Toward a Transnational Framework:
Aligning Internal and External Quality Assurance Processes

William M. Plater
Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), United States
(wplater@wascsenior.org)

Abstract

This article explores the tensions between internal and external quality assurance processes, making a case for the preeminence of internal actions to ensure the capacity of institutions to respond quickly and effectively to the rapidly evolving global conditions affecting all of higher education. As the forms and means of formal and informal learning evolve more rapidly than quality assurance and accrediting bodies can adapt, institutions themselves will have to take the steps necessary to ensure that students are actually learning at levels represented by a new array of credentials and to offer credible evidence to employers and others that the credentials are indeed accurate reflections of competence. There is a place for quality assurance bodies, but these agencies will find it in their best interest to operate in the areas where they can offer the greatest societal value by articulating the standards that define integrity and quality. Both institutions and quality assurance bodies alike must join forces to recognize that expectations for what actually constitutes quality, competence, and integrity transcend national borders, cultural differences, the ages, occupations or locations of learners, and outmoded notions of prestige. It is a new era where bold ideas and strong ideals can reshape our understanding of what it means to learn throughout life at demonstrable levels of quality and competence.

KEYWORDS: International higher education, internal and external quality assurance, accreditation, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)

Nations around the world have become increasingly concerned about quality in higher education—in their own countries and in competitor nations. Concern has grown to alarm as degrees have not always led to meaningful jobs or careers because graduates are not actually prepared for work in a globalized economy. This is a concern that already transcends national boundaries, and at this very moment it is laying the foundation for a new era of global interdependence as corporations, nonprofits, and, indeed, whole nations compete for the world's best talent. How successfully we all navigate this new era depends largely on how well we prepare our graduates for their responsibilities—as citizens as well as workers--in a rapidly changing world.

While the territory of our concern is worldwide and our perspective must always be global, success will be created one institution at a time, one partnership at a time. It is this belief that has led WASC to prepare for a future we must share by thinking about how best to serve its institutional members by engaging other nations and regions in a collaborative approach to quality assurance.

WASC is the acronym for the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, and it refers more specifically to the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities—the federally recognized accrediting body for baccalaureate level and higher institutions in California, Hawaii, and the US Pacific territories. WASC is one of six such bodies in the US that accredit whole institutions instead of specific programs.

WASC is a voluntary association of members committed to quality assurance. Like other US regional accreditors, WASC also has a cudgel because any institution in its government-defined region that wishes to qualify for federal funding for financial aid must be accredited exclusively by WASC. So, the concept of "voluntary" is a little misleading. But what is not misleading is the commitment to quality and to a consensus among WASC institutions around how they know what actually comprises quality.

Thanks to a federal mandate, regional associations like WASC must undergo a recertification approximately every ten years. This is a period of introspection by the WASC staff and its Commissioners, but it is also a time for seeking the advice and guidance of member institutions. Late in 2012, WASC is in the final stages of redesigning its overall accreditation process and its expectations—actually, its requirements—for those who seek or wish to retain our accreditation.

The new WASC process, effective in July 2013, is based on three guiding principles: (1) It puts *student learning* at the center of accreditation; (2) it respects *institutional autonomy*; and (3) it responds to the *public interest* (http://wascsenior.org/redesign). Note the emphasis on institutional autonomy.

This is the conceptual point I wish to address most specifically because it is WASC's belief that quality, finally, rests with the commitment, the will, the integrity, and the *actions* of individual institutions. Yes, organizations like WASC and its US--as well as international--counterparts must play a role by articulating principles and expectations, but no amount of external control or regulation can ever replace the self-regulation that actually guides each institution. The value of a voluntary association is that its members *elect* to join with others who share certain values and certain standards and who collectively reflect what is in the public interest by ensuring that graduates from the programs of accredited colleges and universities actually have attained the levels of learning they claim by titles and certifications.

There is a long-standing tension between institutional autonomy, on the one hand, and the regulatory controls and indirect leverage exerted by governments and their intermediaries, on the other. As the value of education to economic development and national policy become more apparent, at least in the US, the familiar tension has given way to fears about standardization and thresholds of mediocrity that fail to ensure quality. There are also legitimate concerns about the direct and indirect costs of needless, but imposed, compliance

requirements. And now there are new worries about standards and quality across national borders.

Internal Versus External Quality Assurance

The tension to which I have alluded is familiar to anyone responsible for the management of an institution, and I need not elaborate on it except to say that we have incentives to take increasingly concrete and clear steps to *differentiate* the roles of internal and external actors and to *coordinate* their work so as to eliminate duplication and reduce tension. The WASC redesign has sought to do just this.

Earlier this year, the American Council on Education issued a report asserting the same thing. *Assuring Academic Quality in the 21st Century: Self-Regulation in a New Era* (American Council on Education [ACE], 2012) is a blueprint for reconciling internal and external quality assurance efforts, legitimizing both, and predicting the rise of even greater external regulation if we do not reconcile. The report claims "[m]any of the challenges identified will require significant and sustained collaboration between institutions of higher education and regional accreditors. Reforms will be meaningful and durable only if they have the full buy-in of the multiple actors needed to make them effective" (ACE, 2012, p. 27-28). More to the point, the report says, "that work must be carried out jointly by campus administrators and faculty working with accreditors"(2012, p.16-17).

The value of such a report to other nations may be tenuous, but the basic point is not. We fail to reconcile the tensions between internal and external quality assurance at our peril.

There is good reason for institutions to act voluntarily as willing partners apart from the real or implied threat of government intervention. For the vast majority of colleges and universities, educational purpose prescribes a level of quality consistent with mission, balancing such considerations as access with prestige, real capacity with scale. Put bluntly, external quality processes invariably define a floor or threshold that must be met. Internal quality processes on the other hand can—and typically do—reflect higher goals and standards of accountability—*as long as someone outside is watching.*

There are important and pragmatic reasons for internal quality measures as the complement to external measures and forces. These may be as simple as the bragging rights that come with rankings and prestige or in various forms of jockeying for position in competition with others for students, grant funding, and charitable donations. But, more likely, they are grounded in the realization that the best defense against greater external control is a good offense—by asserting and then *proving* that the institution itself is taking all necessary steps to define, to assess, and to report quality through various results: Degree completion, employment of graduates, effectiveness of alumni in fulfilling civic responsibilities, research funding, and the like.

Pragmatism also recognizes the value of coordination to increase efficiency and reduce the several kinds of cost that come with duplication, needless redundancy, and useless tasks. This coordination requires a dialog about what is being measured, how, and for what purpose before the assessments begin. Two of the major complaints of institutions in the US are that

they are asked for the same essential information in multiple formats, and that they are asked to provide information that has no actual bearing on determining whether an institution has attained the levels of quality called for by its mission.

It is here that associations like WASC can offer real leadership in defining what the elements of quality are by setting forth clear procedures for documenting that a threshold—a *high* threshold—has been met. If we are to serve our students as well as our member institutions, then quality assurance associations need increasingly to come together across national lines to agree on what elements comprise quality and what measures or standards are acceptable.

We have to develop a transnational understanding of quality that respects national, cultural, linguistic, even religious differences, while at the same time building a framework that we can all share because our graduates will live, work, practice, continue to learn, and inherit conditions that are regional if not global—climate, health, energy, water, food, personal safety, human rights, literacy—all of these issues and dozens more depend on leaders and citizens who appreciate how much they share with others and who are prepared to act as well as re-act across national borders. But there is a risk. Standards, criteria, frameworks, good ideas—all have a tendency to rigidify, to lose the dynamism that created them and the flexibility they were intended to preserve.

There is a familiar saying that we measure what we value, and we become what we measure. We need to be very careful about how we conceive of quality in the global context. If we begin measuring and celebrating the wrong things (or good things for wrong reasons) whether as institutions or national agencies, we may find that we have inversely perverted the very purpose of quality assurance by creating a rigid, ossified global system based on rankings and league tables that divide opportunities by education for the elite and by education for the masses.

This very topic was the subject of a recent meeting organized by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OEDC]. One of the majors actors on the global stage of higher education, John Sexton (President of New York University), presented a view that a careless acceptance of inadequate proxy measures of quality, such as those represented in league tables, could create a global caste system of colleges based on specious measures that are really only ways of justifying elitism and perpetuating prestige instead of performance (Lederman, 2012, para. 10). Because of the global belief in the value of education for personal as well as national gain with the concomitant massification we are seeing worldwide, such rankings could have serious and permanent unintended consequences—especially for new types of institutions innovating to meet demand, including private, online, and for-profit colleges.

It could happen more quickly than anyone might notice, until we wake up--already locked into the caste system John Sexton fears. I believe it is the responsibility of individual institutions—working with their peers within associations such as WASC—to be the arbiters of quality and the protectors of diversity—of mission, of means, and of students served.

Moreover, in our uncertain but shared future, the only reliable guidepost to what is going to happen is that the next decade will be very different from the past due to massive global

changes. Planning based on extrapolation will no longer work, and many of the easy and familiar terms used to claim quality may no longer be sufficient.

A widely circulating YouTube video asks rhetorically but pointedly how institutions and quality assurance practices can be effective in the future when "[w]e are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist… using technologies that haven't been invented… in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet" (Fisch, McLeod, & Brenman, 2008). Quality assurance actions are necessarily retrospective—examining data about what has happened in the past--but their purpose is prospective—anticipating a future we cannot yet assess.

I think the key to preparing for the future is through institutions' own internal quality processes, within a framework we jointly create in our associations.

In the context of our current awareness of the tension between internal and external quality controls, the WASC reform might seem obvious and self-evident, but let me assure you that it is a major departure for a US regional accredited.

What WASC is doing now will impact all of the other regional accreditors for years to come, especially in a period of dramatic change with regard to the diversification of types of institutions, the growth of online education, and the new credentials being offered as evidence of learning by unaccredited entities. Rather than reject innovations and unfamiliar forms of learning, WASC is preparing itself to deal with the unexpected while preserving an unwavering commitment to verifiable quality. It will do so in the full view of the public. As I have already said, WASC is basing its redesign on three principles: student learning, institutional autonomy, and public interest.

With regard to the public interest, WASC is the first US accreditor to make public both the reports of site visit teams and Commission actions with regard to specific institutions. Beginning in June 2012, WASC pulled back the curtain so the public can not only see what the process of accreditation entails but also what the Commission bases its actions on. This simple act of accountability, transparency, and credibility is likely to change the practices of every other US accreditor (see WASC, 2012c).

Implications for Internal Quality Assurance

The new WASC process will call upon institutions to be more deliberate and public about their own objectives for student learning. WASC's role will be to review internal quality processes and to ensure the reliability of evidence by seeking greater agreement on definitions, data integrity, and reporting formats—aligned with both the internal uses universities make of the data as well as external expectations of WASC, the federal government, and—eventually, perhaps--specialized accreditors.

But all is not happy, or not yet. WASC has encountered several instances where the Association would like to build its own new processes on internal quality objectives, but the institutions instead see intrusion, imposition, and inequality. There are at least four such areas that may also be of equal concern among universities and colleges worldwide. These include (1) specifying and defining the core competencies that all (and I emphasize *all*) graduates

should have attained regardless of institutional type or mission; (2) establishing a qualifications framework for degrees—as the European Union has begun doing—that will help students and the public alike understand what a degree means and what graduates know and can do; (3) articulating an institutional duty to contribute to the public good in ways that ensure that college graduates are ready for the responsibilities of citizenship in an era of global interdependence; and (4) composing an adequately qualified academic workforce.

In the interest of time, I will discuss only one of the four contested areas to illustrate the necessity of reconciling internal and external quality measures, on the one hand, and of finding common ground with quality assurance agencies in other nations, on the other.

Composition of the Academic Workforce

Traditionally, data on faculty qualifications were always a key element of accreditation. There is little doubt that institutions retain full responsibility for the hiring of faculty based on their own quality standards for who is best able to provide the education at levels of attainment and quality consistent with mission. And there is little doubt that an external agency has a duty to review the institution's contention about who can serve as faculty at what levels of education. Institutions are expected to verify that the credentials really are what *is* purported, and quality assurance bodies focus on policy and procedures instead of individual qualifications.

What is missing from this seemingly settled division of duties is a recognition that the composition of the academic workforce, at least in the US, has changed dramatically over the last 30 years—to the point that over two-thirds of its members are contingent—serving without the traditional institutional commitment implied by tenure (or a long-term contract), and perhaps serving on a part-time basis at more than one institution.

Institutions have historically claimed that they control quality through internal processes that define hiring, promotion, and administrative review procedures. But now, most of these well-intentioned practices no longer apply to the majority of those responsible for offering instruction. The reality of who comprise the academic workforce raises important questions about quality—and the qualifications of those offering the courses that make up the degrees. While WASC is concerned principally with the conditions it encounters in the US, the same concerns about the quality of the academic workforce vex institutions worldwide.

This situation has become even murkier in the online environment and the multi-national institutional setting. How many faculty with the relevant terminal degree are required in a program or institution to ensure curricular integrity and educational quality—half, a third, one, none? As the demands of massification and access stretch institutional and national resources alike, as technology flattens the range of offerings, and as relevant knowledge is being developed by experts outside the academy, how is quality to be defined and assessed—and by what level?

The head-long rush of many of the world's prestige universities to create Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs, as they are called) has raised the specter of education without accreditation. Tens of thousands of students worldwide enroll in MOOCs offered by Stanford, Harvard, MIT, and others. These courses are offered by some of the most famous researchers, but the offerings exist outside both the internal and external quality assurance measures.

Slowly—but irreversibly—colleges are beginning to accept certificates of attendance as "transferrable" credit. Can this be good for ensuring quality—even if it is commendable for expanding access? It is a change we cannot prevent, so how will we address it?

We have another example of a point of quality where collaboration between internal and external processes must be resolved—especially if we are to avoid a global caste system of higher education based on measures that may have little to do with actual student learning.

Lessons Learned

In its last major reform over a decade ago, WASC did, in fact, make some very large-scale systemic changes focused on institutional capacity and educational effectiveness. The current redesign has taken these early steps to a much higher plane of performance. In brief, WASC's emphasis has shifted from processes to results. Let me cite a few examples that illustrate how an external agency like WASC has been able to align its requirements with internally created, defined, and sustained quality processes that lead to documented attainment.

Rubrics. By offering examples and by disclosing the ways in which it trains peer review teams to assess institutional practices, WASC has helped institutions in creating their own rubrics for defining such matters as general education learning outcomes, assessing student attainment, and documenting and reporting results (e.g., WASC, 2012b). Institutions have adopted and internalized a broad range of rubrics for their own purposes that are nearly universal in their use but perceived to be internally defined and validated. Aggregated at the discipline and institution levels, rubrics offer one easily understood measure of whether or not a college is meeting its educational objectives.

Frameworks. Even as it deals with the perception that it may be compelling institutions to adopt a standardized, reductionist framework for degree qualifications, WASC has already successfully led a majority of institutions to create their own frameworks for general education with remarkably similar and consistent expectations across the range of members, many based on the VALUE template designed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (See, e.g., Association on American Colleges and Universities, n. d.; Lumina Foundation, 2011; & National Careers Service, 2013). This experience will be invaluable as WASC works with institutions toward accepting a qualifications framework. Currently, WASC has sponsored a pilot project for about 30 member institutions to consider the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) developed by the Lumina Foundation (2011) as a way to articulate the meaning of degrees—from associate to master's levels. Such a framework or profile will also facilitate transnational understandings of what graduates are prepared to do.

Benchmarking. This quality measure is based on comparisons, as points of reference or even standards of excellence, in relation to a practice that is to be evaluated or judged—such as graduation rates or even proxy measures such as scholarly productivity. The key to adoption of such a practice is based on a faculty's coming together to agree on what is being measured and what constitutes attainment—then comparing its own past performances with current performance or identifying peer institutions and comparing its performance with others. The main point is that the comparison is between the institution and the *operational standard*—not between the performance of two institutions or even two programs within the same institution.

This distinction is what makes benchmarking an internal quality process and differentiates it from the sometimes flawed application of benchmarking in rankings and league tables (See, e.g., National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2011).

Institutional research. One of the major achievements of the past decade of WASC's approach to accreditation has been the strong enhancement of institutional infrastructure for assessment. In order to be effective with internal quality processes, institutions must have a reliable and increasingly comprehensive capacity for institutional research—self-knowledge. This capacity is actually necessary for an institution to meet WASC's fourth Standard, which requires an institution to create an organization committed to quality assurance, to institutional learning, and to improvement (WASC, 2013). The first criterion under this standard specifically states:

> The institution employs a deliberate set of quality-assurance processes in both academic and non-academic areas, including new curriculum and program approval processes, periodic program review, assessment of student learning, and other forms of ongoing evaluation. These processes include: collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data; tracking learning results over time; using comparative data from external sources; and improving structures, services, processes, curricula, pedagogy, and learning results. (WASC, 2013, p.17)

The development and wise application of institutional data is undoubtedly the strongest buffer against greater external control. As a best practice and a lesson learned, this may be the single most important step a college or university can take to ensure its continued self-regulation and the ability to set its own agenda for continuous improvement. New technologies and analytic functions built into learning management systems hold the promise of establishing global learning communities that simultaneously accommodate massification with individualized, personal, and direct student-to-student interaction anywhere in the world.

Program review. Another pillar of WASC's re-design has been the widespread adoption of program review as a standard of internal quality processes. Program review has long been established at many research universities committed to high quality and continuous improvement, and WASC's role in the past decade has been to routinize the process--making it integral to all institutions. In the coming decade, the focus will be on assessing how institutions have used program review to improve the quality of their work, especially as reflected in student learning outcomes. Although there is no requirement to engage peers from outside the institution, this is now a common practice often augmented by public as well as academic members to help assess the effectiveness of degrees in meeting employer or community expectations. In the globalized marketplace of higher education, the peer review of programs will increasingly engage colleagues from other countries, and that is one reason WASC has opened itself to international accreditation. We hope WASC institutions will increasingly draw on colleagues from other nations for program reviews because of the insights and innovations in thinking that they can bring to WASC processes.

Capstones. Often taking the form of a senior seminar within the major or discipline, a capstone course typically focuses on a project such as a research paper, an experiment, a performance, a creative work, or a community action activity. Its value is in creating a means to assess actual student learning at the graduation level in a manner that integrates learning

across the whole degree, even if it is reflected in the application of expertise within the major or discipline. In instances where institutions are concerned about how they might best demonstrate their graduates' attainments in the core competencies or general education components referenced earlier, the capstone provides one integral means of documenting and assessing performance. This is yet another instance of where an external agency promoted an inherently internal quality process and elevated it concurrently to an external measure with the potential for public reporting (See, e.g., WASC, 2012a).

There are many more such instances where WASC has recognized highly effective *internal* practices of assessing quality and has been able to spread their use by claiming them as its own *external* processes for purposes of public accountability. I am confident that many quality assurance bodies in other nations are already linking internal and external quality measures in the manner I am suggesting for WASC. The examples are many but the point is simple: Internal and external quality measures can be aligned for mutual benefit.

Advice for the Future

It is, of course, presumptuous for me, whose experiences are largely grounded in the United States with our specific cultures, traditions, and laws, to offer advice to institutions in other nations. The growing realization of global interdependence, however, tempts me just enough to enter into such a speculative realm. Here are some thoughts that could be cause for reflection. In each instance, the focus is on what the institution itself can do through its own insistence on quality processes while anticipating a broader application within the global quality assurance community:

Globalization. An obvious beginning point is anticipating the increased mobility of students, the nature of workforces shared within industries across national lines, and the need for our graduates to have global competencies in the face of transnational issues that affect us all. How can college graduates expect to be successful 30 years from now if they do not have the capacity to think, act, and work transnationally? Recent comments from US Department of Education official, Maureen McLaughlin, makes it clear . . . and "official" . . . that US higher education has to globalize (Fischer, 2012, para. 4-5). The rapid transformation of specialized accreditors, such as AACSB, ABET, or NLN, into international bodies offers compelling evidence of the need for a new approach to collaboration on setting graduation requirements for an interdependent world. If we expect doctors to perform surgery at some safe threshold of competence whether they are in Hanoi or Honolulu and engineers to build bridges that are as strong in Santo Domingo as San Diego, should we not also expect citizens in Turkey, Mexico, India, or China as well as the US to make informed decisions on environmental issues, food security, or intellectual property based on comparable levels of intellectual skills, a shared recognition of what is in the public good, broad understandings of how things work, and similar capacities to apply specific knowledge to new contexts?

Transnational quality assurance. The next step is for our institutions and those who regulate them to consider the implications for knowing what quality is--and means--*across* national lines. For decades, many graduate universities have experienced the need to assess quality based on the applications of students presenting undergraduate credentials from other countries. In the US, this assessment has tended to be in one direction as a receiving nation,

and it has given American institutions a false sense of superiority in setting global standards for quality—without realizing that the world has changed around us and that other regions are innovating at faster rates than the US.

In reaction to what is clearly a growing need to interact globally, the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the coordinating body for all US accreditors, established the International Quality Group (CIQG), designed to "establish a venue for accrediting and quality assurance bodies, colleges and universities, businesses, foundations and others to work together to address international quality issues; to advance understanding of international quality assurance; and to provide research and policy direction" (CHEA, 2012). While this new venue may prove effective as a "forum," it is not likely to displace individual institutions in their efforts to shape the direction of quality assurance transnationally—simply because institutions are the direct actors. Nor can an organization like CIQG supplant accreditors like WASC because they, not CHEA, have the ability to interact with institutions in establishing a balance of internal and external quality processes. However, it evidences there is now no doubt about the need to accredit specifically and locally, but to act cooperatively and globally.

Moreover, we now know that high quality teaching and learning can originate anywhere, and be accessible anywhere, thanks to global communication and affordable technologies. This still early realization has led WASC, for example, to begin a limited process of accepting applications for accreditation from universities in other countries for the purpose of learning from them and for the capacity to act as an internationally-aware quality assurance body. WASC is not engaging in one-off accreditation of American-style universities that happen to be in other countries. Instead, WASC is seeking to form a global community of institutions whose shared values and aligned practices will enable members to learn from each other, to practice collaborative innovation, and to set the global benchmark for transnational quality standards. The prospect of doing this at the agency level, as well as the institutional level, is what makes the challenges of the changed higher education ecology inviting as well as daunting.

The concurrent implication for individual institutions is for them to begin to align their own internal quality processes with global standards developed on a regional basis, where a "region" might be either geographic or functional based on where the transnational interactions occur. Individual institutions have the capacity to lead in this development long before regulatory or national quality assurance bodies can because of their ability to act quickly and decisively.

Transnational academic workforces. As suggested by the current issue of ensuring quality among an increasingly contingent faculty or workforce, institutions have a duty to review their own policies and practices with regard to how they assess the preparation and effectiveness of those offering instruction, conducting research, or directing internships and service learning. Increased travel and electronic interactions—along with economic realities-- make it highly likely that those who comprise the academic workforce will be transnational and increasingly role-differentiated. As the McKinsey Global Institute [MGI] indicated in a report, there will be a growing global competition for the best faculty—especially since teachers, unlike many other work forces, can teach from anywhere in the world (2012). In citing a global "education revolution", the report further stated:

> To respond to the skills challenge in global labor markets, the traditional model for providing secondary and tertiary education will need to be transformed in both advanced

and developing economies. . . . The availability of teachers will be a constraint almost everywhere in the world and the capacity of governments to finance higher investments in education will be a limiting factor in many countries. (MGI, 2012, p.27)

If certain assessment or grading activities can be "outsourced" from a college in California to a specially-organized assessment company in India, what are the quality processes that can assure the integrity of the offering at the course and degree levels?

Open leaning and credentialing. Just as WASC has had to learn how to engage with for-profit institutions, online institutions, and multi-regional institutions, it has also begun to anticipate open learning and credentialing. There will always be more innovations and new technologies to continually challenge assumptions and decades of experience and protocols. Several reputable organizations have begun to "bundle" credits from multiple sources in combination with assessing life experiences and assigning credit equivalencies; these organizations contract with accredited institutions who accept the evaluations of the bundler and give credit toward degrees that the accredited institution will award. Should it be possible for the "credit bundler" to seek accreditation and authority to award degrees without itself ever offering instruction?

As I noted earlier, a small but growing number of universities have begun to accept "certifications" for credit from faculty participating in MOOCs, including from faculty whose own institution will not accept the certification even when it is offered by their own faculty. What internal quality processes are at work in such instances, and what do they imply about external quality controls? Around the world, both educators and policy makers echo the conclusion of University of Melboune's Simon Marginson that MOOCs are the "big game changer" in international higher education (Redden, 2012b, para. 4). Marginson further said:

"Students are going to look very seriously at this option in the future," … in that they will contrast the many thousands of dollars they would spend on education in America, Australia or Europe with the opportunity to take online courses for free from some of the world's most prestigious institutions [and individual faculty]. … "I think it's likely that it's going to have an impact on the labor market." … "It would be unrealistic to argue otherwise." (Reddenb, 2012, para. 4-6)

On the other hand, at the 24th Annual European Association for International Education (EAIE) Conference, one of the most serious topics was concern about growing transnational fraud, ranging from merely inflated credentials to outright identify theft and purchased credentials (Redden, 2012a). There is a need; participants seemed to agree, for individual institutions to work not only with various external quality assurance bodies but with each other (Redden, 2012a). In one bold move, Sweden has created a national application system for international students to reduce fraud in credentials being proffered (Redden, 2012a). Other steps to stem the tide of abuse while accepting the inevitability of technological innovation will be apparent in months to come.

If we are moving globally away from attendance records and credit hours toward competence or performance-based measures of educational attainment, how do we set valid and credible assessments of MOOCs—and whatever comes next, because surely there will be something coming soon? Innovation will not stand still, and we have to find credible means of

recognizing MOOCs and their successors. Given their global reach, we can do so only if we act transnationally.

Vertical alignment of learning outcomes. As WASC has come to recognize the value—indeed, perhaps the necessity—of a qualifications framework, it has also come to understand the importance of the vertical alignment of learning outcomes in pre-baccalaureate, baccalaureate, post baccalaureate, and life-long programs. Learning attainment must be measured by something more convincing than how long someone sits in a classroom. There is a flood of reports and analyses criticizing the widely-accepted measures of the past 150 years, and none is more damning than the critique of the "student credit hour." For example, one recent report states:

> If the U.S. is to reclaim its position as the most-educated nation in the world, federal policy needs to shift from paying for and valuing time to paying for and valuing learning. In an era when college degrees are simultaneously becoming more important and more expensive, students and taxpayers can no longer afford to pay for time and little or no evidence of learning. (Laitinen, 2012, p.16)

We have long since understood that students do not all learn at the same rate, that learning is not neatly layered by grade levels or even course levels, and that much of what we have learned by graduation will be obsolete within a decade. Both because individuals learn at different rates and because most learning is cumulative and perpetual, the articulation of learning outcomes required for specified levels of certification makes it possible for learners to progress at their own pace instead of in tidy cohorts. The mass customization of learning is now not only financially feasible but necessary as society recognizes a variety of learning styles and a range of acceptable performance levels. Competence-based assessment will slowly but inevitably replace course and module completion as the basis of certification. There is a growing recognition that the credit hour is no longer an adequate unit for measuring academic attainment.

Reconceiving general education as adaptive education. With all due appreciation for the systems of higher education in many regions of the world that focus on early specialization in disciplinary competence, I strongly believe that the future will reward those universities that prepare their graduates to adapt to changed conditions and to continue to grow and evolve as the forms and facts of knowledge turn upon themselves. The President of University College Dublin, Hugh Brady, speaking at a conference of the European Association for International Education in September 2012 made an astute observation about the need for European universities to move away from professional specializations at the undergraduate level in favor of general education, or what I am increasingly referring to as adaptive education. Brady indicated, "[o]n the one hand we're always going to need ready-to-work graduates, but you also need a large number of students coming out who are deliberately trained to be life-long learners" (Reddenb, 2012, para. 16).

The only pathway through the twists and turns of perpetual and rapid changes in professions and disciplines is a grounding in general education—the core intellectual skills and broad competencies that the new WASC accreditation process is seeking to include in a more visible and transparent manner.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with one final point. I have repeatedly suggested that one of the most important differentiating factors that make internal quality assurance preeminent is the ability of individual institutions to act quickly and nimbly. Institutions, not external quality assurance bodies or governments, have the capacity to shape the future by recognizing and acting on constantly changing conditions. As the YouTube video so clearly implied, the only way to prepare for a future we cannot anticipate is to create--by design, by intention--a capacity to adapt at a rate that allows us to remain relevant.

Many successful people—leaders in and of nations—believe that we are in the midst of a fundamental, systemic shift in the nature of all education worldwide. They point to MOOCs, the rise of research universities outside the US and Europe, the demands of a growing global middle class, and even the Arab Spring. By contrast, others, mostly those who have successfully led colleges and universities through the tumultuous past four decades of astonishing transformation while preserving centuries-old forms, believe that our institutions are able to accommodate these forces through incremental change.

In reality, I believe, it doesn't matter which perspective is right—and in fact both might be accurate predictions in their own ways. Those individual colleges and universities that attend to quality on their own terms, and as they define it, will endure if they can *prove* their claims about what they are preparing their graduates to know and to do. The future really does belong to internal quality control, but only so long as it can be made public and transparent. Institutions will have to document their past attainments—and especially the learning achievements of their graduates—retrospectively, but they will also have to decide how they are changing to meet evolving conditions both locally and globally. To endure is one state of being, to prosper and to lead is another.

The educational leaders of the future, regardless of the country in which they may be located or under whose rules they operate, will be those whose past record of credibility allows them to take the risks needed for innovation and whose alignment with the differentiated responsibilities of external quality agencies will be the guarantee of serving the public interest at home and abroad.

William M. Plater *served as a Commissioner of the Accrediting Commission of Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges from 2006 until January 2012, when he became the Senior Advisor for International Affairs. He is the Executive Vice Chancellor and Dean of the Faculties Emeritus at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), the urban research campus of Indiana University, and Chancellor's Professor Emeritus of Public Affairs, Philanthropy, and English at Indiana University. Plater earned a PhD in English literature at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and has been awarded honorary doctorates by Purdue University and the National Institute for Development Administration of Thailand. Versions of this essay were presented in speeches to national associations of institutions of higher education in Chile and Mexico. The views expressed in this essay are Plater's own and do not represent either Indiana University or WASC.*

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