Concepts and Practices of Quality: Higher Education in Emerging Economies - a case study of the Philippines

Abstract

For the first time, tertiary and lifelong education are included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). SDG Goal 4 aims for: *equal access* to *high quality tertiary* education. While there is a range of research on basic education, there is a need for greater understanding of the development of concepts and practices of quality in the higher education and lifelong learning sectors in emerging economies. This project will rely on primary data collection via structured interviews with Higher Education regulators and interviews of staff in the Philippines. Initial findings will be presented, which are likely to include concepts of quality as: outcomes based, related to institutional missions, centred in the persons of students and staff.

Paper

Higher education and lifelong learning have recently been explicitly included among the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 4) and prioritised by UNESCO, which emphasizes the concept of 'quality' in provision of education. The project builds up knowledge around the efforts to achieve provision of quality education - particularly universal access to quality higher education (HE) & lifelong learning in emerging economies. Enrolment is increasing in many emerging economies, leading to the massification of higher education in some cases and the expansion of the private sector (Altbach, *et al.,* 2009). The countries with the fastest growing tertiary enrolment are: India, China, Brazil, Indonesia, Nigeria, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Turkey and Ethiopia (British Council, 2012). However, low income levels, limited human resources and political interference constitute major obstacles to the development of high quality higher education (Odhiambo, 2011). In global discourses on HE quality, the Global South is therefore frequently represented as 'underdeveloped.' Studies exploring quality of HE in the Global South are often 'diagnostic', enumerating contextual issues and barriers that inhibit the achievement of quality (see for example, Lim, 1999; Idrus, 2003). This contributes to a deficit discourse that positions organisations and institutions from the Global North as sources of advice and expertise (Blanco-Ramirez, 2014), despite a lack of consensus as to whether and how Quality Assurance (QA) measures have enhanced quality in developed countries (e.g. Harvey and Williams, 2010). Yet, while there is a range of research on basic education with regard to the SDGs, there is limited empirical evidence of what concepts and practices of quality in higher education emerge locally in the Global South (Abukari and Corner, 2010).

In many countries, dependence on aid frameworks creates a requirement to accept education as a potentially freely traded service, which facilitates potential entry of various education providers into the sector and often entails implementing quality assurance frameworks. Quality in this respect becomes a political-economic resource

because it can mediate market access and global reputation, to the extent that it is tied to concepts of soft power. Understandings and frameworks of quality may be subject to a range of external and global pressures.

But quality is not simply a political and ideological construct. In higher education, quality is enacted on an individual and an institutional level through 'dynamic reciprocity of global-national-local interactions in policy processes' (Vidovic, 2004). There is a need to understand policy actors on all three levels as involved in an active process of engagement with policy. Quality in higher education depends significantly on teaching quality, which is part of a global policy approach as well as institutional and national frameworks (Hénard and Roseveare, 2012). Understanding academic staff as policy actors (Ashwin, et al., 2015) positions them as agents of quality assurance and enhancement, who may implement national or global concepts of quality, but who may also resist, reinterpret, or strategically comply.

This project will be collecting primary data through interviews with HE regulators, senior management of universities, and academic staff in the Philippines as a case study of an emerging economy with a rapidly expanding HE sector. The HE landscape in the Philippines is diverse, with both public and private, state and local, religious and secular, for-profit and not-for profit institutions. The research will therefore include staff from several institutions from different parts of the sector. The policy landscape responds to national development priorities, different regional emphases, and international policy shifts. The Commission on Higher Education Development (CHED), the government body that oversees HE in the country, envisions "a vibrant ecosystem of Philippine colleges and universities, both public and private, that are committed to shape current and future generations of Filipino professionals as engines of change, sources of innovation, forces of creativity, leaders of enterprise, and transformers of the future" (CHED, 2016, p. 8). International networks on regional levels play a major role: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Higher Education Area (ASEAN-HEA) is being developed to increase HE harmonisation in the region through student and manpower mobility, mutual recognition of qualifications and streamlined QA mechanisms. This has influenced recent reforms in Filipino HE. The paper will present an overview of findings.

Initial conversations and documentary analysis suggest some predicted findings. Firstly, Filipino quality assurance (QA) is outcomes and typology based. Outcomes based QA examines educational outcomes through core graduate competencies (CHED, 2012). Typology-based QA suggests that quality should be assessed with reference to the institutional mission. It is therefore expected that concepts of quality from staff and regulators will reference institutional mission and graduate competencies. Concepts are likely to differ among staff from different institutions. Secondly, initial conversations suggest that some concepts of quality are embodied in individuals. There is great emphasis in the University of the Philippines (the flagship state-sponsored elite institution) on their rigorous admissions procedures: only 1,591 out of approximately 10,000 passed the entrance exam (Rappler, 2016). The quality of the institution is signalled by its selectivity of students. This is potentially in tension with the SDG emphasis on access. Similarly, there is considerable importance placed on licensure examinations for particular professions (e.g. accounting, nursing and civil engineering), and the results of these exams are often used by HEIs in marketing. Thirdly, there is a

silence in policy documents on teaching or academic practices as an indicator of quality. This will be further explored in fieldwork.

The aim of this paper is to identify the concepts and practices of quality, both in terms of quality assurance and enhancement, in the Philippines. We hope to establish whether different stakeholders have different concepts or share in different discourses. These insights will contribute to establishing a more positive narrative in contrast to dominant deficit discourses around higher education quality in emerging economies.

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