to intra and inter-institutional articulation.

Quality assurance plays a significant role in all the countries analyzed. Everybody recognizes its value, and that it has had important consequences for the life and actions within higher education institutions. We hope that this study will contribute to make it not only an activity addressed at the external assurance of quality, but rather a shared responsibility whose goal is effectively to improve the quality of higher education.

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