

**Assessing Institutional Quality in Higher Education**  
**-Introductory Statement-**  
**Stanford University**  
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**Detlef Müller-Böling**

In our morning session yesterday we discussed the issue of quality in the broader context of ongoing changes in Germany and the U.S. In the afternoon, we then focussed on accreditation and evaluating instructional quality as two important facets of our efforts to assure quality in higher education. With today's topic we will have a closer look at universities and their performance on the institutional level.

After all I mentioned yesterday about the quality debate in German HE, it comes as no surprise that "assessing the institutional quality in higher education" is something quite unusual as yet in Germany's HE sector:

- Accreditation, for instance, as yet is focussed on the program level; there is no accreditation of entire universities, although this may be consistent with the idea of institutional autonomy and the withdrawal of the government from steering the HE sector in a direct and detailed manner. I think that in the future, we will have to discuss the issue of institutional accreditation in greater detail – and the American accreditation experiences of course will be of great importance to us.
- In a similar way, our evaluation efforts are primarily geared toward research and teaching on the department or program level. Evaluation (by the Science Council) of entire institutions primarily takes place *ex ante*, that is, in the planing and designing stage for new universities and polytechnics. After that, institutional evaluation takes place on rare occasions and primarily in times of far-reaching institutional changes.

In recent years, however, there has been a move toward assessing the institutional quality of universities. A number of news magazines engaged in assessment in order to rank universities on a national – sometimes even international, that is, European – scale. Although the **ranking lists** were highly disputed in the academic community, also for methodological reasons, they met the public's interest. In the last analysis, they proved that there is a public need for orientation, for information about the differences that do exist among different universities and programs.

We, that is, the CHE Center for Higher Education Development, took up the idea of assessing and comparing the quality of higher education in our universities. However, we focused on the subject or program level in the form of multi-dimensional rankings that refrained from giving grades for the overall institutional performance. Hence, we cannot say that "university A" is the best, and "university Z" the worst in the nation. There is not such thing as *the* quality of an institution. Rather, universities do have "qualities", in the plural, and they are different with regard to teaching, research,

services etc. – and such differences as well are of different relevance for different stakeholder interests. Assessing institutional quality, thus, requires a multi-dimensional perspective and a differentiated methodological approach.

Assessing institutional quality from the outside and publishing the results in the form of ranking lists is one thing; assessing institutional quality for *internal* (management) purposes is yet another. This is where the idea of institutional **benchmarking** comes in, that is, the idea of looking at selected processes and activities on the institutional level and comparing them with other institutions in order to identify best practice models.

Learning from others together with others by means of a series of self-assessments and in a comparative perspective – this is the idea that stands behind our activities in what we call a “Benchmarking Club” of seven technically oriented German universities.

Again: The over-arching idea is to enhance the institutional performance in selected areas; and the overall perspective is an internal one: the exercises are geared toward improving institutional services and management processes.

Our experiences with benchmarking as a management tool are quite positive so that we will go on in this direction and possibly enlarge our perspective in two ways: by including international partners and by focussing not only on management processes but also on academic issues such as the contents of teaching programs. There seems to be a need to engage in such activities, and it also seems that this is a way not simply of *assessing* institutional quality, but also of improving it.