

## **Book Review of "Assessing Quality in Postsecondary Education: International Perspectives"**

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Volume 49, Number 3, 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066640ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066640ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education

ISSN

2293-6602 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Holmes, J. (2019). Review of [Book Review of "Assessing Quality in Postsecondary Education: International Perspectives"]. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education / Revue canadienne d'enseignement supérieur*, 49(3), 129–131. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066640ar>

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# BOOK REVIEW

## ASSESSING QUALITY IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

REVIEWED BY

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Weingarten, Harvey P., Hicks, Martin, & Kaufman, Amy (Eds.) (2018). *Assessing Quality in Postsecondary Education: International Perspectives*. McGill-Queen's University Press. Pages: 197. Price: 35.96 CAD (paper).

In *Assessing Quality in Postsecondary Education: International Perspectives*, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) presents a collection of essays derived from a two-day workshop held in May, 2017. In this workshop, higher education experts and policy makers from six countries and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) gathered to discuss the measurement of academic quality, student learning, and the educational experience in different contexts. The workshop resulted in this book, which presents numerous insights and perspectives from the participants on how academic quality is conceptualized and operationalized in Canada and abroad. The book is of particular value to research, policy, or government audiences that are interested in postsecondary quality improvement, student outcomes measurement, accountability, institutional performance indicators and the changing landscapes of postsecondary success worldwide.

Overall, the book provides a glimpse into the complex quality measurement systems of various Western postsecondary systems. It is divided into four sections with ten chapters total, plus an introduction and conclusion written by the HEQCO executive leadership. The book includes: Section I: The United States (chapters one - three), Section II: Europe (chapters four - seven),

Section III: Canada (chapters eight and nine), and Section IV: The Future of Quality Measurement: (chapter 10 and conclusion).

Section I speaks to academic quality in the American context. Chapter one provides a glimpse into nine performance indicators and how such tools are used to assess academic quality with the goals of public accountability and higher education improvement in mind. This chapter is a useful starting point, as various terms are defined that may be helpful to a reader as they progress through the book.

Chapter two builds on the concept of performance indicators found in chapter one and explains how higher education accountability is conventionally a static measurement of quality. The authors simultaneously argue that a dynamic measurement of quality, which changes over time can be used to improve higher education more effectively. This chapter explores limitations of performance measurement and further contextualizes academic quality as it is defined within the American postsecondary system.

Chapter three differs and focuses on the measurement of student learning outcomes as an essential component of understanding academic quality. This chapter would have benefited from further elaboration and citation, as the author makes claims that may be seen as un-

supported. For example, the author makes generalized claims regarding faculty lack of interest in third-party assessment of instructional methods, with no support from the literature. Despite this weakness, chapter three provides an overview of standardized student assessment models in an understandable format for readers who may be unfamiliar with these complex tools.

Section II includes four chapters that provide the reader with a glimpse into higher education academic quality initiatives in the European context. Chapter four provides insights into the ambitious and recently implemented UK Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), which can be viewed as a forefront academic quality assessment tool. This chapter is a welcome addition, as it provides a detailed overview of the initiative and various successes, criticisms, and results that the UK government encountered.

Chapter five speaks to quality measures employed in Ireland to assess teaching and learning and student satisfaction. The authors discuss the role that quality measures play in higher education policy and in the allocation of resources to higher education institutions. This chapter includes an overview of the past, present, and future of higher education assessment in Ireland and provides perspective regarding ongoing academic quality framework development. Many thought-provoking questions are presented that suggest a dynamic higher education environment.

Chapter six examines government reform of higher education toward a supervisory governance model. Included is terminology regarding performance contracts between institutions of higher education and government. The authors frame their discussion of performance contracts within the Netherlands' higher education system. This chapter provides needed insight into contemporary aspects of postsecondary accountability, as contracts between institutions and government bodies are becoming more commonplace in various higher education systems.

Chapter seven informs the reader of a conceptual framework, developed by the OECD, designed for benchmarking higher education system performance. The goal of this project is to cover the whole of higher education and to be robust and transparent for various educational stakeholders. As this chapter is informed by a notable intergovernmental organization, perspectives here are useful for readers interested in academic quality measurement from outside the academy and/or individual government organizations.

Section III discusses the measurement and demonstration of quality in order to improve the student experience in Canada. Chapter 8 describes work done by the Council of Ontario Universities' Task Force on Quality Indicators and is written by the chair of said task force. The chapter provides the rationale for a selection of performance indicators that the task force considered, as well as insight into the Strategic Mandate Agreement initiative currently implemented between institutions and the government of Ontario. This explanation is useful for a readership interested in performance contracts and student outcome measurement and the chapter builds on previous concepts presented in the book.

Chapter nine discusses collaborative efforts that the province of Nova Scotia has promoted in order to enhance the student experience while simultaneously attempting to measure said experience with a comprehensive survey. The authors note that it is too early to assess quantitative changes in student academic experience; thus, this chapter sets a foundation for future reports.

Section IV contains chapter ten written by H. Coates, who is an influential authority on many of the topics covered thus far. His chapter argues that the concept and measurement of quality is antiquated, and major new reporting platforms are necessary to prove the value of higher education and to improve investments and outcomes. He provides details of a research project conducted in Australia that defined nine qualities of a successful student experience. For those familiar with the academic quality literature, this chapter may provide work by Coates not yet encountered. If a reader is unfamiliar with said literature, this chapter can serve as a starting point for engaging with the work of an expert in the field.

The conclusion is presented by Weingarten, Hicks and Kaufman of HEQCO. It summarizes four overarching themes from the workshop regarding issues surrounding academic quality. This chapter, as well as the introduction, provides a glimpse into the goals of HEQCO and what the agency values in regards to quality measurement.

As an edited book containing a series of essays, this is a substantial resource for readers who wish to engage with multiple perspectives from the academic quality discourse. By including the viewpoints of experts from six countries and the OECD, the book provides a glimpse into various issues, debates, practices, and theories from different systems of higher education. For a researcher

interested in international higher education academic quality this book is an excellent resource.

For a Canadian audience this book is of particular interest. As a result of a HEQCO initiated workshop, it gives attention to aspects of the Canadian higher education quality landscape, and insight into HEQCO's rationale. For scholars curious about the state of affairs of Ontario's higher education quality and accountability as viewed by HEQCO, *Assessing Quality in Postsecondary Education* serves as a preliminary tool for inquiry into larger HEQCO initiatives.