

Quality Assurance In Higher Education – Where do we go from here?



Dearbhú Cáilíochta
agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann
Quality and
Qualifications Ireland

A close-up, low-angle photograph of a hand holding a dark pen over a document. The hand is wearing a textured, greyish-brown sleeve. The background is a warm, orange-toned blur, suggesting an indoor setting with soft lighting. The document has some faint lines and text visible.

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FOREWORD

In the little over a decade since QQI and the current regulatory framework for quality assurance in tertiary education were established, we have witnessed significant shifts in the landscape of further and higher education provision, in the nature of education and training delivery, and in the development and embeddedness of quality assurance arrangements within providers of education and training.

Within the higher education sector, we are approaching the conclusion of the CINNTE cycle of institutional review of the publicly-regulated higher education institutions, the findings of which generally reflect a mature sector in which quality assurance procedures are well-established and implemented. Within the technological higher education sector, institutions have been designated as awarding bodies in their own right. This brings both greater autonomy and greater responsibility and is a reflection of the demonstration of effective quality assurance measures within this sector over many years. Thirty-six private and independent providers of higher education have now also had their quality assurance procedures approved within the current regulatory framework and will thus also become subject to cyclical institutional review. In addition, QQI will soon establish mechanisms by which eligible providers in this group may apply for delegated authority to make their own awards.

The further education and training sector has undertaken extensive revision and redevelopment of quality assurance arrangements, consistent with QQI's statutory quality assurance guidelines. Within the education and training boards (ETBs), the design, development and implementation of structures, policies and procedures for quality assurance have been a considerable focus and all sixteen ETBs have successfully completed an inaugural review of those arrangements. Around ninety other providers of further education and training have also had their quality assurance procedures approved by QQI and will now also become subject to external quality assurance monitoring and review.

At a system level, a core strand of current government policy is to progress the development of a more unified tertiary education system to achieve greater coherence, complementarity and mobility across further and higher education and training. This is already beginning to impact the design and delivery of programmes and an increasing degree of collaboration between providers in these sectors can be anticipated.

In addition, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Amendment Act 2019 extended the functions of QQI and established a new category of 'listed awarding bodies' that may apply to have their awards included in the National Framework of Qualifications. These organisations will also be subject to QQI's external quality assurance framework.

The tertiary education landscape therefore comprises a diverse and complex constellation of education and training providers, with varying and evolving relationships with QQI as a quality assurance agency and, in many cases, as an awarding body. These providers are located at different points on an evolving continuum of autonomy, development and implementation of systems of quality assurance. As we arrive at the conclusion of major review cycles in both higher education and further education and training, and approach the commencement of a new suite

of functions, it is timely to reflect on our collective approaches to quality assurance and how they may need to evolve so that they remain purposeful, relevant and effective and continue to add value for all of our stakeholders.

The sector is also having to navigate an increasingly rapid rate of change, with technological advances in particular having a profound effect on the delivery of teaching, learning and assessment and placing increasing demands on providers to ensure that programmes, awards and research keep pace with the evolving needs of students, industry and society. This poses new challenges for, and carries new risks to, the quality of tertiary education and obliges us to reflect on whether approaches to quality assurance may need to be reimaged to ensure that our education system remains fully equipped to respond to future challenges and fulfil its crucial role in our society.

To inform those considerations, QQI has commissioned a paper on the Irish quality assurance system from an independent expert. This paper reflects the views and opinions of its author and others who have directly experienced the operation of internal and external quality assurance and the broader quality assurance ecosystem pertaining to Irish tertiary education. It is also informed by observations from a number of international quality assurance experts. We hope that it will stimulate thinking and discussion as QQI contemplates the next chapter of quality assurance in Irish tertiary education.

Dr Pdraig Walsh
CEO, QQI

PREFACE

After a number of institutional quality review cycles, many higher education (HE) institutions and quality agencies in many countries, including Ireland, are reflecting on where the quality assurance (QA) review process is right now, what it has achieved over the past 20+ years and where the process might go in the future. The fact that this is happening in so many different places suggests that this reflection is both timely and important, especially given the financial and staff resources invested in the process, the multiplicity of drivers and their growing demands (both internal and external to the institutions), the increasing financial constraints and continuing need to balance autonomy and accountability in the HE sector. Are things working well and achieving the aims and objectives that underpinned the emergence of QA in the education sector in the first place? If not, does the present QA approach simply need supplementing or is major surgery required? These are important questions not only for HE but also as QA evolves in the further education and training (FET) sector.

Based on a combination of research into the literature and discussions with experts in the QA arena, this report considers the concept of quality in higher education and the QA ecosystem involving the various processes and range of stakeholders. It then explores the benefits and costs of QA, current formal measures and recent developments. New concepts in QA are introduced including an institutional typology and expanding the remit of quality reviews. The final section summarises what we have learnt so far and presents a series of proposals that may contribute to the next phase of development of QA systems in higher education. We must acknowledge that much QA practice has not been documented and therefore cannot be reflected in this report. Whilst the main focus of this report has been on QA in the Irish higher education system, it is set within, and hopefully has relevance to, a wider international context.

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CHAPTER

1.



1. WHAT IS QUALITY IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT AND WHO ARE ITS ARBITERS?

It is generally considered that high-quality educational institutions exist in both the public and private sectors and have been perceived as such by a range of stakeholders from professionals to the general public. Many institutions, however, are considered by these same actors to have recognisable quality deficiencies that would benefit from improvements at various levels. But how do we know for sure that our perceptions are correct?

1.1. DEFINITIONS AND MODELS

Somewhat surprisingly, one of the more significant areas of debate in relation to education in general has been over the definition of quality, yet the definition is seen as key to understanding quality assurance (QA) (Williams and Harvey, 2015). The notion of quality in higher education can possibly be traced back to the introduction of external examining in the UK in the 1820s and in the grading of degrees, even if that was not explicitly recognised at the time. The quality concept as a formal construct initially arose within the manufacturing/industrial sector in relation to quality of products and/or processes. In this context, Garvin (1984) discerned five different approaches to the definition of quality: the transcendental approach; the product-oriented approach; the customer-oriented approach; the manufacturing-oriented approach; and the value-for-money approach. He defined quality as “... the degree of excellence at an acceptable price and the control of variability at an acceptable cost”. Whilst little used in the educational context, this general manufacturing-focused concept has been borrowed and modified.

One difficulty that has arisen in trying to achieve an acceptable definition of quality in education is that the quality concept can be described by four different constituents (Van Kemenade et al., 2008); the *object*, *standards*, *subject* and *values*. Defining the object is of primary importance. The quality of “what”? The question raised by Van Kemenade et al. (2008) is whether we are talking about the quality of the lecture or the lecturer, the syllabus or the curriculum, the organisation of the curriculum or its content, or are we talking about the quality of the students or even the quality of the institution as an educational organisation? Or are we considering the quality of management or examination processes or of institutional facilities? Of course, it could be any one or all of these. Quality also needs some standards against which the object (such as the curriculum content, student level of achievement, competences gained, efficiency of the process etc.) can be judged. What features should be considered and who sets the standards? What persons or organisations are interested in the quality of the object or process – who are the stakeholders? And what are the underlying values: is quality about what is inherently good and worthwhile or about value for money (e.g. Garvin, 1984; Harvey and Green, 1993) or both?

Jarvis (2014) identifies three different challenges that complicate the definition of quality. A first challenge is that ‘quality is in the eye of the beholder’, meaning quality can mean different things to different stakeholders and be subject to a diversity of underlying drivers. This diversity of stakeholders is significant when one takes into account all possible internal and external interested parties, as is the diversity of drivers, both institutional and external to the institution (Figure 1.1). Each of these stakeholders has a different view on quality (e.g. Tam, 2001; Seyfried and Pohlenz, 2018), and different purposes, aims and interests and therefore a different understanding of what quality means. And even then, within a stakeholder group, the concept of quality

might vary depending on the circumstances and past experience of individuals. Many of these stakeholders may well be looking for very different outcomes or seeking to drive institutions in different directions at the same time and there are likely mutual influences on quality between the stakeholders and drivers.

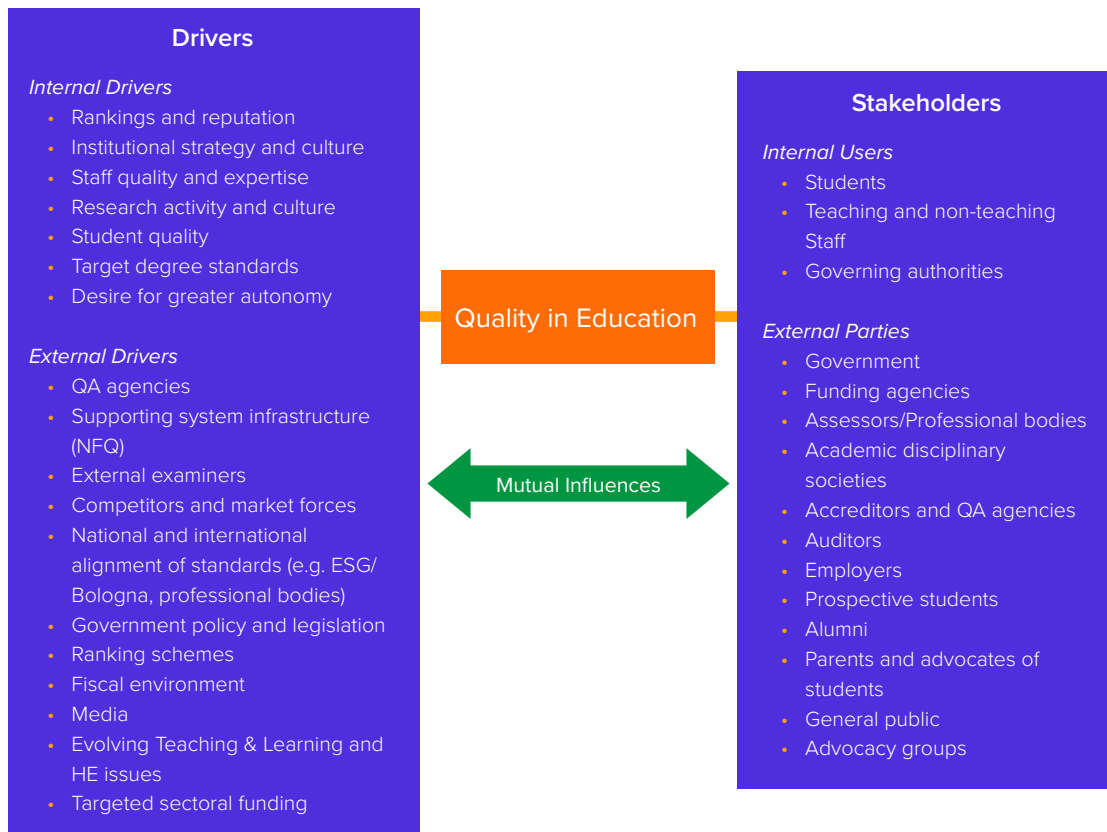


Figure 1.1 This figure illustrates the diversity of internal and external stakeholders and drivers influencing, either directly or indirectly, quality in education and in individual institutions.

For example, internal drivers often seek to enhance an institution’s reputation in the eyes of various external drivers such as funding agencies, prospective students and their parents, employers, prospective international partners and future staff. Some of the external drivers illustrated in Figure 1.1 may seek to ensure or enhance quality and standards of curriculum content, degree awards, facilities or research activities at disciplinary, institutional and sectoral levels. Governments may seek to steer or align institutional activity with various national or even international agendas or policies, which are themselves often driven by fiscal considerations and media and public concerns or trends and emerging fashions. The goals and aspirations of these various drivers are sometimes aligned but more usually are not and sometimes are even in direct conflict. A clear example in the Irish sector is where government, over a number of years, reduced direct funding and subventions per student full time equivalent (FTE) to universities and also constrained staff numbers yet at the same time expanded student numbers¹. This conflicted with the universities’ strategic drive and ability to enhance international reputation and standing, infrastructure quality and to reduce staff-student ratios to support quality teaching and overall research activity. In addition, in Ireland as in many jurisdictions, the desire for autonomy by

1 QQI Report “Quality in an era of diminishing resources” March 2016: <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/Quality%20in%20an%20Era%20of%20Diminishing%20Resources%20Report%20%28FINAL%20March%202016%29.pdf>

institutions (defined by UNESCO as “a degree of self-governance, necessary for effective decision-making by institutes of higher education regarding their academic work standards, management and related activities”²) is often constrained by political and funding body demands and legislative requirements for accountability as well as more centralised oversight and control.

Stakeholders have a significant influence on the perceptions of quality. Students, for example, may choose an institution based on potential career prospects and its reputation among employers or, on the other hand, on the reputation for quality of student life and opportunities for extracurricular activities. Parents would likely be influenced by perceptions of institutional standing (or of their own or their family’s personal experiences) and may also be interested in student safety. Professional bodies, disciplinary societies, employers and QA agencies would likely focus on the quality of teaching and learning and standards achieved by graduates. Governments, funding agencies and perhaps the general public are often concerned about value for money, widening participation and contributions to economic development, particularly in areas deemed to be of key strategic importance, nationally or internationally. Other potential partner institutions and industrial/business organisations at home and abroad might focus on research and academic staff quality and the national and international reputation of the institution or even of the national HE sector as a whole. What is clear however is that different stakeholders, as arbiters of quality, vary greatly in their scope of interest and view of educational quality³.

Some stakeholders, such as the institutions as a whole (particularly management), quality agencies and perhaps government departments charged with oversight of higher education, will take a *macro*-, holistic, view of educational quality. Other stakeholders, such as accreditation bodies and academic schools and departments, will have a narrower scope, *meso*-view, whilst the majority of stakeholders will take a more specialised, narrowly focused, *micro*-view of quality, such as employers, students, parents, research agencies and academic disciplinary bodies, advocacy agencies and groups and perhaps individual academics. This variability will likely affect the scale of influence these various stakeholders have on overall educational quality at both institutional and sectoral levels.

This leads to the question of “Whose quality?” (e.g. Harvey and Green 1993, p.10). Tam (2001) adds further to this dilemma by raising the question of who should determine the purposes of higher education [and hence presumably be most interested in its quality]. Should it be the government [and funding bodies], the students [as ‘customers’] or the employers of the students, the institutional management or governing authority, the academic professionals or society in general? Also, who should resolve conflicting views about the quality of an institution and who should determine the priorities? There is no doubt that the conflicting needs, requirements and aspirations of the multitude of drivers and stakeholders in relation to quality lead to tensions within the educational sector and focus attention in particular on the longstanding questions of autonomy and accountability in higher education to which I will return later.

A second challenge to defining quality, as identified by Jarvis (2014), is that quality itself is a multidimensional concept, thus making a simple definition problematic. Knight and Trowler (2000) and Biggs (2003) tried to rationalise these different conceptions. Type I (and more retrospective) conceptions have maintenance functions and target the achievement of specified targets such as externally imposed standards. Type II conceptions on the other hand are more collegial (and prospective), targeted at trying to improve teaching and learning, enhance teacher performance and disseminate good practice.

2 Cited in Eaton and Uvalic-Tumbic, *University World News* 26th June 2021: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210622133956498>

3 Identified by Elizabeth Noonan, Director of Quality at UCC, during discussions.

The third challenge to achieving a clear definition is that quality is a dynamic concept, reflective of the larger [and ever changing] educational, economic, political, and social landscape – the “quality ecosystem”. This encapsulates the institutions and their processes and resources, the national and international HE sector, the diversity of stakeholders and the internal and external drivers of quality. Indeed, one of the five conceptions of quality by Astin (1980) is the ‘mystical conception’ that reflects the view that quality simply cannot be measured because the activities of higher education are too complex, variable and subtle (Skolnic, 2010). Whilst ideas about the definition of quality have been with us since the late 1980s, the concept and practice of QA in education has arguably not kept up with the rapidly changing HE sector⁴.

The above notwithstanding, the literature is replete with descriptions, models and definitions of quality in higher education. Attempts to define quality have followed two main approaches, one dealing with philosophical concepts, the other focused on tangible phenomena thought to reflect quality which in principle are measurable (Skolnic, 2010). Emerging from the considerable pool of definitions in the literature is the seminal and highly influential paper by Harvey and Green (1993) which is generally considered to be the clearest and most informative conceptual model (Fig. 1.2).



Figure 1.2. A simple model based on Harvey and Green’s (1993) inter-related concepts of quality in education which vary according to their internal or external focus. (Modified from Watty, 2003 and van Damme, 2004).

Five discrete yet interrelated ways of thinking about quality are envisaged: exceptional, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformative, all of which were further developed and defined by Harvey (2006):

4 Comment by Fiona Crozier, Higher Education Consultant (Quality Assurance and International) and formerly of QAA.

- *Quality as exceptional*, i.e. excellent standards of academic achievement, or as Bleiklie (2011) described it, excellence as “an outstanding high level of quality that distinguishes the best universities from the rest”. Quality is achieved if the required standards are surpassed. Quality can also be thought of as distinctive or “high class” and can potentially provide benchmarks against which ‘high’ standards can be evaluated (Harvey, 2006);
- *Quality as perfection (or consistency)*, which focuses on processes and specifications to be met as opposed to inputs and outputs. This notion of quality emphasises reliability and is encapsulated in two interrelated ideas: zero defects and quality culture (Watty, 2003; Harvey, 2006). This view of quality is perhaps of limited value in higher education where perfect results are unlikely to be achieved (Hauptman Komotar, 2020);
- *Quality as fitness for purpose*, which emphasises the achievement of minimum standards and the use of numerical indicators to judge the quality of a product or service in terms of the extent to which its stated purpose – defined as meeting customer specifications or conformity with the provider/institutional mission – is met. This, to all intents and purposes, focuses on measuring inputs against outputs and is more of a functional definition of quality rather than an exceptional one. In theory, the measuring is done by the institution, demonstrating that it fits either externally-prescribed standards (e.g. specified by a regulatory or professional body) or its own objectives (as specified in its values and mission statement for example). Harvey (2006) suggested that this concept also evaluates whether the quality-related intentions of an organisation are adequate and as such it provides a check on fitness for purpose rather than being a definition of quality *per se*;
- *Quality as value for money*, which assesses quality in terms of return on investment or expenditure, concentrating on the relationship between the quality of output (product and services) and the financial costs implied, is often linked to notions of efficiency and effectiveness (Harvey, 2006). This is implicitly related to accountability both to funding agencies as well as students (increasingly seen as customers);
- *Quality as transformation*, which defines quality as a process of qualitative (or potentially quantitative) change from one state to [presumably] a higher-level state with emphasis on the enhancement and empowerment of students as learners/participants, adding value to students through the learning process. This concept of quality can also apply to changes within an institution enabling it to better provide transformative learning or research (Watty, 2003; Harvey, 2006).

A more complex conceptual model has been published by Schindler et al. (2015, Fig. 1.3), resulting from a review of broadly constructed definitions of quality. This model illustrates both central goals and outcomes of quality and the quality indicators that can be used to assess whether the identified goals and outcomes have been achieved. This model centres on stakeholders and in many ways is a combination of philosophical concepts and measurable outcomes based on a review of the literature that reveals four broad conceptualisations of quality: quality as purposeful, exceptional, transformative, and accountable.



Figure 1.3. Conceptual model of Schindler et al. (2015) depicting broad and specific strategies for defining quality in higher education and illustrating both central goals and outcomes (inner quadrants) and quality indicators (outer ring) used to assess whether identified goals and outcomes have been achieved (redrawn from Morales, 2019; with kind permission of The Online Journal of Quality in Higher Education).

These conceptualisations could relate not only to teaching and learning but also to educational and related services and research.

- *Purposeful*: the extent to which institutional products [which could include research] and services conform to a stated mission or set of specifications, requirements or standards;
- *Exceptional*: the extent to which institutional services or products achieve distinction through the achievement of high standards;
- *Transformative*: the extent to which the institutional services and products effect positive (and developmental) change in student learning and personal and professional potential [as well as contributing to societal development, research and industrial enterprise];
- *Accountable*: how well institutions account to their stakeholders for the optimal (effective and efficient) use of resources in achieving the accurate delivery of educational [and research and development] products and services with zero/minimal defects.

Schindler et al. (2015) go further in their definition of quality [although effectively confined to teaching and learning activities] by identifying specific indicators that reflect the desired inputs and outputs. They divide the 50+ specific quality indicators from the literature into 4 distinct categories: *administrative, student support, instructional and student performance*.

- *Administrative*: quality indicators relating to administrative functions that include development of relevant mission and vision, establishing institutional legitimacy, achieving international standards, and effective and sufficient resource acquisition.
- *Student support*: quality indicators that reflect the availability of student support services and their responsiveness (e.g. to student complaints);
- *Instructional*: covering the quality of teaching staff and relevancy of the educational content of programmes;
- *Student performance*: the degree of student engagement with the curriculum and teaching staff and the extent of knowledge and skills development that lead to gainful employment of graduates.

The core of this conceptual model reflects the importance of eliciting stakeholder perspectives, which, it is proposed, should drive the definition of quality and the indicators used to measure it.

Other approaches to the concept of educational quality, of which there are many examples in the literature, have focused on a specific HE sector or country. From a more general standpoint, according to Ulewicz (2017), the most common definitions of the quality of education refer to one of the following three components: i) the degree of fulfilment of an assumed standard (measured in a quantitative or qualitative way), ii) the degree of student's satisfaction with the service offered by the institution, and iii) the degree of fulfilment (or effectiveness) of assumed educational objectives [whether they are internally established (within a strategic plan for example) or externally implemented (as in government or funding agency targets) – in effect fitness for purpose]. Often authors have focused on a definition of quality around the fitness for purpose concept (e.g. Woodhouse, 1998; Nicholson, 2011). It is evident that, in the assessment of quality, both subjective and objective criteria could be used, the former clearly making it difficult to measure quality *per se*. I will return to this issue later.

1.2. SUMMARY

So, where are we now in terms of answering the question “What is quality in higher education?” As Martin and Parikh (2017) summarise, the way in which ‘quality’ is defined and put into practice has obvious implications for efforts to manage and assure it. Yet, many stakeholders in higher education would find it difficult to define quality precisely. As we saw earlier, students are most likely to judge quality as fitness for purpose and perceived quality of the final degree by, for example, employers, whilst faculty members would tend to measure quality in terms of inputs and outputs, such as research funds and productivity, number of publications, number of successful PhD students, etc., or as outcomes such as improved student learning, high grades achieved etc. External stakeholders such as government and the public would more likely agree that quality equals value for money and achieving specific political or societal goals. This lack of an agreed definition, for some scholars, would imply that the quality concept, borrowed as it was from business and industry, is ill suited to education (Nicholson, 2011) and even led Vroeijenstijn (1992)

to argue that 'it is so hard to define quality in higher education that we should stop bothering'. This, in my opinion, is taking things too far.

One could deduce, by definition, that quality is in limited supply, suggesting that there are only a few truly excellent institutions and/or programmes [based around some notional ranking] (cf Bogue, 1998). Alternatively, one could consider that quality should be attainable (and strived for) by every institution and individual programme according to its mission and goals. Thirdly, quality should be identifiable in results (the value added by the institution (Bogue, 1998)). Harvey and Green (1993) recognised the dilemma and suggested that the only practical solution is to recognise and validate all of the diverse perspectives and thus reject the possibility of accepting a singular definition of quality.

Quality started as a debatable and somewhat controversial philosophical concept in the 1990s and nowadays it is accepted that quality is a self-evident good that everyone desires. There is no doubt that defining quality continues to be difficult, with some commentators asserting that quality can neither be defined nor quantified, and others asserting that quality is subjective and dependent upon individual perspectives (Schindler et al., 2015). This means, as Saarinen (2010) rightly pointed out, we should be relying less on the **explicit definitions** of quality and more on the **implicit definitions** concerning the actions and outcomes that quality promotes. We also need to be cognisant of the fact that educational quality is not simply a 1/0 (all or nothing) concept but forms a spectrum or gradient (from poor to high quality) (e.g. Ellis, 2019) along which we try to place particular programmes, teaching activities, services, research activities or entire institutions. Behind these various notions of what constitutes quality in education lies the question of what ends higher education should serve (Tam, 2001). This is an important question as these prior conceptions will generate different methodologies for evaluating quality through QA processes and for alternative sets of outcome measurers.

A photograph of a person wearing a headset and working on a laptop in a collaborative office environment. The person is seen from the back, sitting on a wooden chair. In the background, another person is visible, also working on a laptop and wearing a headset. The scene is lit with warm, indoor lighting. A large orange circular graphic is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the text 'CHAPTER 2.'

CHAPTER 2.

2. THE QUALITY ASSURANCE ECOSYSTEM

We tend to think of QA largely in terms of the education system level and processes that have been put in place by governments, agencies, professional bodies etc. to assess, monitor and improve education and maintain and enhance quality of the inputs and outputs of the overall education system. But as Bogue (1998) quite rightly pointed out, QA is a responsibility invested not only in the technical systems that have evolved but just as importantly in individual faculties and administrators. This point is well made and supported by examples cited by Bogue:

- An administrative officer or faculty member defending the educational standards of a college or university against political interference.
- A faculty member calling a student to account for cheating.
- An academic administrator standing against shallow curricular provisions in a (proposed) academic programme.
- A department or programme Chair holding a faculty member accountable for under-performance.
- A state, regional, or national official holds an institution accountable for misrepresentation of the programmes it is authorised to offer.

Indeed, the ESG (2015) states that “higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance” and in Ireland, the Universities Act (1997), though from an earlier time, concurs with this view.

In the widest sense, a QA system *emerges* from the actions and interactions of the diverse drivers, actors and processes depicted in Figure 1.1. These influence the level of confidence felt by stakeholders that, in relation to teaching and learning activities for example, the specified educational qualifications, and the associated learning outcomes, are trustworthy and that these qualifications, the programmes that lead to them, and the institutions that provide the programmes, are of sufficient quality to be beneficial to individuals and society in social, developmental, economic, and cultural terms. This basically is why QA is seen as necessary. The educational sector (and indeed the vast bulk of related academic literature) have typically understood QA in a traditional and relatively narrow sense to be related to the methodology developed in the 1990s around internal and external QA. Whilst these form the main backbone of HE QA, they are only part of a more holistic QA system in which additional approaches, policies and instruments (such as large-scale data analysis, thematic analyses, performance-based funding schemes and others) play important roles in assuring and enhancing quality in HE⁵ (see the discussion in Sections 5 and 6). In the remainder of the report the term ‘QA system’ will be used in both the narrower (but more widely used) and the broader (more holistic) senses, and context will make it clear which one is intended.

The QA system, its beginnings and subsequent development over the last 40+ years, are well documented in the literature (see for example the reviews of Dill, 2007; Nicholson, 2011; Ryan, 2015; Williams & Harvey, 2015; Martin & Parikh, 2017; Twomey, 2020; Okebukola and Uvalic-Trumbic, 2023 and for Ireland in Appendix 1). The reasons for the introduction of QA systems into

⁵ Achim Hopbach, member of QQI’s Policies and Standards Committee, former president of ENQA and worked as director of Austrian and German QA agencies and the General Rectors conference.

education are also well rehearsed (e.g. Billing, 2004; Singh, 2010; Beerkens, 2015). Driven largely by national politics and associated legal frameworks, they include:

- The desire to maintain the quality of provision in the face of massification and differentiation [diversity of institutional types] of higher education;
- To ensure compliance with government or external agency requirements;
- To control or manage the growth and standards [of offerings and awards] of private providers;
- The necessity to demonstrate social accountability and show ‘value for money’ and efficiency and effectiveness to various external stakeholders and particularly the public purse;
- To change and improve governance of institutions;
- To contribute to HE sector planning and help steer division of labour and associated resources in the sector;
- The improvement of quality to add optimum value to educational systems, processes and outputs;
- To stimulate competitiveness within and between institutions (for positive reasons) and allow for better institutional comparisons;
- Increasing the information base on higher education performance to facilitate ‘consumer’ choice;
- To demonstrate equivalence to students in the quality of provision and to encourage internationalisation and stimulate mobility of students (e.g. under the Bologna process);
- To legitimise/validate certification of students by assessed institutions;
- To provide important safeguards in times of significant change (especially when rapid) and challenges (as exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic for example).

These objectives demand a rigorous implementation of QA, particularly in light of the competitive nature of the HE system (highlighted for example by the growing import of institutional rankings), the significant level of public funding provided to the system, and the assurance needed by ‘customers’ of the private higher education sector. However, knowing that quality is important is one thing, but how to rigorously assess the quality of educational institutions, their processes and products in an open, fair and consistent manner is another matter. This is the ‘playing field’ for QA.

2.1 SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT

Can quality ever be truly measurable or is it to be restricted to some qualitative/subjective notion of ‘in the eye of the beholder’? Subjective assessment of quality is often related to perceptions of individual educators or learners, external evaluators and peers, of competitor institutions or of the general public at large (even sometimes based on historical reputations). It can be applied for example to the state of educational facilities, the apparent competence of management, the perceived quality of teachers (perhaps highlighted in national student surveys) or the general overall quality of graduates. The stakeholder or reviewer ‘gains a sense’ of high or low quality of

the entity (be it a student, a programme, an institution, or the outcome of an activity) based on their knowledge, experience, comparisons with other similar entities or even what they see or hear in the media. The release of this assessment to a wider audience can influence the standing and status or esteem of the reviewer or the source of the comparisons. The danger of this subjective approach however lies in the fact that the perceptions of individual actors in QA can vary, based on their own experiences and prejudices, thus the outcome of a review of quality can sometimes depend on the individuals who carry out the assessment rather than on the intrinsic quality of the entity under review.

Many areas of activity in higher education however can potentially be objectively (even quantitatively) assessed. Research activity for example can be assessed along a spectrum from poor to high quality based on well-known and understood disciplinary-focused metrics such as number and publication location of peer reviewed articles, citations (and citation indices), research grant success, patents, invitations to international conferences, awards etc. This is increasingly seen as a controversial approach by some commentators but is nevertheless still widely used and reported on (see Section 5.4.1). Similarly, the quality of student performance can be objectively assessed against disciplinary standards based on exam performance (as marked by academics and overseen by external examiners), employment success etc. However, research quality can sometimes be considered subjectively through, for example, peer esteem and research impact (although these criteria may actually be largely based on the more objective, quantitative criteria), as can student quality in the sense of the perceived quality of postgraduate institutions they successfully apply to (which again may be based on more objective criteria). Institutional ranking (national and global) is another factor that is often taken to be reflective of quality and although there are several different models in existence they are usually based on a combination of quantitative (e.g. a range of research-based metrics, proportion of high degree grades, graduate employment rates etc.) and qualitative (e.g. peer esteem) factors that are then integrated to provide an overall comparative score. Clearly, indicators of quality lie along a spectrum from subjective/qualitative to objective/quantitative and both approaches have their place within the QA system overall.

2.2 THE BASIC QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In light of the initial drive for accountability, and more recently enhancement, QA has become a major phenomenon worldwide and is continuing to grow. Almost every country in the world has adopted an external evaluation system of some type for higher education (Van Kemenade et al., 2008). QA has come to affect every level of the HE sector and has become an accepted and integral part of academic life (Williams & Harvey, 2015). One illustration of this is the increase in membership of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), which started in 1991 with eight members, which by 2010 had more than two hundred and in 2023 300+. Another example is the establishment of specific academic journals dealing with quality, such as the major journal 'Quality in Higher Education', which has been publishing articles for over 25 years. Thirdly, it has been reported that there are over 142,000 full text publications identified on the academia.edu platform for sharing academic research that discuss QA in higher education. This illustrates the deep intellectual and critical engagement with educational quality, including technical aspects, outcomes and processes. Skolnic (2010) pointed out that QA processes in different places probably lie on a continuum between a political and a technical process and location on this continuum is likely to depend upon the nature of the activity being assessed and the context and structure of the assessment process. Given the worldwide

scale of QA, and the specific social and political context of the jurisdiction in which the QA process is conducted, it is difficult to generalise across all the various mechanisms and processes. Whilst this makes a review of QA somewhat challenging, nevertheless patterns in, and approaches to, the QA processes in general can be identified and clear trends can be found as QA matures within individual jurisdictions.

There is sometimes a significant level of variability nationally, and certainly internationally, in the operation of QA and in the focus of QA attention. In addition, international comparisons show that a ‘general model’ of external QA does not universally apply (Billing, 2004). Nevertheless, the basic process and organisation of the quality review is similar at least within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Fig. 2.1), guided by the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs; see EUA, 2023), where it is used to quality assure programmes, subjects or institutions, although the significance of the elements might vary at different levels within an institution. The system normally consists of a national agency to co-ordinate and support QA in institutions, a combination of self-assessment and performance indicators, the use of evidence-based processes, external peer review, a follow-up process after finalisation of a report and public reporting of the outcomes (e.g. Billing, 2004; Harvey & Newton, 2007; Okebukola and Uvalic-Trumbic, 2023).

In this basic QA system (Fig.2.1), internal QA refers to intra-institutional practices and policies used to monitor and improve quality of processes at institution and programme level – it is the responsibility of the academic department/school/faculty or the institution. External QA refers to inter- or supra-institutional policies and schemes of assessing, maintaining and improving quality of institutions and/or programmes which are the responsibility of specialised agencies with authority and legitimacy [backed by legislation] to engage in this activity.

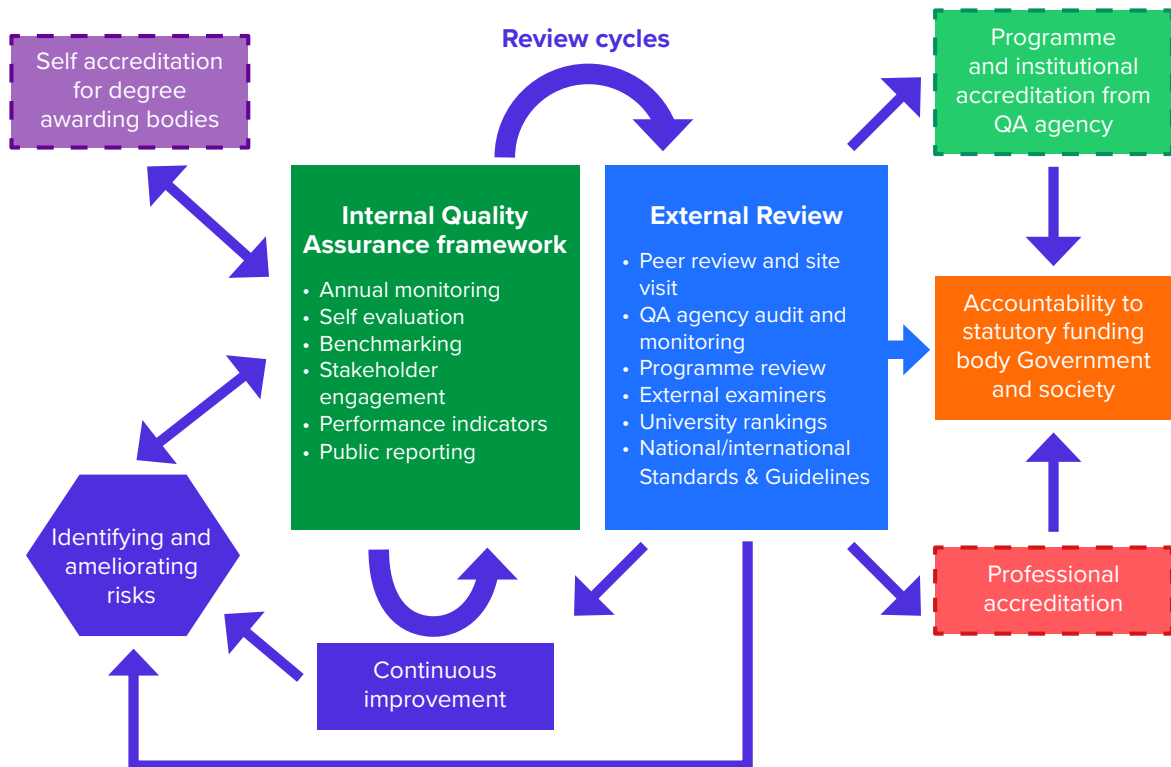


Figure 2.1 The basic quality assurance system (based on overall practices in the EHEA). The arrows signify directions of influence.

Irrespective of the label attached to the process, QA has evolved a dominant ‘peer-evaluation’ methodology – the use of self-assessment, peer review by an external panel (including an important site visit), a written (public) report and a response from the institution is ubiquitous (Heusser, 2006; Harvey, 2017). In addition, there is a review cycle, which may vary in duration but is usually of the order of 5-7 years.

It is important to recognise the important role played by external review over the last 15 years or so in developing internal QA⁶.

2.3. MAIN APPROACHES TO QUALITY ASSURANCE

Over three decades, educational QA has developed into a well-institutionalised regulatory field. But a consistent dilemma or tension has arisen:

- Should QA systems be designed to promote continuous improvement in education?

Or

- Should QA systems focus on accountability of institutions and systems to key stakeholders (especially funding and legislative bodies)?

According to Harvey (1999), improvement/enhancement and accountability should be considered not as a dichotomy, or as two ends of a continuum, but rather as separate dimensions of QA. There is a lot to be said for this view as both goals are still very much to the fore in QA systems which are intended to ensure accountability and/or to bring about improvement (Nicholson, 2011).

The object of attention of traditional QA ranges from the learner or learning outcomes, through the programme or subject, to the service provision, the institution and even the QA system itself. The focus of quality evaluations can also be diverse (Harvey & Newton, 2007), ranging from institutional governance and regulation and financial viability to the student experience of learning, curriculum design, programme content and teacher competence.

There are a number of different approaches to QA that have been described by a range of authors (e.g. Dill, 2000; Tam, 2001; Kis, 2005; Loukkola & Zhang, 2010; Harvey, 2017). Matei & Iwinska (2016) present a very accessible overview of the definitions, concepts and approaches to QA, both internal and external. There are three main ‘traditional’ forms of academic QA (effectively targeted at teaching and learning) – *institutional accreditation*, *subject assessment*, and *academic audit* – as well as a number of other approaches that have been described and are used in practice. Each of these have different strengths and weaknesses.

- A. **Quality (or academic) Audits** (sometimes referred to as a ‘review’ (Nicholson, 2011)) are a means of checking that relevant systems and structures in an institution support its key teaching mission and ensure that provision is at or beyond a satisfactory level of quality. In other words, audits demonstrate how an institution satisfies itself (and thereby external stakeholders) that the academic standards it has set (or which are set by an accreditation body),

6 Fiona Crozier, Higher Education Consultant (Quality Assurance and International) and formerly of QAA.

and its own explicit and implicit objectives, are being achieved. They are used by institutions and QA agencies globally. A quality audit can be conducted either internally or externally (Tam, 2001) and is usually administered at the whole-of-institution level, or at the subject level (Chalmers et al., 2008). Where they include external evaluation, quality audits involve the auditee conducting a critical self-analysis, and an external review team verifying the self-report, making recommendations for improvement, and monitoring progress (Chalmers, 2008).

The audits make no attempt to comprehensively review an institution's or programme's resources and activities, nor to directly assess the quality of teaching or student learning (Dill, 2000), although they help to place improvement of teaching and learning on institutional agendas (Harvey, 2017). Instead, they focus on those processes by which academic institutions exercise their responsibility to assure academic standards and improve the quality of their teaching and learning. The output of such an audit is a description of the extent to which the claims made by the HEI are correct (Kis, 2005). Audits also serve to aid senior managers to initiate QA systems in institutions and provide system-wide information on best practices (Dill, 2000). Chalmers et al. (2008) highlight further strengths of the Quality Audit including providing a sense of ownership through self-analysis, encouraging continuous improvement and self-learning, and recognising institutional diversity by auditing institutions and programmes in comparison with their stated strategic objectives and mission. Audits normally involve both qualitative and quantitative assessments.

Weaknesses in the approach, highlighted by Chalmers et al. (2008), include that the concentration on institutional processes (rather than outputs) does not guarantee quality outcomes. Whole-institution audits do not capture the extent of variability across academic staff, courses or departments in an institution, and the understanding of quality may differ significantly among the institution, its academics and the external review panel. Also Audits are costly both in time and money.

- B. **Accreditation**, as developed in North America, was the dominant QA process in much of Europe pre-EHEA/Bologna. It is aided by the goal of harmonisation of standards in the European Higher Education Area and is now practiced worldwide. It basically determines whether an institution or a particular programme meets threshold quality criteria or (often minimum) standards that are usually established by a national quality agency or a disciplinary professional body. The focus of accreditation is comprehensive, and normally involves examining the mission, resources, and procedures of an institution or academic programme (Dill, 2000; Chalmers, 2008) and the institution's likely ability to support, sustain and deliver specific programmes or entire degrees. As an example, in France it is a legal requirement for all HEIs that wish to deliver the official engineering degree to apply for CTI (Commission des Titres d'Ingenieurs) accreditation (Sánchez-Chaparro et al., 2020). QA is used as a mechanism to strengthen institutional legitimacy in society and present the institution as a respectful full member of a highly reputed community. The output of such accreditation is whether or not the institution or programme qualifies for a certain status and the outcome is usually a yes/no decision with the award of accreditation or not. Exercising such power provides legitimacy on the process, as seen in The Netherlands where the QA agency introduced a grading for programmes on a scale that allows for a so-called 'yellow card' prior to a 'reject' accreditation outcome and in Norway where the QA agency rejected a large number of programmes in the early 2000s (Beekens, 2015). However, this 'binary' state is often softened through decisions involving probationary periods, and opportunities to reapply for accreditation within a shorter time than the normal accreditation cycle (Harvey, 2004).

There is a notable marketisation and privatisation of accreditation. Private/professional accreditation initiatives like the Washington Accord for Engineering (a self-governing, autonomous agreement between national signatories that provides external accreditation to third-level educational programmes that qualify their graduates for entry to professional engineering practice⁷), and the international Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business accreditation for business schools, are becoming increasingly important and valuable for institutions (Beerens, 2015), providing a legitimacy in the competitive market for students and funding.

Strengths of accreditation include the existence of predefined and transparent criteria and standards whereby institutional and regional comparisons of quality are made easier, judgements (being binary) are easy to comprehend, and there is (potentially) stronger consumer (or stakeholder) protection (Chalmers et al., 2008). There are weaknesses as well, including the perception (or reality) that predetermined (and usually quantitative) standards may be minimalist/mediocre which in many ways undermines the notion of ‘quality as excellence’ and means the process has limited discriminatory power amongst institutions. [It is worth noting however that some accreditation processes do consider more qualitative core criteria such as the appropriateness of resources and the effectiveness of processes.] Accreditation standards (and particularly professional criteria) tend also to increase homogeneity within a sector, the pre-determined standards often lag behind the latest leading quality teaching & learning (T&L) practices and there is limited incentive for quality improvement and innovation (see Chalmers et al., 2008 and references therein). It is worth reflecting also that the motivations behind the increasing trend to purchase QA on an international market are diverse and not necessarily linked to quality⁸.

- C. **Quality (or subject/programme) Assessments**, on the other hand are a means of assessing the quality of what is actually provided by institutions, with a focus on teaching and learning at the subject or programme level (Dill, 2000) and, in some jurisdictions, also on research. This approach to QA involves some judgement of performance against established criteria, again either internally or externally, using peer panels. Assessment tends to focus more on results than on reputation (Bogue, 1998). The output produces a quantitative evaluation, a grade (whether numeric, literal or descriptive) (Kis, 2005). The strengths of this approach might include the ability to make comparisons across institutions using the quantitative evaluations, the opportunity to focus on specialist areas of provision in an institution while recognising institutional diversity, and the significant opportunity for learning and enhancement as a result of the assessment. Weaknesses include the lack of institutional control over the established criteria: nationally established criteria could undermine institutional diversity in the sector, and where outcomes are linked to funding or ranking schemes this may pressurise institutions to manipulate their performance data to satisfy the required indicators.
- D. An associated QA approach to the more general Quality Assessment is **Performance Funding**. This is typically a national or regional initiative that rewards exemplary performance in relation to indicators that reflect national or state priorities (Chalmers et al., 2008), or that have been agreed between the national funding agency and the institution (as in the case of Ireland). Indicators tend to be outcome-focused, such as rates of degree or year completion and graduate employment rates and destinations, student enrolment and diversity targets etc. Critical to this QA approach is the establishment of standardised performance indicators where Australia seems to be leading the way in development and implementation (Chalmers, 2008;

⁷ See <https://www.ieagrements.org/assets/Uploads/Documents/History/25YearsWashingtonAccord-A5booklet-FINAL.pdf>.

⁸ Observation by Achim Hopbach, member of QQI's Policies and Standards Committee, former president of ENQA and worked as director of Austrian and German QA agencies and the General Rectors conference.

Chalmers et al., 2008). Performance indicators have a particular utility in the management of higher education institutions and are used for four primary reasons:

- i. To monitor the institution's own performance for comparative purposes (internally and externally)
- ii. To facilitate the assessment and evaluation of institutional operations
- iii. To provide information for external QA audits, and
- iv. To provide information to the government [or funding agencies] for accountability and reporting purposes (Rowe, 2004)

At the national level, performance indicators are designed to fulfil a range of objectives including:

- i. To ensure accountability for public funds
- ii. To improve the quality of higher education provision [through strategic design of indicators]
- iii. To stimulate competition within and between institutions
- iv. To verify the quality of new institutions and underwrite transfer of authority between the state and institutions, and
- v. To facilitate international comparisons

Chalmers (2008) provides a comprehensive description of the various input and output performance indicators. Based on the Australian system, many of these are widely used elsewhere, including in Ireland, both in performance funding approaches as well as providing data for other QA approaches.

Strengths of performance funding (including the use of performance indicators) include the provision of objective criteria for the assessment of quality (as determined by the funder) and distribution of funds, which can potentially enhance funding for teaching and learning for example, and at the sectoral level it clearly allows for institutional comparisons (Chalmers et al., 2008). On the other hand, weaknesses of this approach include a degree of inflexibility in funding formulae which may not support institutional diversity in the sector; indicators are often outside the institution's direct control (e.g. graduate employment rates); and performance funding tends to focus on past performance rather than on present activity and may restrict opportunities for the institution to improve.

- E. Another approach to QA that has been tried in the HE sector is **Total Quality Management** (TQM) (e.g. Bogue, 1998), where every decision has to comply with a rigid predetermined TQM-type format of mechanistic performance targets. This approach had its origins in the industrial manufacturing sector, pioneered in Japan and taken up in the USA (Hoecht, 2006). The TQM techniques were originally designed to improve the transformation of raw materials into finished goods with a reduction in the variation in production processes in order to improve the quality of product output. Whilst continuous improvement, customer focus and integrated management lie at the heart of TQM and would have some resonance in HE, many scholars have been critical of its use and Jauch & Orwig (1997) concluded that TQM would not work in the HE sector for a number of reasons that bear consideration even now. The two main ones are firstly that TQM seeks to reduce variability in the 'product' which clashes with a learning

model that involves learner participation and where there is natural variation in teaching styles. Secondly, the customer focus is laudable but as discussed earlier there are many stakeholders/customers in higher education – so which customers should be the focus? Any continuing interest in applying industrial and business models of QA to higher education would be problematic largely because there is little effort to clarify what the parallels are between the sectors (Williams & Harvey, 2015).

- F. More recently, two other approaches have come to the fore; **Enhancement-focused** and **Risk-based** QA systems. Whilst these will be considered in more detail in Section 5, it is appropriate to summarise them here. There is a trend in some countries towards national systems based on accreditation and more intrusive forms of QA and ranking systems, but in others the movement has been towards quality enhancement (e.g. in Finland for at least 10 years, and in Scotland for over 20 years (Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)). Enhancement-focused QA audits and reviews tend to rely more on self-assessment and external reference points (Prisacariu, 2014). Institutions self-recognise issues and collaborate with the QA agency to establish a targeted review with follow-up. The review outputs are largely formative judgements focusing on improving teaching and learning and avoiding summative judgements that could possibly lead to sanctions (Rosa et al., 2012). These approaches are much more under the control of the participating institution and the QA agency plays a more supportive and facilitatory role.

Australia has led the way in *Risk-based QA* [more recently joined by England and Norway] which offers a conceptually rather different approach to the more traditional QA processes (Beerrens, 2015) (see also Section 4.3). TEQSA (the Australian QA agency) adopted risk-based regulation in which its regulatory risk framework scans sector participants, placing them into categories (Jarvis, 2014) based on the assumption that quality risks are not equally distributed across the range of public and private educational institutions. In practice this means the monitoring of institutions is selective. Established HE operators that demonstrate long and successful track records, have international reputations and evidenced-based achievements in research and teaching excellence, essentially receive just ‘light touch’ regulation, reducing compliance burdens and the need to engage in institutional audits/requirements to demonstrate QA processes. Instead, the focus of TEQSA QA is more on the fringes and on institutional actors (especially new and private institutions) whose operations may pose a risk to the sector and its national and international reputation.

As Twomey (2020) points out, there is often a blurring between QA, which tends to imply some baseline, and quality enhancement which tends to focus on development, change and additionality beyond that baseline. Enhancements, in effect, drive the baseline upwards. Tam (2001) and many other commentators have suggested that any measurement of quality and performance evaluation in higher education that falls short of the centrality of the student’s experience and their intellectual and emotional progress throughout their years in HE is bound to be peripheral. However, this view misses the broader and just as important role of higher education in not just the transfer of knowledge but also in its creation (i.e. research) and in the broader societal roles that higher education plays. These too should be assessed for quality as they are in many (e.g. in the UK, Scandinavia, France; see later), but not all, jurisdictions.

At the institutional level, regardless of the specific nature of the process implemented, external QA should combine accountability and encouragement of continuous improvement of HEIs (ENQA, 2015; Sánchez-Chaparro et al., 2020)). Furthermore, beyond the regulatory or accountability facet, QA should be considered as a management tool that enables the implementation of a systematic, periodic, self-reflection cycle and is associated with other management processes at an institutional level such as organisational learning or strategic management.

2.4. SUMMARY

Westerheijden et al. (2014) point out that the history of QA illustrates its political dimension: politics and quality have been, and are likely to continue to be, at least for the near future, closely intertwined. This is countered to some extent by the emergence of semi-independent quality agencies, which are not officially part of a ministry but linked via management or board appointments (Beerrens, 2015), which helps to separate policy-making from policy implementation and provides greater independence from political interference. Amongst the various approaches to QA, quality audit and accreditation remain the dominant types of QA but as the QA system matures in different countries, there appears to be some movement towards the less intrusive regulatory approaches of Enhancement-focused and Risk-based QA. These approaches tend to be more reliant on internal QA, using external review in a more formative way. The use and importance of international standards and guidelines, as well as national performance indicators and qualification frameworks, has certainly increased over time but it is imperative that they do not stifle diversity in education systems and allow the continued development of autonomy in the sector⁹. There is room in the various educational sectors (nationally and internationally) for variable interpretation of standards and guidelines and if there is a desire for greater consistency of interpretation it should be met through the emergence of communities of practice at the disciplinary/professional level as well as across peer institutions nationally and internationally. The growth in transnational institutional ‘clubs’ and associations, particularly in Europe but also regionally and even globally, will certainly help. Furthermore, the emergence of a greater role for stakeholders in the QA processes (both internal and external) has been welcomed and provides for a more holistic approach to QA, leading to a greater likelihood of relevant outcomes and institutional learning.

⁹ See for example <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210622133956498>; ‘HE institutional autonomy is under siege across the world’; University World News, 26th June 2021.



CHAPTER 3.

3. WHAT ARE THE PERCEIVED BENEFITS AND COSTS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE?

When reviewing the success of the implementation of any policy, process or system it is important to be able to show that the benefits outweigh the costs. The introduction and development of QA in higher education is no different. ‘Impact’ of external QA is a critical issue to validate its use and support its perceived value. Following Beerkens’ (2018) line of questioning, has QA made higher education any better? For example, do graduates now ‘walk out’ with better knowledge and skills as a result of all the quality reforms? Or, to put it another way, has QA helped to maintain threshold competence standards such that no (or as few as possible) graduates ‘walk out’ with sub-threshold qualifications and competences. Before considering the costs and benefits though, let us turn this on its head and ask instead: What happens when QA is absent or fails?

Clearly things do go wrong in higher education. Salmi (2023) reported that in 2012, the Government of Ecuador closed 14 of the 26 private universities that had been placed by the accreditation agency on its list of worst performers. Similarly, the Chilean government also closed down a private university, Universidad del Mar, in 2012, because of poor quality. In 2014, the Colombian Ministry of Education closed down several medical programmes offered by a well-known private university because of serious concerns about the quality of teaching and lack of compliance with legal and tax requirements.

An interesting published example comes from the Philippines. An education-for-all policy adopted by several administrations increased demand for HE but was introduced without providing the necessary funding for proper administration. This opened the doors into the higher education industry for the private sector resulting in a disproportionately large number and proliferation of private non-sectarian higher education institutions (PNSHEIs; both education providers and business ventures) (Tan, 2012) such that in the academic year 2017-18 almost half of all graduates came from [over 1300] private HEIs (Morales (2019). The findings of the study by Morales (2019) suggest a relationship between the growing number of PNSHEIs and diminishing student performance in terms of graduate employment and pass rates in the national board/licensure examinations. The Philippine Commission of Higher Education (CHED) found that the average pass rates across all types of higher education institutions fell from 42.61% in the academic year (AY) 2012 -2013 to 36.82 % in 2017-2018. In particular, pass rates for the licensure examination for teacher education, which continues to comprise the largest number of licensed professionals in the country, fell from 41.87 % in AY 2012-2013 to 31.38% in AY 2017-2018. These changes were effectively linked to deteriorating quality in higher education in the Philippine HE system driven by a different set of priorities in the private sector (notably economic rather than pedagogic) than in mainstream HE. Several private HEIs did develop a reputation for good quality education but evidently the majority did not, presumably compounded by an expanding student body of increasingly variable ability. It should be noted that in general one cannot assume that stimulating significant growth in the public sector (without the necessary commensurate resources) will not negatively affect quality.

A further example, resulting from a change in government policy that has resulted in no cyclical QA reviews in England since 2016 and has meant that issues that might have come to light under the institutional review process remain undetected¹⁰, relates to the ongoing investigation of

¹⁰ Comment by Fiona Crozier, Higher Education Consultant (Quality Assurance and International) and formerly of QAA.

English universities by the Office for Students concerning the quite astonishing extent of evident degree ‘grade inflation’ over the last decade or so. The proportion of students receiving first class degrees increased from 15.7% in 2011 to 30% in 2019 and then, following encouragement to ‘be generous’ because of the effects of COVID-19 on the education system, they increased further to 37.9% in 2021¹¹. Apparently, the universities have indicated that they intend to ‘rein in’ the number of first class degrees awarded and return them to pre-pandemic levels. Although there are nuanced discussions about the drivers of grade inflation, in this instance rigorous QA and the maintenance of standards were evidently not upheld.

3.1. BENEFITS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

There is surprisingly little published work on the overall impact of QA (Williams & Harvey, 2015) and the impact various QA policies have, particularly on student learning, is, according to Beerkens (2018), to a large extent unknown and still hard to evidence. This is most likely because there is an inherent challenge in objectively demonstrating benefits from QA and in particular external QA, not because such benefits do not exist but because getting the empirical data is difficult.

Firstly, the link between system quality and QA is not necessarily a direct causal link, as many factors have an impact on the quality of teaching and learning, beyond external QA¹². It is therefore difficult to isolate the impact of QA from other forces that have been affecting higher education over the period during which QA has been implemented (Kis, 2005). This also relates to the time periods during which changes in educational outcomes arise and the (generally relatively slow) pace of change in higher education when it comes to implementing new policies, approaches and regulations.

A second issue is how to prove an effect of QA. The ‘gold standard’ in evidence-based policy analysis is an explicit measurement of the effect of a policy intervention on final outcomes, preferably by randomised trials to minimise the effect of potentially competing causes, self-selection and other biases (Beerkens, 2018). Such an approach is difficult to pursue in higher education. Using a scientific experimental approach, one would, for example, establish randomised experiments where groups of students or institutions are managed under specific QA measures (the positive treatment) and other groups are denied such interventions (no treatment). Where education is concerned, this experimental approach may of course conflict with ethical concerns (e.g. deliberately withholding quality (or at least better quality) education from a cohort of students or institutions). A second approach would involve the use of correlation, where outcomes are compared amongst institutions or student cohorts along a gradient (from low to high) of quality activity or measures. Correlation does not prove causation but can highlight possible driving factors. Yet another approach is a before : after analysis, where the nature and level of outcomes or process states is measured before implementation of known quality interventions and measured again some time (or over time in a longitudinal study) after such interventions. This approach lacks the control (i.e. how do we know the changes would not have happened anyway over the time period without interventions). Finally, a further approach makes use of surveys

¹¹ Article by Nicola Woolcock, Education Editor from *The Times*, May 10th 2023 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/uk-universities-grade-inflation-boundaries-investigation-2023-8sz8qc85z>.

¹² From discussions with Maria Kelo, Former Director of ENQA and currently Director of Institutional Development at EUA.

of institutions and stakeholders (e.g. students, academics, employers) to gauge perceptions of the impact of QA overall. This is perhaps a less powerful approach but if enough samples are collected it can be informative. [For further information on this aspect see Leiber et al. (2015) and Seyfried et al. (2018) for a discussion on issues and challenges in assessing the impact of QA measures in HE and Beerkens (2018) for a review of the approaches used to measure student learning, research output and behaviour and hence improvements in education as a result of QA].

It is perhaps not surprising that much of the literature [and certainly of the older literature] on the effectiveness of external quality audit is anecdotal (as described by Shah, 2013). Yet despite these drawbacks, there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the introduction of QA has led to positive outcomes on the overall quality of higher education and particularly of HE institutions. For example, 83% of respondents to a recent EUA survey reported that establishing an internal QA system has had a positive impact on their institution, whilst 16% identified mixed impacts and only 1 a negative impact (EQA, 2023). Discussion in the literature (e.g. Baldwin (1997), Brennan and Shah (2000), Dill (2000), Harvey and Williams (2010), Shah et al. (2011), Stensacker et al. (2011), Shah (2013), Williams and Harvey (2015), Harvey (2017), Beerkens (2018) and EUA (2023) highlights a number of positive impacts of externally-supported QA to the HE sector, to various stakeholders and to society at large, based on reviews of publications and/or surveys and evidence from a number of countries (e.g. Australia, Chile, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, UK, USA, West Indies):

- It provides a mechanism to ‘modernise’ national HE systems and change institutional culture as a direct result of external review outcomes;
- It has improved transparency and accountability in the overall system with publicly available information on quality and standards leading to increased trust among the general public;
- External national processes and external QA reviews present a useful catalyst that academic management can use to legitimise cultural and organisational change with positive influences on internal governance structures and strategic management in universities and also to create a common identity in an institution. In other words, external QA is a very effective mechanism to “make things happen” not just within an institution but also nationally;
- Extrinsic motivation can encourage a university to document, critique and enhance its internal capability, and identify its own shortcomings and strategies for self-remediation, continuous QA, improvement and innovation;
- QA has helped to professionalise quality processes in universities, with standardised processes and norms and special organisational units or positions to facilitate the tasks;
- It can lead to the creation of an evidence-based culture in decision making and strengthen surveys and feedback mechanisms;
- It has enhanced the development of policy and the structure of institutional quality work; the development of student influence in QA; documentation structures; cooperation with stakeholders; internal evaluations; reviews and follow-up processes;
- It has encouraged, and actually led to, the weeding out of bad provision at institutional (viz. removal of programmes) and national (viz. closure of institutions) levels;
- QA has helped to establish new formal standards and impacted positively on new

- programme development, resulting in more cohesive, student-centred, programmes;
- Retention rates, graduation rates, and levels of final awards have increased and graduate employment seems to have improved in the systems where the performance data was subject to external evaluation [but note this must be considered against the existence of grade inflation];
 - It has helped put educational quality on the agenda, thereby increasing its importance;
 - It has provided system-wide information on best practice and common problem areas;
 - There is evidence of improvements in pedagogical practices (teaching and student learning), student advising and learning communities, through facilitation of active discussion and staff cooperation in academic units;
 - It has improved performance development and review processes for staff;
 - It has led to improvements in the institutional approach to the collection of student survey data and feedback and to the creation of new routines and systems for the handling of data and information on educational performance and quality;
 - Greater opportunities for cross-border movement by students and improvement of the QA of offshore international education programmes have been identified;
 - QA has offered visible confirmation to the public that attention is being paid to academic QA.

Arising from direct discussions between the author and QA professionals (see acknowledgements for a list of individuals) some additional benefits have been described in addition to those listed already:

- The quality enhancement aspect of QA, if used properly, is a knowledge management tool to enhance teaching and learning;
- The generation of significantly greater quantities of relevant data across a range of institutional activities and outcomes is beneficial;
- QA systems have met governmental demands and introduced an element of public accountability into the educational system as well as providing some guarantees of quality provision to the public (and stakeholders);
- External QA has led to the introduction of more sophisticated and holistic internal QA systems in institutions [in addition to external examining and programme approval and review];
- The added value of external peer groups providing, in effect, ‘free consultation’ in helping to identify issues and opportunities, offering advice and good practice from elsewhere, providing external reference points etc. is clear. Additional mutual benefits include peer panel learning which they may take back to their own institutions;
- QA has led to the development of regional frameworks (even at a high generic level). Currently, we now have African and (SE) Asian frameworks building from European standards and guidelines, which are sufficiently similar to allow articulation internationally, sharing developments [and student mobility], development of trust and confidence between systems, even as they are adapted for different countries.
- Enhancement-based QA is supportive of the fundamental nature of education as a learning endeavour.

Not all the benefits have been equally strongly delivered. For example, based on the results of a survey using 120 valid responses from 30 Australian universities, Shah (2013) identified the three areas in teaching and learning in which most improvements have been seen as a result of the implementation of QA as:

- QA process for course development and approval;
- tracking performance in learning and teaching; and
- academic programme reviews.

The areas showing least improvement were:

- strengthening the role of learning and teaching committees;
- quality management of student assessments; and
- [perhaps somewhat surprisingly] external advice on course development.

In relation to governance, the areas attracting high improvement were:

- strategic planning and
- quality management;

whilst the area of least improvement was:

- financial management.

Internationalisation was identified from the survey as one area where the relevant QA agency (AUGA) audits resulted in significant improvement for:

- the development of QA processes for offshore courses, partnerships and contracts;
- a process for the review of offshore programmes or partners;
- a risk management process for offshore programmes;

whereas areas requiring further improvement were found to be:

- resources and support for students studying in offshore campuses (for example, library, learning skills);
- induction and cross-cultural training for teaching staff.

Among the impacts identified were some that might be considered as positive or negative depending on one's viewpoint (Beerkens, 2018):

- Strengthening the position of central administration in universities and contributing to managerial power;
- Creating new accountability relationships at the programme level between the central administration and academic units responsible for delivering education.

There is also a view that QA mechanisms can generate benefits in terms of marketing advantage where the outcome of QA is used to strengthen institutional legitimacy and present the institution as a respectful full member of a highly reputed community (Sánchez-Chaporro et al., 2020) [certainly in light of positive external reviews, accreditation by professional bodies and ranking outcomes]. In a way this actually raises an interesting conundrum: there may be a positive impact of professional accreditation QA on low-ranking institutions who argue (and advertise) that, as they have achieved accreditation [even where only minimum standards are set by the accreditation agency], the educational service they provide is equivalent to that provided by institutions with a higher reputation and greater overall quality. This conundrum could ultimately have a negative impact on the reputation of the national HE system abroad.

Investigations into the effects of QA have tended to focus on teaching and learning, with little focus on research [apart from a number of stand-alone national research evaluation systems (e.g. UK)] and even less on facilities. As Williams & Harvey (2015) suggest, much more attention needs to be paid to the impact of QA on institutional facilities and the relationship between the quality of facilities and student experience. Likewise, there is little evidence in the literature of QA and external audit having an positive impact on student satisfaction (e.g. Shah et al., 2011). That is not to say that such improvement has not happened, and, given the significant range of perceived benefits listed above, it would be expected, but rather it has been exceedingly difficult to generate clear objective evidence. QA interventions, as a rule, have complex and manifold cross-effects on different subsystems of higher education institutions at the micro- (individual or programme), meso- (department or School) and macro- (institution) level (Leiber et al., 2015). Therefore, we not only see benefits of QA at each of these levels but also costs.

3.2. THE DOWNSIDE AND COSTS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Much less has been written concerning the costs and negative effects of the implementation of QA in higher education. Interviews and surveys do provide some insights however.

Williams & Harvey (2015) highlight four key negative issues associated with QA processes:

- i. An excessive bureaucratisation of procedures;
- ii. A greatly increased administrative workload for academic staff which can take them away from their 'core business' [of teaching and research];
- iii. A formalism of the process that can stifle creativity and individuality;
- iv. A de-professionalisation of academic staff, associated with a [perceived] 'policing mentality' and a lack of trust.

To this one could add that:

- v. QA has, to some extent, joined other issues which are arousing growing public disquiet and is subject to inherent limitations, disadvantages and potential ethical concerns arising from professional self-regulation (see Hazelkorn, 2023).

These themes of *bureacrtisation*, *administrative burden*, *stifling of creativity* and *lack of trust*

arising from the QA process have been recurring concerns over time and in many different countries. In the early days of QA in the UK, academics perceived external reviews as a distrust of their own work and as a costly and overly bureaucratic exercise (Cheng, 2009). QA was perceived by many academics to have high opportunity costs for themselves and to address quality only at a rather superficial level and was mostly perceived as a form of control and an encroachment on their professional autonomy (Hoecht, 2006). Reviews can be seen as too process-oriented and insufficiently focused on measurable outcomes and the final product, the report, is not scalable in any meaningful way (Hazelkorn, 2023). Similarly, some critics (based on a survey of Australian universities (Shah, 2013)) not only view QA as an intrusion into academic autonomy, but as something which implies a lack of trust in academics and generates increased bureaucracy with a focus on processes rather than on outcomes and standards, and increased emphasis on measures such as student satisfaction to assess and reward quality outcomes. They are also critical of the fact that it may not highlight the resources and infrastructure required by faculties to achieve such outcomes. A further concern, associated particularly with QA processes in their early stages of development or where accountability is the predominant objective, is that quality monitoring can be more concerned with inputs, outputs and systems [e.g. numbers of lectures, numbers of students passing courses], rather than with processes [such as teaching approach, extent and nature of feedback to students, student engagement in the learning process] and with aspects that support important outcomes [i.e. achievement of learning outcomes and skills development] in teaching and learning (see Kis, 2005).

There is concern also about various *forms of measurement* in QA which can, on one hand, be illuminating but on the other also perverse. A clear example relates to the subject teaching quality assessment (TQA) process that was introduced in the UK in the early 1990s and underwent modifications through to the early 2000s (Laughton, 2003; Greatbatch and Holland, 2015). This scored subjects out of 24, effectively based on how well they delivered their own stated aims and objectives [rather than against some agreed best practice or objectively assessed level of actual teaching quality]. This effectively promoted the establishment of easy to achieve rather than challenging objectives, appeared to be biased in that the average mark was highest among old universities, lower in the post-1992 universities and lowest among colleges offering HE provision, and reportedly did little to enhance teaching and learning in the system.

A number of other negative issues have been raised in the literature. Harvey (2017) reports on concerns about the *selection, training and professionalism of peer evaluators* with the resultant potential for bias or preconceived judgements; the conduct and confrontational nature of panel visits; the rehearsed nature of engagements and the inevitability of concealment [presumably of evidence from external reviewers]. In addition, Harvey (2017) notes that there are repeated concerns about the *artificiality of QA processes* in higher education resulting in ritualised compliance by academics to deal with the extra administrative burden. QA under such circumstances fails to be a part of the everyday activity of academics because they perceive no real link between the quality of their academic work (teaching and research) and the performance embodied in QA processes. This leads in turn to a degree of *cynicism about the efficacy and value of assurance processes* and their dissociation from learning.

A study of the quality and readability of public QA reports in a number of European countries (Udam et al., 2018) identified several *recurrent issues with the final reports* including problems with readability and understandability by the general public and many stakeholders (exacerbated by the often highly technical content), and insufficient detail to support decision-making by the potential students and their families (e.g. in selecting an HEI). Another issue concerned *accreditation* which has been criticised for a range of imperfections including a basis, sometimes,

of minimalist standards and opaque processes (Bogue, 1998). The QA process can become *politicised* in highly centralised systems where there is a possibility of disciplinary [or political] bias when individuals from some disciplines have the ultimate power to make decisions about the quality of programmes in other disciplines (Skolnic, 2010). Recent evidence of politicians pursuing a populist agenda (e.g. in some US states) and interfering with curriculum design and content is another example.

The *actual financial costs of QA* have also been raised. Data are not so readily available but a few publications provide some information. The economic costs of evaluation include a number of elements such as the setting up of the QA agency and of the operation of the external review procedures. This would be based on the number and types of higher education institutions in the national system; the focus of the quality review (HEIs, academic programmes or broader groupings of subjects/disciplines); frequency of evaluations; remuneration of experts; indirect costs of institutional staff time in preparing for external monitoring and the collection of information for the self-review (Kis, 2005). In Germany, for example, Harvey & Newton (2007) point to estimates of the vast bureaucracy and financial cost of running even one cycle of programme accreditation in the national higher education system which in the first decade of the 2000s had some 30,000 programmes. If, for the sake of argument, each of the programmes was subject to a three-day visit by a team of four reviewers, the cost of the 360,000 reviewer days would be in the region of €250 million [in the mid-2000s].

In terms of an institutional review, in the survey of Australian academics by Shah (2013) just over half of respondents suggested the costs to be between A\$100,000 and A\$500,000, a further quarter said it would be between A\$500,000 and A\$1 million and the remainder estimated the cost would be above A\$1 million.

On a system-wide basis, a comprehensive assessment of the costs of internal QA and external quality assessment to providers in England was undertaken for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2015). Without going into the details of the Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) methodology used, the overall results are quite startling (Table 3.1) with an annual total for all HE providers estimated at £1.143 billion. This assessment included higher education institutions (HEIs – 300, including 130 universities), further education colleges (FECs – 253 providing HE programmes) and alternative providers (APs – not in receipt of public funding but with taught degree-awarding powers or with designated courses). For the HEIs in particular and on the basis that this estimated cost relates predominantly to an institution's learning and teaching activities, it represents 7.7% of the total reported teaching costs for 2013-14 and 4.1% of total expenditure of the institutions. These overall costs can in turn be broken down into constituent elements (Figure 3.1). Whilst this data concerns one particularly well-developed HE system, it does provide an idea of the scale of the activity and could be cited by critics as an additional negative consequence of the QA process.

Type of institution	Number of HE providers in England	HE student numbers	Estimated total annual cost of quality assurance and quality assessment (£ million)
Higher Education Institutions	130	1,401,800	1,001
Further Education Colleges	203	94,898	66
Alternative Providers	99	115,458	76

Table 3.1. A summary of estimated costs of QA and quality assessment for the three types of provider in England for 2013-14 academic year (modified from HEFCE, 2015)

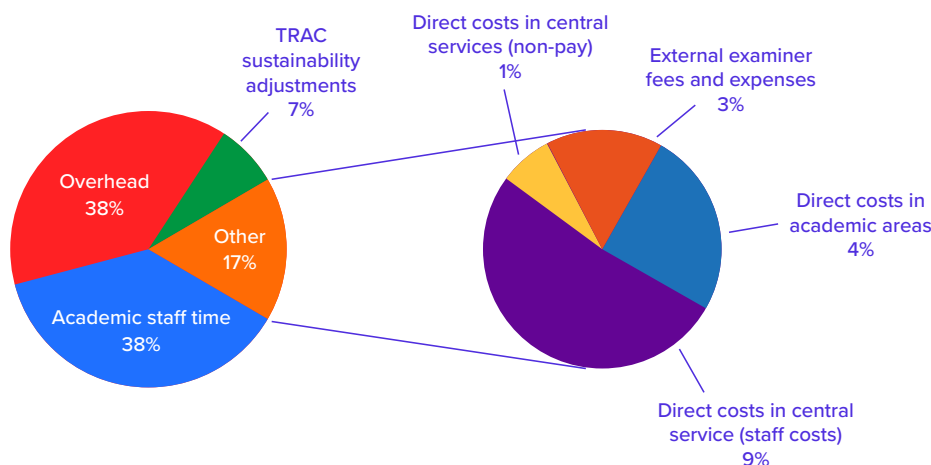


Figure 3.1 A detailed breakdown of the estimated overall costs of QA and quality assessment for the three types of provider in England combined (Higher Education Institutions, Further Education Colleges and Alternative Providers) divided into the main areas of cost for the 2013-14 academic year (from HEFCE, 2015).

The annualised total cost of institutions' preparation for a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) review for English HEIs was estimated at £2.8 million (under the 6-year cycle for reviews at the time). For most FECs (based on a four-year cycle at the time), the annual total cost was estimated at £2.7 million. Estimated average annual total costs for preparation for accreditation visits by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) for English HEIs was £5 million and estimated costs to HE providers of releasing staff to act as QAA reviewers came to £730,000 for the sector as a whole and £590,000 for HEIs only for reviews taking place in 2014-15. A range of other costs were incurred in the overall QA system in English institutions including the average total staff cost for the quality office or equivalent, which was approximately £736,000 (or £887,000 for HEIs), including those staff directly responsible for student appeals and complaints; average total cost of external examiners' fees and expenses for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes was £273,000. Table 3.2 summarises these estimated costs for just HEIs based on the proportions illustrated in Fig 3.1.

	Total direct cost £ million	Academic staff time £ million	Overhead £ million	TRAC Sustainability adjustments £ million	Total full economic cost £ million
HEIs	168	375	385	73	1,001

Table 3.2. Summary of key elements of extrapolated full economic cost for HEIs for the 2013-14 academic year in England. TRAC is the Transparent Approach to Costing methodology used to calculate the full economic cost of QA and quality assessment in HEIs (from HEFCE, 2015).

For providers not registered with the Office of Students (presumably private providers), QAA charged review fees for new applicants in 2022-23 over three stages — approx. £6,200 for the initial two stages and between £26,250 and £36,500 depending on the size of the review panel (3-5). In Ireland, the total absorbed cost (to QQI) of conducting a TEMRU (Tertiary Education Monitoring and Review) event such as a CINNTE review of a public HEI is approximately €50,000 regardless of the size of the institution (using a similar panel size)¹³. Regarding programme validation, the full cost of a ‘panel event’ is €20k. These costs do not include those borne internally by the institution itself. TEQSA (Australian quality agency) increased its fees and introduced new charges to recover costs for regulatory activities undertaken to support Australia’s higher education sector¹⁴. These cover an annual charge paid by all registered HE providers (which will be phased in over 3 years from 2023-2025 and is effectively based on a formula reflecting the number of students in an institution) and a separate application-based fee for regulatory activities related to registration, course accreditation and variation or revocation of conditions. For example, the cost of an assessment of an accredited course is AU\$36,000 for each assessment. The fee for a substantive assessment of application for registration as a higher education provider will be AU\$100,600 from 2023.

3.3. SUMMARY

In summary, the financial costs of a fully functioning QA system can be high for the sector and for individual institutions. Some difficulties have also been identified in a range of countries where QA processes and their acceptance by education professionals can be challenged. On the other hand, clear and positive benefits from well established, well run, and inclusive QA have, without doubt, led to significant enhancement of institutions and their teaching and learning processes in particular. These advantages and benefits might not be seen in the early developmental stages of a QA system but accrue as the system matures, the institutions learn and the sector is allowed to evolve. That is not to say that mature QA systems could not benefit in turn from further improvement, and it is not surprising that a number of national systems have undergone significant change or are in the process of reviewing the systems’ operation as discussed in the next section.

¹³ Information provided by Peter Cullen, Head of Research and Innovation, Development Directorate, QQI.

¹⁴ <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/about-us/fees-and-charges>.



CHAPTER 4.

4. VARIABILITY IN FORMAL QUALITY ASSURANCE APPROACHES AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

This section briefly discusses the variability in basic, formal QA approaches and systems internationally, presents an interesting QA system typology and then explores a few national systems which have changed over recent years as examples of the kinds of developments that are possible and which could be considered in an Irish context.

4.1. THE VARIABILITY IN QUALITY ASSURANCE INTERNATIONALLY

A number of authors have provided reviews and comparisons of QA systems and processes in different countries (e.g. Dill, 2000; Van Damme, 2000; Billing, 2004; Jarvis, 2014; Westerheijden et al., 2014; Okebukola and Uvalic-Trumbic, 2023) and there is a comprehensive and largely up-to-date database on the EURYDICE website¹⁵ on such systems in 27 EU Member States, in addition to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Türkiye (accessible under ‘Browse by Chapter’, then ‘Quality Assurance’ on the site). In general, QA in countries around the world is at different stages of development, and their higher education systems have been shaped by various external factors related to historical, political, economic and social contexts (Chalmers et al., 2008; see Figure 2.1). The mode of QA regime adopted usually reflected the nature of the relationship between the state and higher education sector, including issues of autonomy, governance and academic freedom (Jarvis, 2014). This variation is normally reflected in the nature of, and approach to, QA and performance monitoring in various countries due, in the main, to several specific issues (see for example Billing, 2004):

- The degree of maturity of the educational system;
- Cultural differences that affect how ‘quality’ and ‘level’ of evaluation (e.g. sector, institution, faculty/department, subject/programme or individual staff) are defined;
- Data that is not available in the same form, and opinions differ on which indicators of quality should be used to measure it;
- Differences in the basic elements of the structure of educational systems to individual programmes;
- The national variation in educational objectives and societal values.

The major controlling factors and their inter-relationships that influence the nature and functioning of the quality system can be illustrated diagrammatically as the Quality Assurance Ecosystem (Figure 4.1).

¹⁵ EURYDICE website address <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems>.

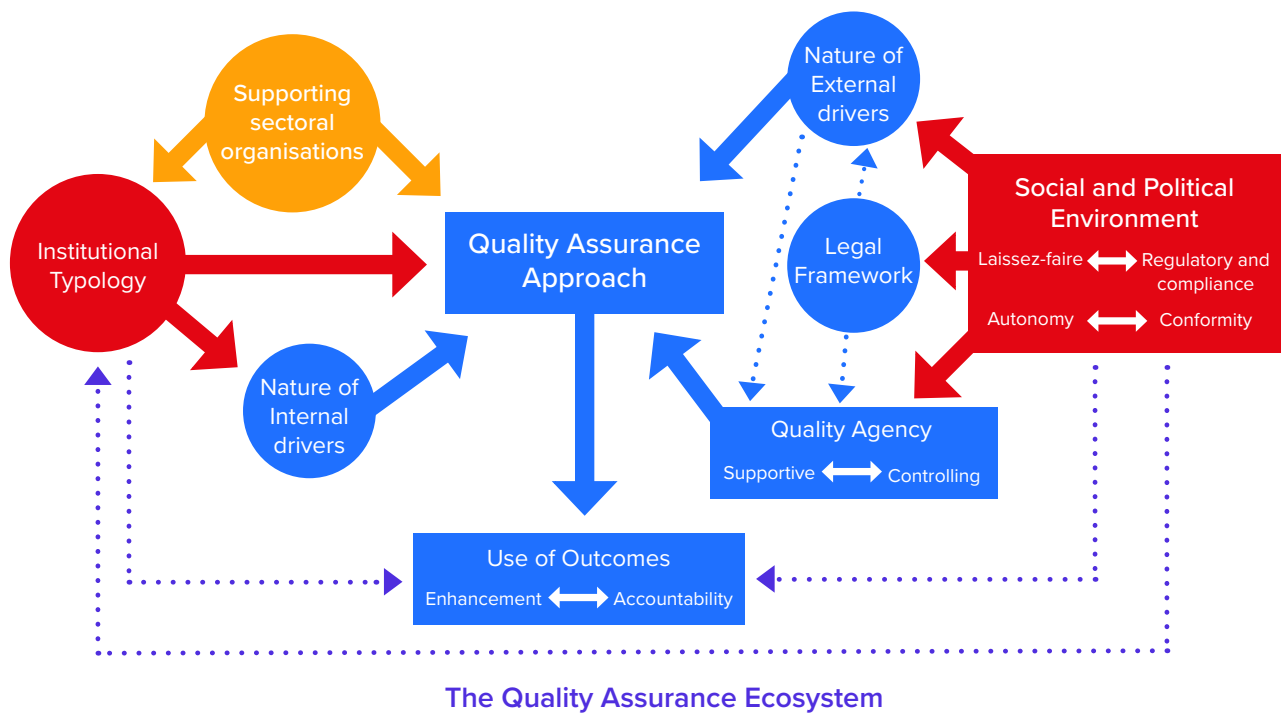


Figure 4.1. The Quality Assurance Ecosystem illustrating the various controlling factors and the interrelationships through deliver QA is delivered.

The QA approach to education adopted by any country is governed by the social and political environment of that country, resulting in institutions along a gradient from laissez-faire (potentially leading to autonomous institutions) to highly regulated (usually leading to institutional conformity). This environment in turn will influence the underpinning legal framework, the nature of external drivers and the nature and *modus operandi* of the national quality agency in question (which is also influenced by the underpinning legal framework and the external drivers). The QA approach adopted by an individual institution will reflect the position/nature of the institution in the QA institutional typology (see Figure 5.1 in the next section). Associated internal drivers will also be influenced by the social and political environment, the nature of external drivers and the relevant quality agency. Supporting sectoral organisations (in Ireland, for example, the National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN), Irish Universities Association (IUA), and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)) may have some influence over the institutional typology and QA approach of affiliated institutions. How the outcomes of the QA approach are used will also vary along a gradient from enhancement to strictly accountability, which will be influenced by the two key factors (in red in Fig. 4.1) of the social and political environment and the institutional typology.

One can also conceive of some simple relationships between the external environment and characteristics of an institution or of the HE sector as a whole (Fig. 4.2).

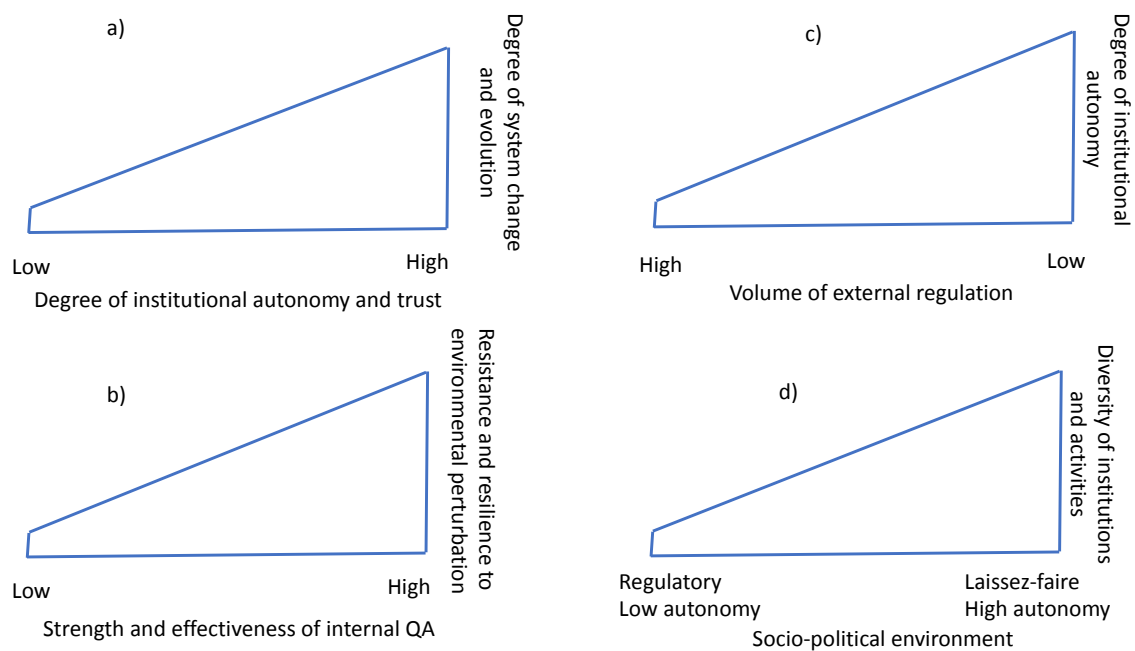


Figure 4.2. Expected relationships between a) the degree of autonomy and trust placed in institutions by government and QA agencies and the degree of institutional change and evolution likely over time; b) the strength and effectiveness of internal QA systems and the resistance to and resilience (speed of recovery) from environmental perturbations to the educational system; c) the relationship between volume of external regulation and degree of institutional autonomy; and d) the effect of the socio-political environment (in terms of a gradient from regulatory, with low institutional autonomy and high compliance, to laissez-faire oversight and high institutional autonomy) and the diversity of institutions and educational activities in the system.

For example, the degree of autonomy and trust placed in institutions by government and QA agencies would be expected to be positively related to the degree of institutional change and evolution likely over time (Fig 4.2 a). Borrowing concepts from ecology, the resistance to and resilience (speed of recovery) from environmental perturbations to the educational system (e.g. pandemic, sharp income declines) are likely to be positively related to the strength and effectiveness of internal QA systems (Fig 4.2 b). Fig 4.2.c illustrates the likely relationship between volume of external regulation and degree of institutional autonomy. At the sectoral level the nature of the socio-political environment (in terms of a gradient from regulatory with low institutional autonomy and high compliance to laissez-faire oversight and high institutional autonomy) will influence the diversity of institutions and educational activities in the system (Fig 4.2 d). In ecological systems, diversity, in turn, supports resilience and resistance to environmental perturbations and hence the stability of the overall ecosystem, as well as contributing positively to the efficient functioning of processes in the system as a whole. Applying this concept to the education system may be distinctly beneficial.

The various issues and factors discussed above translate into commonalities and variations along a number of dimensions in the QA systems introduced in each country (Van Damme, 2000):

- The notion or perception of quality
- The purposes or functions of the QA system

- The methodology used, e.g. self-assessment, peer-review, performance indicators, institutional quality audit at the national level
- The responsible agency/unit overseeing the scheme
- Whether participation is voluntary or compulsory
- The focus of QA (e.g. research, or teaching, or a combination)
- The scale of QA (i.e. whether it is focused on review of programmes, disciplines, or institutions (or some combination of all three))
- Whether reporting is confidential or public (with or without scoring/grading)
- The range of follow-up activities [including ongoing monitoring]
- The extent, if any, to which higher-level decision-making is dependent on QA results (viz. funding, accreditation etc.)

Most countries, and especially those countries where the notion of QA in higher education is new, do not have the infrastructure, resources, or widespread level of acceptance necessary to implement many of the QA models used in Europe for example (even though they might borrow from the ESGs), and/or are subject to significant government interference. Papanthymou & Darra (2017) list a range of internal obstacles to successful implementation of quality management in such countries that includes: i) the lack of management or employee commitment, lack of highly qualified professionals, clarity about role and responsibilities, lack of knowledge of self-assessment mechanisms, or of interest in training; ii) resistance to institutional assessment/change; iii) poor coordination between employees and departmental management and rigid organisational structures; and iv) instability of leaders and departments. For such countries, and for those in the early developmental stages of QA systems, audit and accreditation (see Section 2.3) remain important and significant first steps. In Africa for example, programme registration and institutional registration/accreditation have been in place in several countries (such as Kenya, Nigeria, Botswana and Ghana) since at least the mid-1990s (Machumu & Kisanga, 2014) and many countries have their own standards and guidelines largely guided by and adapted from the ESG¹⁶. Elsewhere, the ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework and the African Standards and Guidelines, both of which articulate with the ESG, are much newer than the ESG and are still in the implementation phase in their regions¹⁷.

In a few countries, such as Canada, there is no national QA system but rather distributed regional or provincial/state-based oversight focusing mainly on programmes rather than institutions. The US system is based on accreditation to qualify for federal funding for students and the need for the Federal Government to determine that students are attending a legitimate university¹⁸. The Financial Framework for Students is set out in law and includes necessary accreditation of institutions, which are assessed in order to be eligible for the Federal PELL Grant Programme to support undergraduate students in HE. In New England for example, the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) has accreditation powers and institutions must apply every 5 years for accreditation. The National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) was reconstituted in 2010 to advise the US Secretary of Education on matters concerning accreditation (allowing regional variation), the recognition process for accrediting

¹⁶ From discussion with Doris Herrmann, Managing Director, AQAS, Germany Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs.

¹⁷ Fiona Crozier, Higher Education Consultant (Quality Assurance and International) and formerly of QAA.

¹⁸ From discussion with Dr Barbara Brittingham, former CEO of New England Association of Schools and Colleges and President Emerita of New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE). Former Board member of QQI.

agencies and institutional eligibility for federal student aid¹⁹. Recognition of an institution entails meeting of a set of 11 standards of faculty staff, governance etc. set by the institutions themselves and against which they are assessed.

Countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden introduced national evaluations through audits to assess institutional quality and impact in areas such as research, teaching, and organisational performance. Similarly, France, Germany, The Netherlands and Italy have used various instruments to assess quality ranging from audits, benchmarking, peer review, qualitative and quantitative indicators, measurement against performance indicators, as well as surveys of students, graduates and employers – among others (Jarvis, 2014). Typical purposes of quality management, ranging through performance assessment, improvement (of academic activities and management), resource allocation, compliance and accountability, have been identified through surveys of HEIs in five global regions [Africa, Asia and Pacific, Europe, Latin America and Caribbean, North America] (Martin & Parikh, 2017).

Across Europe, there is generally less variability in the QA processes (see Section 2.3, Figure 2.1) where the core of the methodology of external QA is the ESG, and national agencies often apply a similar methodology abroad (Grifoll et al., 2015). There is also a tendency for national QA agencies to organise institutional reviews in one way: external panels will include academics, students, and labour market representatives; evidence-based processes are used; and provisions are made to moderate conclusions at the end of the process. Similar review models are favoured: the inclusion of an institutional self-evaluation report, followed by an on-site visit by experts, and the production of a written report as discussed in Section 2.3. That is not to say that there is no variation, due in part to differences in the culture of public administration within which the processes are enacted, and there are many ways to comply with the ESG. In Finland for example, which has a very stable QA system, there is a legal requirement to evaluate institutional QA systems cyclically/regularly and to publish the results, but there is no requirement for the national agency to do so²⁰. There were two possible outcomes for an institution of the first two cycles of audit – to pass, which was valid for 6 years, or fail, with identified problems and the requirement to undertake a re-audit after 2/3 years. Currently the Finnish QA audit (which is externally peer reviewed) provides a rating; insufficient, good or excellent in each of three areas (cut down from 12 areas previously); creating competences (educational processes); promote impact; and enhancing quality and well-being. There is no legal consequence to the outcome but the potential for reputational damage. The recent significant changes to QA in England and the breakaway of QAA from the national process is another case in point (see later).

4.2 A QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM TYPOLOGY

Westerheijden et al. (2014) have suggested an interesting QA system typology emphasising the link between QA and the policy and political contexts in which specific QA methods and schemes are selected. The typology (Fig. 4.3) illustrates one particular approach to categorising QA systems that the authors found useful in describing system development over time.

¹⁹ <https://sites.ed.gov/naciqi/>.

²⁰ From discussions with Dr. Helka Kekäläinen, Head of Unit, Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education, Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, FINEEC.

The typology consists of four very different types of QA process. The most advanced *Next Generation* system is characterised by stepwise, non-contentious improvement of QA schemes designed to enhance teaching and learning, underpinned by internal professional engagement between decision-makers, academic staff and students and just as importantly, a harmonious relationship between government, relevant quality agency and HE institutions. The *Arms Race* system in contrast, results from constantly tougher and sharper QA schemes and a HE sector that tries to defend and buffer itself through avoidance manoeuvres (such as off-loading QA to specialised professional offices), superficial compliance, window dressing and outright political struggle (e.g. revolt against teaching quality assessments by the Russell Group of universities in the UK in 2001).

The third and fourth system types are based on the adoption of QA schemes copied from elsewhere, chosen because of political attractiveness and imposed (using external drivers) regardless of consequences in order to achieve external legitimation. Whether the QA model imposed actually solves quality problems is less important than whether it ‘looks good’ or is fashionable in the eyes of relevant constituencies (Westerheijden et al., 2014). In the *Catwalk* system, pursuing the fashion metaphor, there are broad consensual views on what constitutes good management, modernity and progress between government, society and institutions, which can of course change as a consequence of electoral and governmental changes. The final system model is the *Random Walk* in which QA scheme choices may become random depending on what is needed to obtain political legitimacy in a particular situation.

Whilst this QA model may seem somewhat esoteric, Westerheijden et al. (2014) have successfully applied the above typology to the development of QA in The Netherlands, Norway and Portugal.

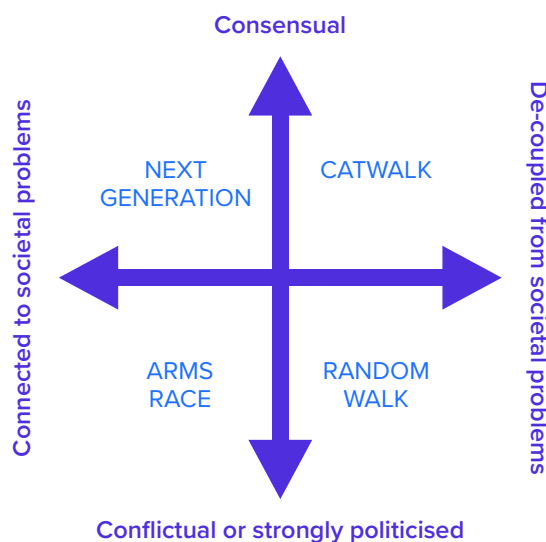


Figure 4.3. The QA system typology of Westerheijden et al. (2014) showing the characteristics of the four QA system types in the four quadrants of the diagram (see text for details of each type). These sit along two gradients – the horizontal dimension varying from a close relationship between the QA system and social problems to be solved (to the left) and de-coupling of such relations (to the right). The vertical dimension relates to the degree of politicisation, from consensual views at the top to conflict and strongly politicised relationships at the bottom. (Redrawn from Westerheijden et al. (2014))

In the Netherlands, between 1985-2002 the QA policy mirrored the ‘Next Generation’ model with umbrella organisations of HEIs co-ordinating their own evolving national schemes of programme evaluation which more closely resembled the improvement-orientated US approach

of programme self-evaluation. A policy change in 2003 followed a ‘Catwalk’ with an accreditation of study programmes approach following the Bologna Declaration. This approach was revisited and further policy change took place in 2011 along the lines of the ‘Next Generation’ model again, where processes were streamlined and given more institutional focus and peer review site visits were introduced to overcome complaints about excessive bureaucracy from the HE sector.

The situation was a little different in Norway. Numerous reforms of HE followed a large influx of students in the early 1990s amidst concern over academic standards. The first phase of QA development (1991-1996) could be described as ‘Catwalk’ with the introduction of national assessments for the first time along with major reorganisation and amalgamations amongst HEIs. The second phase of development up until 2003 fitted the ‘Next Generation’ model with an advisory body to oversee QA and commence a series of institutional audits and the start of developments towards greater institutional autonomy and significant HE reforms. A government change led the way to providing similar framework conditions for public and private providers rather than to support student interests, with developments fitting the ‘Random Walk’ model with the intertwining of political bargaining, ideology and political solutions that facilitated institutional drift in the sector where a variety of institutions could climb the HE hierarchy to university status.

Finally for Portugal, there have been two main phases of QA development. The first from 1992-2006 could be considered to have followed the ‘Next Generation’ model, thereafter a ‘Random Walk’ based on an accreditation approach. Two assessment cycles ran between 1995-2000 and 2000-2005 with an improvement perspective dominant in the first and more of an accountability perspective in the second. Accreditation and government oversight assumed a stronger role subsequently along the lines of a ‘Random Walk’ model with a more politicised HE system underpinned by new legal provisions for QA in HEIs under the oversight of a new assessment and accreditation agency.

If one looks at the situation in Ireland, the general trend has been somewhat similar to Norway, with the initial developments of university QA more aligned to the ‘Catwalk’. The Irish universities established the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) with the introduction of national assessments to oversee QA as stipulated under the 1997 Universities Act and to commence a series of institutional reviews. This then led towards something close to the ‘Next Generation’ approach, with QQI given statutory status and the commencement of developments towards greater institutional autonomy and significant HE reforms. There has also been evidence of recent ‘Random Walk’ with some institutional drift in the overall HE sector where a variety of institutions were facilitated politically, informed by the Hunt Report²¹ with modest formal input from QQI, to achieve university status, and a provider-focused model of QA began to be introduced into the FET sector associated with a ‘Next Generation’ approach. Where it all goes now is of course the big question!

These examples highlight another factor associated with quality in higher education – the political dimension – ‘politics and quality are closely intertwined’ (Westerheijden et al., 2014). They also suggest that QA can be used as an ideological tool which, if appropriately introduced, can be a positive mechanism to separate or buffer HEIs from politics although, arguably, it can also be dangerous to the development of any HE sector. Interest is growing in identifying impact and evidence in QA, with a demand for proof of the positive effect to support the growing ‘evidence-based policy-making’ (Beerkens, 2018; see Section 3). Effects of QA probably do vary across countries (depending one suspects on the maturity of the education

21 The ‘National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030’ in the Republic of Ireland (universally known as the Hunt Report).

system, the relationships between the various parties as discussed earlier, and the specific QA approach and level of regulation adopted).

4.3. DEVELOPMENTS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS INTERNATIONALLY

Until 2010, the dominant trend in the regulation of quality in higher education systems reflected the reassertion of state and direct regulatory oversight coalescing around the use of qualifications frameworks (QF) (see Section 2.1) which were progressively standardised as part of a national or regional QF (Jarvis, 2014). Despite this apparent level of conformity, scepticism has been reported on the effectiveness of any one QA model (Ryan, 2015) and recently several countries have introduced quite substantial changes to the previously prevailing QA model. One of the first movers was the USA where quality review processes were primarily discharged by institutional accreditation, focusing largely on resources and processes in the 1990s, but then moving towards the requirement for institutions to directly assess and provide concrete evidence of student learning outcomes and actual levels of student performance (Ewell, 2010). In other countries a major shift involved integration of previously separate agencies (often dealing with different education sectors) into new statutorily based entities underpinned by legislation and associated with nationally-based institutional reviews (e.g. Portugal (Rosa et al., 2012), Austria²², and Ireland (QQI, 2021)). In fact, most countries with mature QA systems have been or are going through a development or transformation of their QA system.

The developments in Scotland provide an interesting and apparently successful case study. The Scottish Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA Scotland) made it clear that its enhancement focus, introduced over 20 years ago, emerged from the previous, more than a decade-long, experience of audit and review (Singh 2010). The approach has been successful with four, 4/5 year cycles of review to date²³. Previously, institutional and subject-level reviews were separate, but the external review process had identified extremely few below-threshold pockets of provision with the majority being identified as ‘excellent’ or ‘highly satisfactory’. It was, therefore, recognised that the focus of future quality approaches should be on ensuring that all provision would be enhanced from this evidently positive starting position. Collaboration between Universities Scotland, QAA Scotland, the National Union of Students and the Scottish Funding Council, led to an approach which focused on institutional evaluation of policy and practice using external reference points (including sector data about comparator institutions) as well as external peers. The revised Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), strongly supported by successive Scottish governments, has been operational since 2003 and has five elements: External Quality Review, known in Scotland as “Enhancement-led Institutional Review” (ELIR); Internal Quality Review, termed “Institution-led Review”; Student Engagement in Quality; the Enhancement Themes; and Public Information (Pelik, 2023).

Under this approach institutions self-recognise issues and collaborate with QAA Scotland to establish targeted reviews with follow-up in a scheme called Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)²⁴. There are some prerequisites to this approach however:

²² Austrian QA system, 2022. Published on Eurydice (<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/austria/overview>).

²³ Based on a discussion with Ailsa Crum, Currently Director of Membership, Quality Enhancement and Standards, QAA (former head of Quality and Enhancement QAA Scotland).

²⁴ Report by QAA Scotland ‘An overview of quality and enhancement activity 2018-2022 (ELIR 4 cycle)’: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/reviewing-he-in-scotland/elir-4-overview-of-the-quality-and-enhancement-activities-2018-22.pdf?sfvrsn=56a5a581_4.

- It must be based on trust and mutual respect between the agencies and institutions;
- Trust, in turn, is based on evidence that institutions will evaluate honestly and regularly;
- Yearly reports and sharing outcomes of periodic and subject reviews are required [providing for collective learning and digests of emerging themes and common challenges];
- An ongoing (positive) relationship between HEIs and the QA agency is also required;
- There should be a ‘no surprises’ approach where the HEI raises emerging issues with QAA rather than QAA learning of issues from student complaints or via media;
- The ELIR is supported by a ‘concern’ scheme that can trigger investigation;
- Considerable effort is put into training reviewers, careful timing of visits, the timely provision of information and the achievement of balanced reports.

“ELIR 5” is likely to involve greater changes than the relatively small evolutions to date, if it is to continue to retain support and confidence (Pelik, 2023). In a very recent development, QAA Scotland has been commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to lead key workstreams of Scotland’s Tertiary Quality Project which involves the development and delivery of a common approach to assuring and enhancing quality in Scotland’s tertiary sector. QAA Scotland will lead two key workstreams in the overall project. One involves the design and delivery of a multi-year quality cycle involving peer-led external review of colleges and universities, working closely with Education Scotland. QAA Scotland will also lead planning for the delivery of a national enhancement programme across Scotland’s tertiary sector. Further collaboration with student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs) and NUS Scotland will maximise the effectiveness of student partnership in the new arrangements.

The kind of developments exemplified by the Scottish example are supported by stakeholder engagement where the voices of students, employers and other external stakeholders are increasingly part of the process. But these developments are also dependant on the scale of the sector, which plays a role in the kind of QA system that can be successfully implemented – the Scottish system for example, unlike that of England, is of an appropriate scale and coherence to make it suitable for this approach [the Irish system would be of a similar scale and therefore potentially suitable also]. The challenge a larger-scale system poses is the increase in the variety of expectations, often contradictory, that QA has to meet (Beerrens, 2015). Academics and university leaders emphasise the ideas of improvement and enhancement in a QA system whereas employers might expect more comparative information about universities and output factors, such as qualifications and labour market success. Government representatives, on the other hand, acting on behalf of all societal stakeholders, carry the broadest set of expectations, including facilitating funding and offering credibility of the system.

The dominant form of QA at the present time seems to be accreditation (see Section 2.3), with an increasing emphasis on outputs, such as quality standards and learning competencies – focusing on process outcomes rather than on the mechanisms of the process itself (Beerrens, 2015). There is also a shift towards institutional audits, as in the Netherlands, Austria and elsewhere (Hopbach, 2014), which manage to reach to the core of institutional processes and support effectively the collaborative actions in the institution to effect real change in the teaching and learning process (Dill & Beerrens, 2010). Some quality agencies have a broader remit than others, as for example the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), which cooperates with the Norwegian Research Council to assess the status of research vis a vis international levels and also conducts student and staff surveys on study programmes which facilitates the highlighting

of challenges in the sector²⁵. Further, in some countries, the quality of education for specific disciplines may be overseen by independent bodies under law, as in the case of engineering in France where The Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur (CTI) is responsible for the accreditation of all engineering courses²⁶.

Accreditation is sometimes scored, as is the case in Denmark, using a three-point scale²⁷:

- **Positive (green light):**
The QA system of the institution is generally well described and well-functioning in practice. This allows for the possibility of establishing new educational programmes as well as adjusting existing programmes.
- **Conditionally positive (yellow light):**
The greater part of the QA system is well described and works reasonably well in practice but certain areas are less well-functioning and the institution needs to follow up on this within a certain time period. All new educational programmes must be accredited before being established and a plan for follow-up drawn up.
- **Refusal of accreditation (red light):**
Several significant deficiencies in the structure and/or the functioning of the institution's QA system mean that the institution cannot establish new educational programmes and existing educational programmes must be accredited following a rota system.

However, the outcomes of the QA process are more usually framed in terms of lists of commendations and recommendations supported by explanatory text, in addition to approval or otherwise in relation to programme accreditation.

The more recent emergence of *Risk-based Regulation* in higher education, as for example in England and Australia, is conceptually rather different from more traditional approaches (see Section 2.3). This assumes that quality risks are not equally distributed across various HEIs and therefore the monitoring of institutions becomes selective, based particularly on high-risk cases, on track records of regulatory compliance, financial soundness and good internal (risk management) controls. On the face of it, this seems to leave quality enhancement firmly in the hands of intra-institutional processes in the majority of HEIs unless the institutions take advantage of some external review process. The *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency* (TEQSA) (2015) details this kind of development in QA in Australia, whose risk-based QA model is often touted as one of the most progressive systems in practice (Fig. 4.4). The original external agency, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was established in 1999 and ran cycles of quality audit with all 39 universities in 2001 and 2008 (before it was dissolved and its functions transferred to TEQSA). As TEQSA notes, its 'regulatory risk framework' ensures HEI sector participants are placed into various categories. As mentioned earlier (Section 2.3), long-established institutions with successful track records, international reputations and evidenced-based achievements in research and teaching excellence essentially receive 'light touch' regulation, reducing compliance burdens and the need to engage in institutional audits to demonstrate QA processes (Shah, 2013). Instead, the focus of TEQSA is on those institutions whose operations may pose risk to the sector and overall reputational impact (Jarvis, 2014).

25 From discussions with Dr Øystein Lund, Former Director of Quality Assurance, Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), currently Councillor for Research and Education – Royal Norwegian Embassy, London.

26 French QA system, 2022. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/france/overview>.

27 Danish QA system, 2022. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/denmark/overview>.

In Australia, QA panels only visit problematic cases based on analysis of data such as student dropout rates, staff-student ratios and institutes that are identified as being at risk of falling below quality thresholds that need to be addressed specifically – this might appear to be a rather negative and punitive approach²⁸.

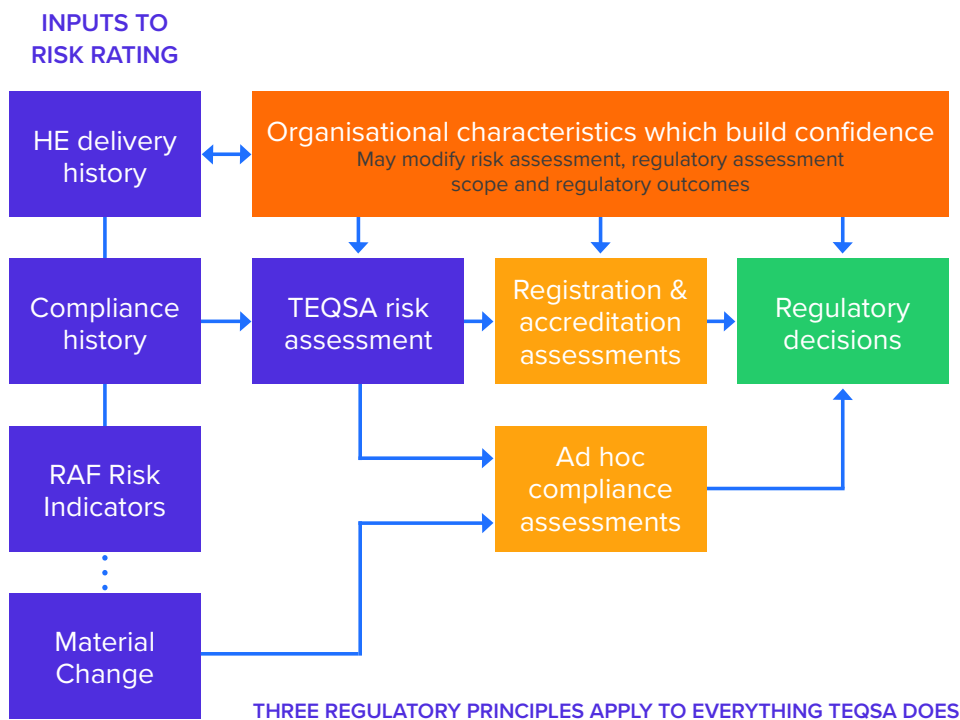


Figure 4.4. The Australian Risk-based QA model (from TEQSA, 2015) based on previous delivery and compliance history of institutions and risk indicators that feed into a risk assessment. Only certain institutions undergo accreditation or compliance assessments.

A further development is the effective ‘professionalisation’ of QA (in the sense that the accreditation is, for example, managed by the relevant professional disciplinary body rather than the state-governed QA agency). Examples include the Washington Accord²⁹ in engineering education and the international accreditation for business schools through the US-based Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)³⁰, which were highlighted earlier. In Ireland, there are a range of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) that accredit a variety of professional programmes, such as the Medical Council, Engineers Ireland, Dental Council, and Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland amongst many others³¹. These are seen to offer perhaps more relevant and valuable disciplinary-specific ‘labels’ than national accreditation (Beerrens, 2015) although their articulation in institutional QA systems is still important.

28 From discussions with Maria Kelo, Former Director of ENQA and currently Director of Institutional Development at EUA.

29 International Engineering Alliance [<https://www.ieagreements.org/accords/washington/>] established the Washington Accord as a multi-lateral agreement between bodies responsible for accreditation or recognition of tertiary-level engineering qualifications within their jurisdictions and which have chosen to work collectively to assist the mobility of professional engineers. The Accord outlines the mutual recognition, between the participating bodies, of accredited engineering degree programmes. It also establishes and benchmarks the standard for professional engineering education across those bodies.

30 AACSB (<https://www.aacsb.edu/about-us>) provides quality assurance, business education intelligence, and learning and development services to over 1,850 member organisations and more than 950 accredited business schools worldwide. AACSB’s accreditation processes are [ISO 9001:2015](https://www.aacsb.edu/about-us) certified.

31 See the QQI document ‘Principles for Professional Engagements with Education Providers, including Programme Validation, Professional Accreditation and Approval’ https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2022-02/principles-for-accreditation-and-other-professional-engagements_0.pdf.

4.4. SUMMARY

There has been a considerable amount of change in the approaches to, and nature of, QA and quality improvement over the last 30 years or so since QA became fully embedded in higher education. As Beerkens (2018) rightly points out, evidence of the link between activities undertaken (in the QA sphere) and their effect on learning quality is essential for evidence-based quality enhancement in education, yet measuring the real effect of any quality instrument on student achievement is at best highly resource-intensive and is ‘under-theorised and under-researched’ (Newton, 2013). That is not to say that it cannot be done and evidence from England and Australia, using performance metrics, has demonstrated improvements in, for example, retention rate and employability (see Section 3).

Leiber et al. (2015) explore the underlying sociological framework and present a number of experimental approaches to investigating how to assess the impact of QA on HEIs. They favour comparative and longitudinal studies that include assumptions about the causal mechanisms and careful survey designs. As Beerkens (2018) points out, the ‘gold standard’ – rigorous (quasi-) experimental proof that a quality instrument has increased student learning – may be not only technically challenging to obtain but also very costly and perhaps not the most effective way to develop optimal QA mechanisms and encourage quality education. How and under what conditions does it work? What is the problem that needs addressing, if there is one? What alternative solutions could there be and would they work?

As educators, we have a ‘guiding image’ of what knowledge we believe the student should know and comprehend and what skills they should have acquired at various stages of their education, and we test the student’s knowledge, aptitude and application against ‘targets’ of what we think they should or need to know. The student’s success in many ways reflects on the teachers’ ability to teach, transfer knowledge and develop skills in the student just as much as it depends on the student’s inherent abilities and learning capacity. And who sets this target of knowledge that the student should achieve – the teacher themselves, the external examiner, the disciplinary profession, the government, or broader society? There is of course no right answer, but this short discourse serves to make the point again that ‘quality is in the eye of the beholder’ so to speak, no less so in higher education than in other walks of life. There must be a target to measure quality against and it is likely that this will be a moving target in education. On this basis, QA and quality enhancement cannot be measured against static targets but must develop in tandem with educational progress and societal needs.



CHAPTER 5.

5. NEW CONCEPTS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE

Singh (2010) poses a fundamental question: “Is there anything new that is intellectually engaging, politically instructive or educationally useful to say about the last two [or three] decades of QA in higher education or to insert into QA systems in their multiplying manifestations around the world?” In truth, looking through the recent literature and discussing the ‘state-of-the-art’ with various experts, there is evidence of some developments over time as QA systems mature, followed by a significant amount of consolidation of ideas and approaches, the emergence of much empirical evidence supporting the basic tenets of the benefits of QA and a gradual expansion of implementation of the systems to a wider educational base (such as Further Education), but, apart perhaps from the risk-based QA approach, nothing dramatically new.

Occasionally, though infrequently, there have been more systematic attempts to connect the quality question in HE with other social purposes like equity, social justice and democracy. In South Africa, the QA system has included criteria on social justice and social transformation (Lange & Singh, 2010). Are these more holistic approaches simply outliers, operating well outside the main body of ‘recognisable’ QA or are they actually responsive, socially derived, attempts to take fuller account of the real-world and contemporary social struggles which inevitably continue to shape the purposes of higher education (see Singh, 2010)? Embracing this expansionist approach to QA is not simple. What factors should be taken into account, what criteria should be considered for the inclusion of additional elements, and to what extent do they represent a shift in expectations about the central purposes of QA and/or require a fundamental change in the basic QA cycle?³²

The following sub-sections offer a few ideas, some new, some already raised by others, that could be considered as possible contributions to the next phase of development of QA systems in higher education.

5.1. AN INSTITUTIONAL TYPOLOGY

The basic process and organisation of QA systems was described earlier (Section 2, Fig. 2.2) as usually consisting of a combination of internal and external review and evidence-based processes used to quality assure programmes, subjects or institutions, although the significance and weight of the elements might vary. These can potentially be characterised as one of four different types of QA process as described in Section 4.2 (based on the typology of QA systems of Westerheijden et al., 2014). What is also evident is that the degree of engagement with, enthusiasm for, or responsiveness to, QA varies amongst institutions. One can therefore conceive of an ‘institutional typology’ in relation to this engagement with QA which reflects not only how the QA process is perceived but also on how it is used and what benefits accrue.

In Figure 5.1, I have identified a number of institutional types arranged along two dimensions that define the relationship between the institution and QA processes. The different institutional types lie within a ‘two-dimensional quality space’ in relation to degree of engagement with QA and enthusiasm for/responsiveness to QA and each demonstrates particular characteristics that could

provide a framework against which more individually targeted QA approaches and processes could be established in the HE sector of any jurisdiction.

At the top right of the graph, the “*Engaged Enthusiast*” demonstrates the greatest engagement with and enthusiasm for QA. Such institutions are likely to be confident (i.e. willing to show all their ‘wares, warts and all!’), and a reflective and learning organisation. Quality and QA is fully integrated into the institutional culture and strategy and the overall process is embraced, often with self-directed processes and an enthusiasm for new developments. The QA process is enhancement-focused on teaching and learning and student and staff development and often also encapsulates research and service. These organisations will work well with external reviewers during reviews and are often highly networked organisations, willing to share learning and best practice. Basically QA and QE are undertaken as they are seen as ‘the right thing to do’ for the direct and longer-term benefit of the institution and its staff and students.

The “*Competitor*” institution also evinces strong engagement with and enthusiasm for QA, but perhaps with a different motivation. This institution is likely to be prestige-seeking and driven by the perceived benefits to status and standing of strong engagement with QA. It basically engages with QA so that it can demonstrate its quality and success to peers, funders and prospective students through successful QA reviews and published outcomes. The success in the process is then leveraged to gain more funding and attract staff and students.

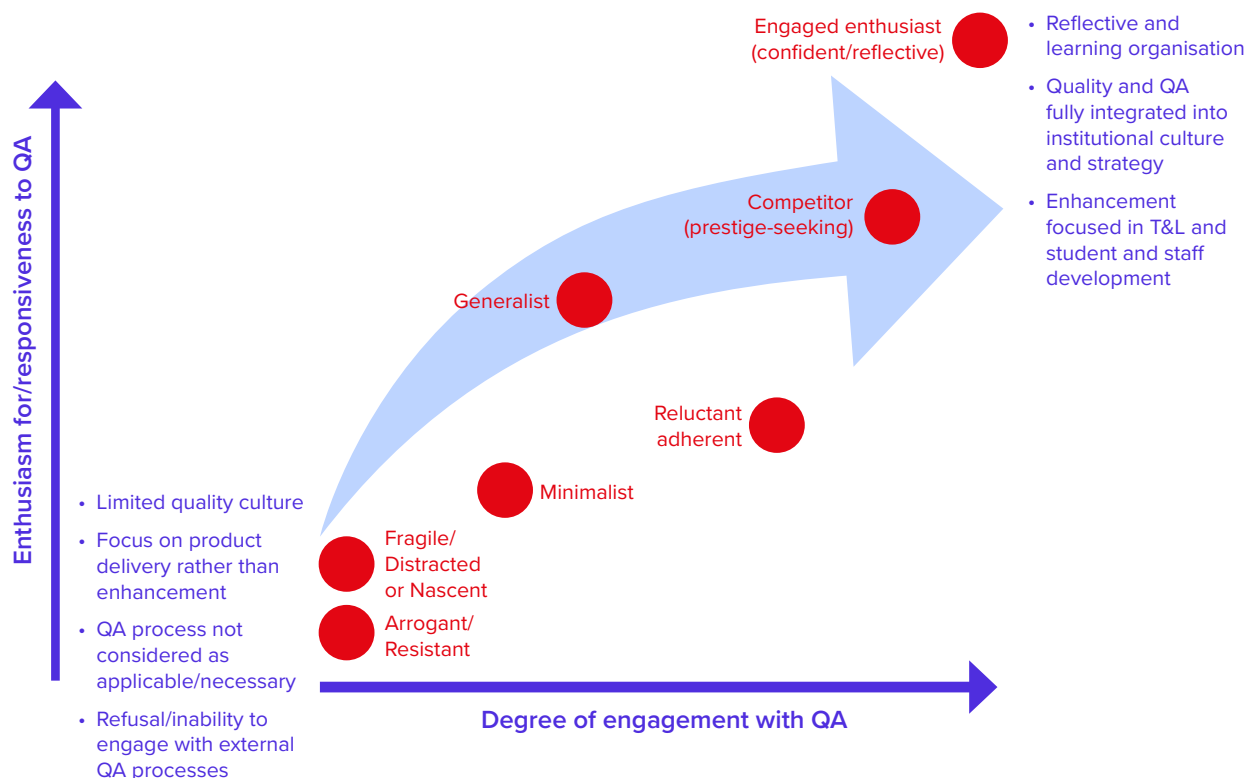


Figure 5.1. An institutional typology placing institution type (in red) within a ‘two-dimensional quality space’ in relation to degree of engagement with QA (X-axis) and enthusiasm for/responsiveness to QA (Y-axis). The general characteristics of the extreme types (top right and bottom left) are described.

The “**Reluctant Adherent**” fully engages with QA processes, albeit with limited enthusiasm, largely because it is required to do so by legislation and its funding agencies. There is limited engagement

with QE and basically a compliance-approach to the overall process. Little innovation will ensue.

The “**Minimalist**” has no enthusiasm for the QA process and undertakes only what is absolutely necessary (by law or required by the relevant funding agency or government Department) to minimise costs and effort. It will comply with necessary required follow-up after the event but is unlikely to take the initiative on any self-improvements.

Two types of institution can be conceived that show very little or no engagement with QA. The “**Fragile/Distracted or Nascent**” institution is one with perhaps significant ongoing problems, with concerns over risk of exposure during any QA process, or a relatively new institution lacking the ability to undertake a full QA process. It would be likely to require significant external intervention to overcome the problems or sufficient time to develop the necessary abilities to undertake full QA. On the other hand, the “**Arrogant or Resistant**” institution does not believe that the QA process offers any benefit or that it is necessary and therefore effectively declines to engage. Some may alternatively seek targeted accreditation instead of the fuller QA process. These institutions may be state-supported or private, the former obviously likely to be in some form of conflict with state bodies, the latter unconcerned or not sufficiently persuaded that the benefits of QA justify the costs.

Finally, the “**Generalist**” could be considered as a mix of many of the other types in a single institution, i.e. where various elements of the institution (such as individual Schools/Faculties or the equivalent ‘go’ or are ‘allowed to go’ their own ways in respect of engagement with the QA processes. The overall institution would undertake broad institutional-type reviews but the various elements would align with one ‘type’ or another (i.e. some might be “Engaged Enthusiasts”, others “Minimalist” and some even “Resistant”). It is quite likely that the “Generalist” would be the most common type, particularly amongst the large, complex institutions.

Does this typology have any value? I think the answer is yes. The quality review outcome and site visit for example would look completely different in the case of the ‘Engaged Enthusiast’, the ‘Reluctant Adherent’ and the ‘Fragile’ institutions. Institutional cultures and attitudes change over time in light of leadership and the influence of institutional values on quality management, hence the typology might be somewhat fluid for any particular institution. Using this typology one could, for example, envisage a flexible national QA system where the nature of the quality review might be tailored to the perceived (e.g. as determined by the state funding agency or quality agency based on past engagement, performance and outcomes of reviews) or self-identified institutional type, or where institutions are ‘encouraged’ in some way to shift their approach to the benefit of the students, staff and overall education system (this concept is developed further in Section 6, and Fig 6.1). A similar type of approach might be considered also for internal QA in the “Generalist” type of institution, for example. The trust placed in institutions by the funding agency and/or quality agency based on past experiences is likely to vary across the institutional types, similar to what is described in Fig 5.1 (where the x-axis is replaced with ‘Degree of Trust’). One would surmise that those institutions earning greatest trust would be likely to undergo a less intrusive QA process from the relevant national agency. The typology would also seem to offer some advantages for the ‘Risk-based’ QA approaches such as that introduced in Australia, where the experience of the QA agency from previous reviews or advice from the main legislative authority could identify the institutional type and therefore establish the overall QA approach accordingly. Over time, institutions might shift their status and consequently the nature of their engagement with QA authorities.

5.2. THE SCALE OF APPROACH

The scale of approach to QA by various actors has already been touched on in Section 1 (p.9) but it is worth developing this a little further as there is merit in using the macro/meso/micro categorisation as a way of thinking about the overall shape of the QA system, and the needs of participants and stakeholders³³.

At a *macro level*, in order for a national HE sector to participate in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), as well as for international prestige, the sector must align with the Bologna process and implement one of the key requirements of Bologna for a national system of QA to strengthen the quality and relevance of learning and teaching to ensure standards. At individual institutional level, a third-party independent verification/quality mark will be required by constituent institutions in the sector for many of the benefits articulated in Section 3 to accrue. This is currently achieved in most countries (including Ireland) through sectoral-level comprehensive Institutional Review (IR) with external peer reviewers. An institution-wide review of research would also fall within this scale of QA.

At a *meso level*, institutions will focus QA internally and holistically on academic schools and departments or services, reviewing a wide range of functions and activities, again usually in a predetermined periodic cycle. This will involve peer review panels that might consist of both external and internal members. Targeted QA processes (such as the development of learning outcomes or managing distance learning) conducted by quality agencies across the sector might also be considered at this meso level. Other stakeholders, such as professional accreditation bodies, might wish to focus on particular quality concerns related to the overall development of their discipline across the quality spectrum or on their need to transform or further develop quality processes to support implementation of strategic goals/ developments of the institutions offering their professional programmes. Thus, cross-sectoral QA of specific provisions, such as medical education or engineering, by relevant professional bodies, would operate at this level.

The majority of QA stakeholders will take a much more specialised, narrowly focused, *micro-level* view of quality, including employers, students, parents, research agencies and academic disciplinary bodies, accreditation bodies, advocacy agencies and groups and perhaps most individual academics. In institutions, this might be targeted, for example, at ongoing individual programmes, or even modules, internal programme approval, particular functions etc. Again, other stakeholders, such as professional accreditation bodies, would wish to focus on particular quality concerns related to the overall development of their discipline across the quality spectrum in individual institutions. This scale of approach could be reflected in particular local quality initiatives, at the level of Schools and programmes, or service units and their business processes.

5.3. INTRODUCING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

An appreciation of the value of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), that cover a broad range of issues related to socio-economic, environmental and technological development, is gradually impacting on all walks of life and the higher education system is no exception. As part of their broad remit, the SDGs expanded the focus beyond primary and secondary education to include tertiary education (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). In particular, SDG 4

³³ These ideas on scale of approach have benefited from discussions with Elizabeth Noon, Director of Quality at UCC.

calls for equal access to tertiary education, including university, as part of the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. So, what is the relevance of the SDGs for QA? The EHEA produced a ‘Rome Communiqué’ in November 2020 which highlighted the key role HE could play in delivering sustainable development goals (Stukalo & Lytvyn, 2021). Even earlier, Holm et al. (2014) had conducted a comparative analysis of QA in education for sustainable development (ESD) in Chinese and Nordic universities, both at the policy and at the implementation level. Somewhat surprisingly, AQUA (Andorra Quality Assurance Agency) in partnership with ACPUA (Aragon Agency for Quality Assurance and Strategic Foresight in Higher Education (based in the Autonomous Community of Aragon in Spain)) are amongst the pioneering agencies focusing attention and support on quality-led pathways for embedding sustainable development into higher education and SDGs into higher education QA and quality enhancement systems³⁴.

One can envisage how the concepts and aspirations highlighted in many of the SDGs could be applied to the educational processes and development of HEIs through academic programmes and their learning outcomes, research activities, institutional policies and strategies and management and development of educational campuses, and evaluated as such with refocused QA approaches. This could include the following (paraphrased) SDGs:

- 3 – Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being at all ages;
- 5 – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls;
- 8 – Promote sustained, inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment;
- 9 – Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation;
- 10 – Reduce inequality;
- 11 – Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable;
- 13 – Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts;
- 14, 15 – Promote restoration, conservation and sustainable use of natural resources and ecosystems and halt biodiversity loss;
- 16 – Promote peaceful, just and inclusive societies and accountable and inclusive institutions;
- 17 – Strengthen and revitalise global partnership for sustainable development.

A number of universities have been taking the lead in this area, strengthening our empirical and conceptual understanding of how SDGs can be achieved through higher education and educating future generations about the most significant global challenges. These institutions are now gaining recognition through targeted ranking schemes. The Times Higher Education (THE) University Impact Rankings for example was introduced in 2019 to measure institutions’ social and economic impact. The latest (2023) Impact Rankings is the 5th edition and includes over 1590 universities from over 110 countries/regions³⁵. It finds the top six (in rank order) to be the Western Sydney University (Australia), University of Manchester (UK), Queen’s University (Canada), Universiti Sains Malaysia, University of Tasmania (Australia) and Arizona State University (USA). Irish universities fared extremely well in the overall ranking, with four institutions (University of Galway, University College Cork, Dublin City University and University of Limerick) ranked in the top 100 worldwide,

34 www.aqua.ad/system/files/sites/private/files/101_17045_proposal_of_indicators_to_embed_the_sdg_into_institutional_q_assessment_digital_0.pdf

35 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings>

and specific recognition is given to UCC which finished in the world's top six for SDG 2 (Zero hunger), University of Galway which was 21st for SDG 14 (Life on Water) and University College Dublin which appears in the world's top 20 for SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy), to mention just a few.

There is clearly a growing appetite for engagement with SDGs and for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and value is seen in their application to HE activity – an approach already implemented by the Swiss QA agency (AAQ) in its institutional accreditation framework. Inclusion of an evaluation of the success of application of SDGs in institutions would seem an obvious and beneficial way to expand or refocus elements of the QA process and serve as a lens through which to review HE as a whole.

5.4. BROADENING THE SCOPE (RESEARCH, SERVICE, AND THE THIRD MISSION)

The above discussion on the introduction of sustainability and the SDGs into QA processes highlights the appetite for further broadening of the scope of QA away from the more traditional concentration on teaching and learning and governance/management areas.

5.4.1. RESEARCH

Over the past decade, the inclusion of research activities in internal QA processes has grown with some 95% of respondents to an EUA survey reporting they are covered at least to some extent (EUA, 2023). The broader evaluation of research quality at both institutional and national level has been an area of focus for several decades now in a number of jurisdictions, most notably in the UK REF scheme. The rationale includes increased social awareness and public interest in the process and results of scientific research, the need to document the activity of scientists and researchers and the overall impact of their actions on individuals and societies, as well as the fact that the quality of education and research is crucial to attracting international talent and innovative organisations willing to invest in countries and regions (Margherita et al., 2022). The UK REF was conducted as a separate exercise from 'normal' QA with the goal of effectively ranking institutions based on the 'quality' of their research staff (using peer review of individuals and their outputs) and using the ranking towards the determination of institutional resourcing. Most European countries have introduced Performance-based Research Funding Systems (PRFS) for institutional funding (Sivertsen, 2017) although in the main they have, apart from a few cases (such as Italy, Lithuania and Portugal), adopted a different approach to the UK, especially in relation to the use of bibliometrics which forms no part or only a small part of the quality indicators. As a result of a major review of the UK REF system, Hicks et al. (2015) concluded "Metrics should support, not supplant, expert judgement. Peer review is not perfect, but it is the least worst form of academic governance we have, and should remain the primary basis for assessing research papers, proposals and individuals, and for national assessment exercises like the REF". This recommendation could be interpreted as a formulation of best practice for other countries, particularly since it is aligned with the first of the ten principles of the Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics "Quantitative evaluation should support qualitative, expert assessment" (Hicks et al., 2015) which provided principles for the measurement of research performance and more sustainable and comprehensive approaches to research evaluation (Margherita et al., 2022). Similarly, 'The Metric Tide' report of Wilsdon et al. (2015) concludes that in the UK REF it was not

feasible to assess research quality using quantitative indicators alone, but that peer review was also essential.

To date, the main QA approach to research has been evaluation at the disciplinary level, but whilst transdisciplinary research (TDR) is growing in popularity and importance, definitions of the quality of such research are generally lacking (Belcher et al., 2016). A central aim of TDR is to achieve socially relevant outcomes, and TDR quality criteria should demonstrate accountability to society. Therefore, additional criteria are needed to address the innovative approaches and the diversity of actors, outputs, outcomes, and long-term social impacts of TDR. The Belcher et al. (2016) paper identifies a number of such criteria based on their literature review (of over 30 relevant articles): Relevance; Credibility, Legitimacy, Effectiveness.

Currently in Ireland there is no systematic research quality review at third level. Individual institutions have trialled research quality processes (e.g. UCC developed and ran an institution-wide large-scale externally peer-reviewed research quality review in both 2009 and 2015³⁶). A similar national review would be challenging but given the resources currently provided for research and the potential value of peer review and advice to institutions and individual academic units and research centres, a quality review at a sectoral level offers many advantages. Institutional collaboration should be sought and precedence is available from the ‘Snowball-Metrics’ development amongst 8 UK research intensive universities cooperating to produce a set of research evaluation metrics (Snowball Metrics – <https://snowballmetrics.com/metrics/>) This collaborative scheme includes research metrics (project applications and awards, income and publications and citations); enterprise activities (that includes industrial income, patenting, licensing and spin out generation); postgraduate education, facilities and completion rates; and denominators (number of people, organisations and themes (types of applications and subject areas)). Such standardised metrics could usefully inform a parallel peer review.

Any such developments in Ireland in research quality assessment would need to take into account two recent and important transnational agreements. Firstly, ALLEA (2022), the European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities, reached agreement (based on collaboration amongst 350 European research organisations in 40 countries) on reforming research assessment centred around four core commitments:

1. Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research;
2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators;
3. Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular inappropriate uses of Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and h-index;
4. Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment.

Additional supporting commitments aim to enable the move towards new research assessment criteria, tools and processes, and to facilitate mutual learning, communicate progress and ensure that new approaches are evidence informed.

36 See <https://www.ucc.ie/en/geu/rqr-1415/>.

Secondly, the European Council Conclusions on Research Assessment and Implementation of Open Science (June 2022) established principles to guide research assessment into the future:

- A. moving to a more balanced approach between the quantitative and the qualitative evaluation of research, by strengthening the qualitative research assessment indicators while developing the responsible use of quantitative indicators;
- B. recognising all forms of research and innovation output and processes;
- C. taking into consideration diverse career pathways and all research and innovation activities;
- D. taking into consideration the specificities of the various research disciplines, the range from basic to applied research, the stages of research careers and the missions of research institutions;
- E. ensuring that ethics and integrity are accorded the highest priority and are not compromised by counter-incentives;
- F. ensuring diversity, gender equality, and actively promoting women in science.

These, and the above ALLEA core commitments, would seem to provide a template for establishing core research QA approaches in the future.

5.4.2. SERVICE

Service quality is mostly recognised in the commercial arena. It is well known that improving service quality can have a direct impact on a company's ability to satisfy customer needs while remaining competitive and thereby increase a commercial organisation's profits and reputation. There are five dimensions of service quality recognised: reliability (ability and consistency in performing a certain service that satisfies customers' needs); tangibility (the ability to portray service quality to customers); empathy (delivery of services in a way that suggests empathy to customers' demands and needs); responsiveness (ability to provide prompt services and responses to customers' requests); assurance (the element of trust the customer has in the organisation's ability to deliver services)³⁷. The provision of high-quality service requires knowledge of what the 'customers' want, hence market intelligence is beneficial (e.g. through surveys).

Service quality can and has been readily applied to educational enterprises and increasingly is included in institutional QA reviews although not universally. The focus will, of course, differ from the teaching and learning activity and will also vary depending on the administrative structures and foci of the institution in question. QA may include student-facing services and offices such as admissions, student experience, library, health, sports and examinations (some of which can be offered within academic departments as well as centrally), as well as staff-facing services and offices such as human resources, research support, academic administration, finance etc.

There are a range of recognised 'customers' in higher education at whom the various services are targeted (see Table 5.1) and who expect a quality service.

37 Indeed Editorial Team August 2022 at <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/service-quality>.

HE “customers”	Customer attributes
Students	Pay for and receive educational instruction, utilise administrative functions, purchase auxiliary services (e.g. accommodation, food, entertainment)
Parents	Select or assist in the selection of service provider, pay for service and associated costs on behalf of student, provide primary contact point for some services
Future employers of graduates	‘Purchase’ the end product of the service process, sometimes provide advice in service design or funding, sometimes offer learning opportunities (e.g. work placement)
Staff/faculty members	Develop, design, and deliver product/service, consume some services
Disciplinary academic communities	Benefit from scholarly activity of faculty members, provide peer review of services, accredit programmes
Research sponsors	Provide funds to HEIs or individual faculty members in exchange for service, information, or activities
Accreditation bodies	Exercise various degrees of control over product/service design and delivery
State and federal governments	Provide funds for HEIs to engage in service and for students to participate. Exercise varying degrees of influence over service/product design and delivery
Society	Pays (through taxes) for portions of the services and benefits from the services provided by HE

Table 5.1. Customers of the service provision of a higher education institution and their attributes (modified after Quinn et al., 2009).

Trying to meet all service requirements and expectations may pose significant challenges to the institution and balancing quality improvement efforts based on the relative importance of the competing customers might be the only pragmatic way forward.

A range of quality techniques are used in industry and business including Total Quality Management, Quality Function Deployment, Six Sigma, ISO 9001 etc. and many have been applied to higher education but not systematically and with limited analysis of their success or value (Quinn et al., 2009). More general approaches to quality review of service provision can be beneficial to both the educational institution and the service itself based on personal experience and as reported by many QA practitioners. A more systematic and holistic approach to QA of service should be considered going forward.

5.4.3 THE THIRD MISSION

One final area of interest that could be considered as a target for further development in QA is the so-called ‘Third Mission’. Educating and qualifying human capital is recognised as the First Mission of HEIs and the production of new knowledge through research as the Second Mission. There is also a growing expectation that HEIs will engage with societal needs and market

demands, contributing to the local and regional development, economic growth and social development of host and often global societies through a Third Mission (see Laredo, 2007). This arises in part through the implications and impact of the UN Sustainable Development Goals which, as discussed earlier, have prompted renewed motivation to orient universities' teaching, research, and engaged activities to promote inclusive and sustainable development (e.g. Filho et al, 2021). In this regard, there is a growing focus on how universities' institutional arrangements enable or hinder interaction and collaboration with community stakeholders, and how universities consciously and strategically make and improve on these societal contributions (e.g. Zomer & Benneworth, 2011), thus there is a growing desire to consider the quality of this engagement. This is easier said than done and the situation in Portugal, for example, is commonplace. There, whilst Portuguese institutions apparently strongly embrace the Third Mission, the QA of this as a core activity is still in an embryonic stage of development (Sin et al., 2018). The systematic literature review conducted by Manatos et al. (2017) found that the Third Mission is the dimension receiving least attention in relation to QA possibly due, at least in Europe, to the focus of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) on the learning and teaching dimension and to the fact that the ESGs have been used as a reference framework by European institutions to devise their internal QA systems and by QA agencies in their assessment and accreditation activities. This is clearly an area for development and one which refocused and more holistic QA systems could embrace into the future.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding an open book. The person is wearing a dark, textured sweater. The book is open to a page with mathematical text and diagrams. An orange circular graphic is overlaid on the left side of the image, partially covering the book and the person's hand. The text 'CHAPTER 6.' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font over the orange graphic.

CHAPTER 6.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the context of globalisation, the quality of higher education (HE) is increasingly considered as strategically important for national economic development and competitiveness (World Bank, 2009, Martin and Parikh, 2017). Yet, despite HE being perceived as a strategic asset for the knowledge economy, concerns have been expressed about the quality and relevance of its provisions such as teaching and research. These concerns are particularly apposite in the context of changes in the level of public funding of the HE sector: while enrolments and overall spending have increased, public expenditure per student has not kept pace (OECD, 2016). Graduate unemployment has also become a growing concern internationally, with labour markets seemingly not responding to the dynamic expansion of HE systems. In Ireland, for example, over 28% of workers are in an occupation that does not require a third level qualification despite having one³⁸ – the fourth highest rate in the EU. As a consequence of these external impacts, there has been a perception of declining academic standards globally and a questioning of the relevance of HE to labour market needs, particularly in developing countries (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumberg, 2009).

Thus, many countries have created mechanisms for external quality assurance (EQA), such as accreditation and review or quality audit, guided in some cases by institutional initiatives, in others by national reforms, and in still others by regional policies, such as the Bologna process in Europe with its heavy emphasis on quality management (QM) (see Martin and Parikh, 2017). This has meant that since the 1990s, quality has turned from a debatable and controversial concept into an everyday consideration in higher education. This has largely been driven by governmental administration and policymakers, and – it would seem – is something the academic community reacted to, rather than acted to achieve (Saarinen, 2010). The FET sector in Ireland and elsewhere is now on the same road.

Over three decades, educational QA has developed into a well-institutionalised regulatory field. The response of the Irish HE and FET sectors to COVID-19 showed how generally robust QA and standards were for most programmes although some ‘limped along’ and there was a huge amount of training involved in all institutions to cope. However, it is nonetheless necessary, outside of the COVID-19 context, to reflect upon whether QA is generally effective as well as whether it is achieving the aims and objectives that underpinned the emergence of QA in the higher education sector in the first place. If not, it should be considered whether the present approach to QA needs to be supplemented or whether, in fact, major surgery is required.

In relation to the Irish HE sector in particular, one can pose a number of challenging questions:

- Has the quality of delivery and outcomes of academic programmes been maintained over time in the face of apparent long-term chronic underfunding of the HE sector leading to disimproving staff : student ratios, funding and space per FTE? Has quality in the sector been enhanced through increased efficiency and effectiveness of provision, improved teaching and learning skills – and can we hence conclude that QA and QE are working? Or, is the well documented fall in international rankings of Irish universities over the last decade or so symptomatic of quality challenges that are impacting the sector but not being identified through existing QA systems? For instance, we are not seeing the effects on the quality of graduates necessarily but on research and innovation metrics. It is notable that the

38 <https://www.irishexaminer.com/business/economy/arid-41f26077.html>.

most recent QS rankings (for 2024) showed an increase in seven of the eight universities following substantial injection of research funding in the preceding few years. Or, finally, could it be that there has actually been no acute funding crisis in the first place? An ongoing debate on HE quality in Ireland centres on state investment or lack of investment and the consequences for system quality (QQI, 2016)

- How can one explain apparent ‘grade inflation’ (in Ireland, and elsewhere, such as in the UK) and a seemingly associated drop in standards, if QA is working properly? The trends observed could be occurring because of improved T&L as a result of QA and QE; enhanced student engagement and ability; or the lowering of standards. The first two could be seen as positive outcomes of QA – the third, a failure. Has the quality of graduates actually declined despite the increase in the proportion of top grades? Or, because institutions and their staff now spell out what is required of students more explicitly (for example, the publication of assessment rubrics and marking schemes) have students got better at delivering what is being asked of them? This comes back to the question of how we assess the quality of the graduate and the criteria that we use.
- How can institutional quality cultures be supported, maintained and, where necessary, changed? Effective internal quality cultures require a high degree of institutional autonomy. But, as we have seen (e.g. Section 4.2), even within a single university, the concepts of quality and culture can differ amongst interest groups such as university management, academic and administrative staff, students and student organisations. Furthermore, the quality culture may differ within these groups, such as different academic fields or departments and even amongst different academic programmes. Most institutions would appear to be of the ‘Generalist’ type in the institutional typology, so how can the overall culture of these kinds of institutions be changed?

Several major changes in the world of higher education have affected the way quality is perceived and measured (Bassett, 2023). New technologies and the digital impact on education are affecting course content and delivery, research, administration, admissions and information systems and QA reviewers and government continue to struggle to understand their impact on questions of quality and to adjust their oversight. New providers of HE courses and new pathways to a degree are emerging such as through publishers like Pearson, availability internationally of MOOCs (massive open online courses), and accredited universities such as those in the USA, packaging degree credits from many places. There is the growth of the for-profit sector as well as the expansion of types of institutions (such as Community Colleges) that are now approved to offer four-year degrees. Significant changes are occurring in the nature of the student body which in turn is becoming increasingly focused on cost and debt load. Finally, there is increased emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness in society that is extending throughout the HE sector.

In addition, a number of perceptive questions have been raised around current formal QA measures³⁹:

- Are the current approaches to QA challenging or informed enough and does the maturity of the HE sector in many jurisdictions mean that a different approach to QA is needed?
- Have QA processes become overly ‘ritualistic’ and do they focus too much on process and quantitative data because these are more easily measured than qualitative data?

39 Roisín Morris-Drennan, Senior Manager, Research and Innovation, Development Directorate, Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

- Do current approaches stifle/inhibit innovation and, if so, at what level in the QA ecosystem (individual academic or professional services staff, programme, discipline, institution or system)?
- Is the emphasis on transparency of QA, seen in many jurisdictions, counter-productive in terms of getting at the real issues (i.e. does the very public publication of the self-evaluation report, QA review report or ongoing monitoring reports temper the level of candour involved)?
- Consider how non-classroom-based approaches to teaching and learning such as apprenticeships or work placements are quality assured: are there lessons to be learned?
- How might any current risks or perceived future risks to quality in the higher education sector – such as generative artificial intelligence, micro-credentials, remote teaching and learning – be mitigated?
- Given the differences in mission and identity of FET and HE, to what extent can the current QA approaches, that were effectively developed for the HE sector, be applied to the FET sector? What implications does the increasing blurring of the boundaries between these sectors have for QA as “the development of a more unified tertiary education and research system” is progressed in Ireland⁴⁰ and elsewhere?

These are important points to be raised and considered in the ongoing discussions around the future of QA development in both the HE and FET sectors.

6.1. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED SO FAR?

In the first section of the report, the multi-dimensional nature of quality in relation to higher education was discussed along with the continued influence of politics. Whilst many stakeholders in higher education would find it difficult to define educational quality precisely, several models have helped us visualise the concept (Fig 1.2 and 1.3). One could justifiably argue that we are missing a ‘guiding image’ or ‘target’ of what the higher education sector is trying to achieve; it is worth asking what this could be, and how we will know when we have achieved it. At the end of the day, it is proposed that the outputs of the education system matter most – the quality of the graduates, the quality of the research and the generation of new knowledge, the improvements to society and, increasingly, even the delivery of some of the SDGs. There are many stakeholders that rely on the delivery of quality education and a large range of internal and external drivers that can influence the type and quality of education delivered (as indicated in Fig 1.1).

An interesting proposition is to consider the value of the QA institutional review (IR) outcomes. The IR process, which has been implemented over a number of cycles in many countries, has revealed, by and large, in Ireland and in other mature HE systems, that the HE sector is working effectively and that almost all parts have the requisite QA infrastructure in place (see for example EUA, 2023). Therefore, while it is a given that countries like Ireland should maintain external review of institutions as per the ESGs and Bologna for example, the question arises as to whether that review cycle should take place over a shorter period of time, e.g. 2-3 years, to provide more effective and up-to-date comparative data. In addition, under a shorter cycle, there might be an opportunity to focus more on particular quality issues and conduct sectoral thematic reviews. This

40 See <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/982e2-unified-tertiary-education-sector/>.

may be a useful way of addressing particular issues that are topical or time limited. In the Irish HE sector, verification or evidence of ongoing compliance with ESGs and national policies is currently provided through the Annual Quality Report from institutions to QQI, and, with the implementation of some external peer review of those reports and further guidance on how they are to be prepared, QQI would be able, in combination with thematic reviews, to demonstrate and report externally on the effectiveness of the QA of Irish HE to government and also to Europe and more broadly. Thematic reviews could also help to answer/resolve particular stakeholder issues at the sectoral level under this macro-QA approach. Further, whilst regional frameworks such as the ESG, ASG and AQAF all give equal weight to internal (IQA) and external (EQA) quality assurance, one could argue that if EQA has done its job then it could take a ‘back seat’, as it were, once complete confidence can be placed in an institution’s or programme’s own IQA processes⁴¹.

The level of public and private funding underpinning higher and further education and training and their importance to society as a whole has largely driven the need to assure the quality of education and the development of the QA ecosystem described in Section 2. It is often assumed that the QA review is a fault-finding exercise rather than one that supports the identification and dissemination of good practice – but, if used properly, QA can be a knowledge management tool to enhance T&L and education overall⁴² and thus deliver quality enhancement.

The basic QA process as we know it has evolved a dominant ‘peer-evaluation’ methodology – the use of self-assessment, peer review by an external panel, a written (public) report and a response from the institution. In addition, there has been a review cycle which varies in length depending on the target (i.e. programme, institutional elements, institutions themselves and the sector). There are a number of distinct, widely implemented, approaches to traditional QA which form the backbone of the QA ecosystem but there is evidence of some new and interesting developments emerging (see Section 2.3 and 4.3). There is a growing understanding that, irrespective of the specific nature of the process implemented, external QA should combine accountability and continuous improvement of HEIs.

One could conceptualise a quality continuum featuring different types of quality arrangements aligned within a ‘QA space’ related to the degree of institutional engagement with QA/QE and the quality stages and extent of the QA process. Institutional types, based on the Institutional Typology developed in Figure 5.1, can be superimposed within this space (Figure 6.1).

41 Comment from Fiona Crozier, Higher Education Consultant (Quality Assurance and International) and formerly of QAA.

42 Achim Hopbach; member of QQI’s Policies and Standards Committee, former president of ENQA and worked as director of Austrian and German QA agencies and the General Rectors conference.

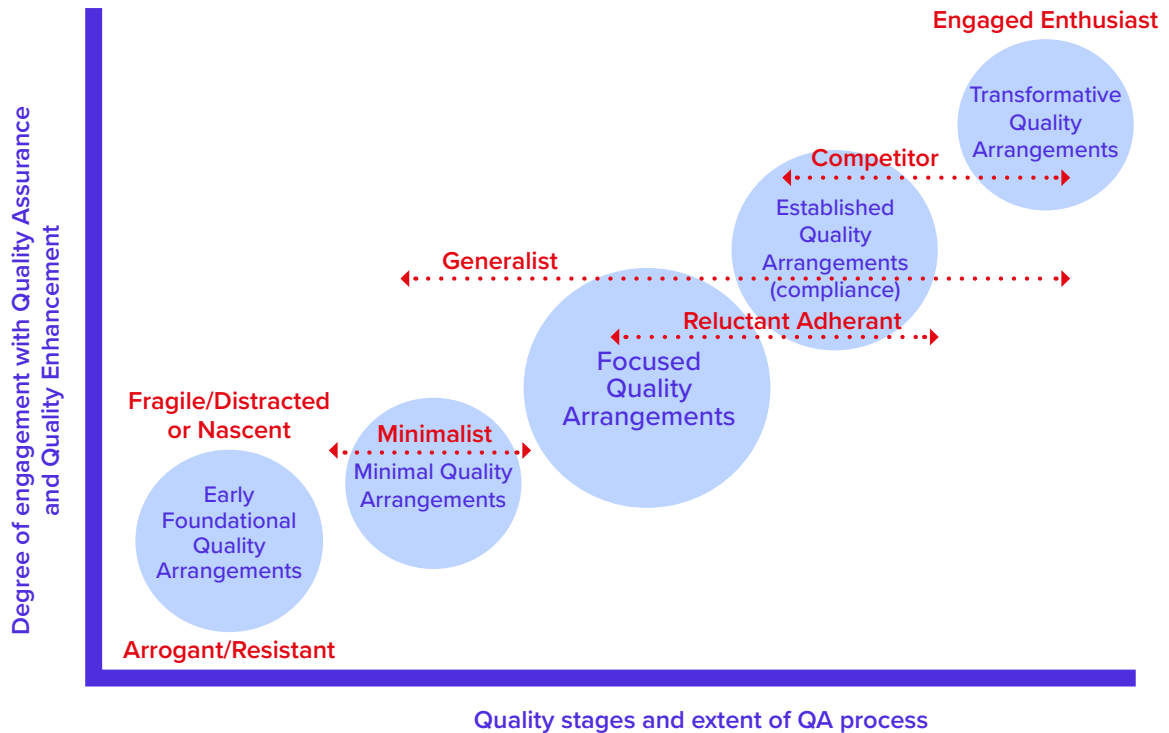


Figure 6.1 A schematic of a quality continuum illustrating possible types of quality arrangements (in black), aligned within a 'QA space' related to the degree of institutional engagement with QA/QE and the quality stages and extent of the QA process. Institutional types (in red; from the Institutional Typology in Fig 5.1) are superimposed. The dotted red arrows are indicative of the range of quality stages/extent of QA processes the particular institutional type may be engaged with. Note that several of the various institutional types (e.g. the Engaged Enthusiast) could also move through various quality stages as they mature as institutions.⁴³

Thus one could envisage early foundational quality arrangements which might be used by/ applied to new institutions or Fragile/Distracted or Arrogant/Resistant institutions; minimal quality arrangements targeted at Minimalist institutions; established quality arrangements (towards the compliance end of the spectrum); the centre of the QA space could contain focused quality arrangements (where quality is adopted as in the Generalist institution or even in the Reluctant Adherent to fulfil minimum requirements plus what it needs as an organisation); at the far end of the spectrum are the transformative quality arrangements, which would show the advanced integration of quality ethos and processes of the Engaged Enthusiast/Reflective institution. The Generalist institution would include various components that might apply across a wide spectrum of quality stages, the Reluctant Adherent might align between the Focused and Established Quality Arrangements and the Competitor might align between the Established and Transformative arrangements as best suits its strategic goals.

This model could potentially form the basis for a variable external QA framework, and it might also help focus internal QA whereby the attributes of being at each stage of the quality spectrum inform the scope of internal review processes.

43 The model conception benefited significantly from discussions with Elizabeth Noonan, Director of Quality at UCC.

QA costs money, time and goodwill, but sufficient evidence exists to assert that, overall, the benefits far, far outweigh the costs and the effects of introducing QA have been positive, as discussed in Section 3. Benefits may not be so evident in the early developmental stages of a QA system but, as discussed in Section 3, they accrue as the QA system matures, the institutions learn, and the sector is allowed to evolve. That is not to say that mature QA systems could not benefit in turn from further improvement and, as discussed earlier, it is not surprising that a number of national systems have undergone significant change or that reviews of the operation of some systems are underway, as discussed in Section 4. There is a sense amongst many stakeholders that if we leave the QA system unchanged it will lose value – this underlines the importance of reflecting upon necessary changes or ways of reinvigorating the system. The review and revision of QA systems is also required to deal with the new and emerging threats to higher education quality that need to be mitigated in order to maintain educational standards. These include funding pressures and continued increases in staff:student ratios and their impacts on the system; contract cheating and the growing influence of new technologies including generative artificial intelligence on academic integrity; the threat to programme coherence from the increased number of MOOCs and micro-credentials; and the challenge of remote teaching, learning and assessment.

6.2. FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Over the 30+ years that the full QA process has been in operation, much has changed in the educational sphere, nationally and internationally, and yet the HE sector is still using many of the same methodologies and principles introduced at the inception of QA. The Irish QA system is well-regarded internationally as a small system punching well above its weight. Having said that, the general sense amongst institutions and QQI itself is that now is the time to re-evaluate current QA systems in Ireland, as is happening elsewhere. What might the features of a renewed QA system be? As mentioned previously, does it just require supplementing or is it in need of major surgery?

Several of the elements of the QA ecosystem illustrated in Figure 4.1 could be considered targets for change, such as the nature of the internal and external drivers, the institutional typology, the quality agency and legal frameworks. Based on the evidence considered in this report and the views emanating from discussions with a range of QA experts, a number of targeted modifications and enhancements can be proposed to take QA in the Irish HE system into the next phase of its development and operation. Some elements of these proposals have already been – or are in the process of being – adopted in a number of jurisdictions, and, whilst the focus of this paper is on the Irish QA system in particular, the proposals may have currency more widely.

1. The relationships depicted in Figure 4.2 would suggest that **reducing the volume of external regulation can enhance institutional autonomy**. A high level of autonomy would be predicted, in turn, to increase the diversity of institutions and activities in the HE sector. **Providing greater autonomy within the QA ecosystem can also provide for increased strength and effectiveness of internal QA, which can, in turn, confer greater resistance and resilience to ‘environmental’ challenges to the educational system**. Greater diversity and the associated autonomy within the sector are important for the sustainability, effectiveness and adaptability of the sector. Rather than align all institutions to the same pathway, it is proposed that they should be articulated together to form a holistic system; this can mirror the importance of biodiversity to natural ecosystem functioning and stability in the face of external perturbations.

So, enhanced institutional autonomy is certainly a place to start but this will require changes in the social and political environment, greater trust placed in institutions by the regulating and funding bodies and, in turn, associated changes or modifications to the underpinning legislation. It would likely mean also that the important regulatory aspect of the current QA systems may have to be addressed differently, through alternative approaches and processes. This is an important message as the legal authorities and their regulatory responsibilities are here to stay⁴⁴.

2. Considering the institutional typology described in Figure 5.1, one could predict that **the ideal HE QA system would be an internally driven process by Engaged Enthusiast institutions to improve and learn to deliver the best education, research and service.** The quality agency (like QQI) should try to nudge institutions as close as possible towards the ‘Engaged Enthusiast’ type by developing mutual trust and respect and focusing more on the needs and aspirations of the HEIs – this can be associated with more focused individualistic reviews (see below).
3. In the type of system described under No. 2, **institutions should be encouraged to be more collaborative and altruistic – sharing best practice and identifying solutions to sectoral problems for the good of the entire system** and mirroring the effective collaboration evident amongst Scottish universities for example. Representative bodies in Ireland, such as the IUA, THEA and HECA, could support this by taking a larger role in this regard. Just as importantly, there is a need to engender trust between institutions and the relevant QA agency and the review methodology should be adjusted to incentivise collaboration⁴⁵.
4. The effectiveness of a quality review depends not only on the institutional type but also on the quality of the peer review panel. **Enhanced training and building a cadre of experienced peer reviewers can be very beneficial to all concerned** (which would require additional funding to support the reviewers).
5. Published reports from QA reviews may sometimes be somewhat ‘watered down’, with a view to protecting the institution from bad press or reputational damage. **In a more open QA/QE system where there is widespread trust between the various players, the ‘watering-down’ of reports is neither necessary nor desirable.** It is worth asking what value a report can be to an institution if its recommendations are not sufficiently rigorous and hard-hitting (where warranted) where justified critique could benefit the institution.
6. **The diversity of QA approaches managed within the overall QA system of the particular HE sector should be enhanced to match the diversity of institutions, their strategy, context, activities, etc.** In other words, any national QA system should move away from a ‘one size fits all’ and approaches should be designed to match the institutional typology. Some issues are more important in some institutions than others and some might not even relate to particular current ESG standards (such as social/economic/sustainability responsibilities, gender diversity etc.). A standardised approach is therefore likely to be less effective in a mature HE system and having a more individualised approach under the auspices of a central oversight body is likely to yield better overall outputs for the institutions and the sector. This may require legislative change, but the general approach has already started to be implemented in several of the jurisdictions now operating risk-based QA.
7. The voices of students, employers and other external stakeholders are forming an increasingly large part of the overall QA process and are clearly part of the HE ecosystem. This is welcome,

⁴⁴ Point raised by Achim Hopbach; member of QQI’s Policies and Standards Committee, former president of ENQA and worked as director of Austrian and German QA agencies and the General Rectors conference.

⁴⁵ Doris Herrmann. Managing Director, AQAS, Germany Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs.

but is likely to increase the expectations that each QA process has to meet; **this must be taken into account in considering the revision or amendment of QA processes. However, care must also be taken not to confer primacy on any particular stakeholder group over others.** This is a considerable challenge, but a crucial one.

8. There is real value in **developing more supportive internal QA functions that work on an ongoing basis with academic and service units to train staff and provide expert advice and materials in order to build up more purposeful self-evaluation processes** (e.g. more professional SWOT analyses, survey design, data repositories). This might beneficially extend to inter-institutional support and collaboration.
9. There is **still value in continuing with the cyclical approach to reviews**, as this form of periodical oversight can *inter alia* help to identify and distribute best practice, identify specific sectoral issues as they arise, and offer developmental approaches to resolving them⁴⁶. For example, QAA Scotland identify/produce best practice thematic reports (e.g. postgraduate research and student experience; employability, graduate standards, online delivery) and create clusters of HEIs based on shared enhancement themes, which are developed by bringing institutions together where they may have common commendations or recommendations, or have raised common issues that can feed into targeted /focused projects (e.g. support for postgraduate students involved in teaching; support for supervisors; the development of suitable research environments for postgraduates). A similar kind of approach has been adopted in Finland. However, **serious consideration should be given to reducing the length of the cycle (e.g. even to as short as 2/3 years) aligned with a change in the nature of the institutional reviews towards more thematic approaches** as discussed earlier.
10. **The QA system should be more relaxed about needing to know everything, and should be forward looking rather than retrospective.** It should also minimise the bureaucratic burden and optimise enhancement, active engagement and discussions.

To enable quality procedures for improvement purposes, **the aim should be to promote future performance rather than to make judgements on past performance** (cf Kis, 2005). This implies a more formative approach, with the focus not on 'control' but on improving quality. Where this approach is predominant, the final review reports are primarily written for an academic audience and the emphasis is on the recommendations. The principal evaluation mechanism here is the improvement audit; that is an audit that is forward-looking and agenda setting (Harvey, 2006).

11. **Any quality review (be it at programme or institutional level) could begin by asking the HEI a number of targeted questions:**
 - a. What are its strategic aims and objectives?
 - b. What are its main issues?
 - c. How does it propose to deal with these issues?

The review outcome can provide feedback and advice and the autonomous institution is left to continue to develop and improve, supported by the QA/QE process. **At the end of the day QA and enhancement are about trust – does the governmental and/or funding authority trust the institution to 'do the right things' or not.**

⁴⁶ Recommendation from Ailsa Crum, Currently Director of Membership, Quality Enhancement and Standards, QAA (former head of Quality and Enhancement QAA Scotland).

12. The capacity to manage enhancement-based QA in the FET sector is challenging due to the general limitations on non-teaching staff in the sector⁴⁷. **If greater alignment between the HE and FET sectors is to be contemplated, the resource and experience issue needs to be addressed.**
13. **Quality is not a simple 1/0 concept but lies on a scale and it is important for an institution and perhaps the governing/funding body of the sector to assess where on this scale a particular programme or institution lies** (cf Ellis, 2019). Caution is recommended, however, especially in T&L and student experience areas, as these can potentially focus the review on the wrong issues, lead to arguments about grades and evidence, and raise issues about the accuracy of grading. On the other hand, a form of scaled outcome can work for a research review for example, given that there are more clear-cut and measurable types of information available. Whether this information should be made public is open to debate.
14. In view of the global-level changes taking place in society, **consideration should be given to including additional elements for quality assessment at all levels within the QA ecosystem** e.g. the Green Agenda, sustainability and institutional values, and several SDGs. This approach could be supported by additional specialist agencies helping to manage and deliver QA processes (e.g. the EPA or Engineers Ireland in Ireland).
15. The **approach to inter-institutional or even intra-institutional reviews could be developed to operate within a more thematically-based, strategic, QA system** with horizontal (i.e. all institutions effectively reviewed at once) rather than the more commonly used vertical (sequential institutional reviews) cycles. Alternatively, a combination of the two approaches could be used in a so-called ‘T’ shaped system). This approach would be supported by a reduced review cycle.
16. Education is about learning and, at the end of the day, **QA should be focused on institutional learning and development to improve student learning, student and staff experience, research and service with staff (and students) actively participating in the process internally and across the sector. Benchmarking should be a consistent element in any new QA model.** It should also become common practice for **the QA overseeing agency to work with the sector to research into the various sets of data provided in annual assessment reports as well as from the main review cycles.** This could be particularly valuable in modestly sized HE sectors such as Ireland.
17. **A well-functioning, trust-based quality system can be expected to be more effective as it allows for savings on monitoring and supervision costs, and can also be more innovative and improvement-oriented** (Hoecht 2006). One would therefore hope that a more open debate about QA can take place between policymakers, the quality agency and academic institutions in the mutual interest of all groups.
18. **In any reorganisation/refocusing of QA in Ireland, it is important that providers input into the design of the new QA system.** In the Finnish HE system, for example, the 3rd cycle of institutional review was designed by consensus in a national working group that included strong representation of HEIs and working-life representatives. This formal group took decisions with significant HEI and stakeholder inputs. All HEIs took part in the national seminars to discuss the ongoing progress of the working group⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ Based on discussions with Rory O’Sullivan, Chair of FET Colleges Ireland.

⁴⁸ Helka Kekäläinen, PhD, Head of Unit, Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education, Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, FINEEC.

6.3. CONCLUSION

In the review and revision of any system, it can be valuable to look for *guiding images* that can offer possible targets for the sector to aim for and, in the QA ecosystem, there are a number of these, including Scotland, Finland and Australia. For example, the new Finnish QA system follows the ESGs but some new features have been added, such as benchmarking and a greater focus on enhancement. In addition, in the institutional quality reviews, providers must identify one area for targeted evaluation where the quality agency selects experts with knowledge and experience of this targeted area⁴⁹.

There is no doubt that QA in the HE sector is here to stay. It is essential that there be clarity about what is being measured or assessed and that QA systems be used as facilitators of measurement or assessment to ensure that they do provide the most effective way of doing this⁴⁹. Both internal (IQA) and external QA (EQA) should continue to play a role, the latter (together with umbrella regional frameworks (ESG/ASG/AQAF etc.)) having been vital in developing the former over the past couple of decades. However, if national EQA systems fulfil their roles, IQA could, over time, become the mainstay of the overall quality ecosystem.

From the quality manager's viewpoint, QA procedures can be used most beneficially when they are embedded in a comprehensive strategy with senior management, academic and administrative units and the QA unit working closely together in an institution. Further, it is important that QA outcomes be accepted as both a valuable contribution to the provider's evidence-based management agenda and development and as an indispensable part of the HEI's teaching and research effectiveness and outputs (see Seyfried and Pohlentz (2018)). At the sectoral level, a cooperative approach between policy makers, the national quality agency and the educational sectors offers the best way forward to maintain and enhance the quality of education. Trust between the various components of the educational system is essential, but, of course, must be earned. With trust should come greater autonomy for institutions, a more diverse and stable education system and better and higher quality outcomes for all stakeholders. This kind of progression, and the emerging maturity of the HE system, will inevitably lead to changes in the nature and management of QA within the sector and hence in the role and activity of the quality agencies. Taking a proactive approach to this journey, guiding the rethinking of external QA processes to maximise their benefits for all stakeholders, while also encouraging and supporting provider autonomy in developing and enhancing their internal QA systems, may be the most beneficial pathway forward for these quality agencies.

⁴⁹ Discussion with Fiona Crozier, Higher Education Consultant (Quality Assurance and International) and formerly of QAA.



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APPENDICES.

APPENDIX 1

The Irish quality assurance system: development and issues

This appendix focuses specifically on the overall Irish QA system, providing some background to its development and current structures and highlighting some issues and suggestions for development raised during discussions with a number of QA professionals in the HE and FET sectors. Some of the material has supported various points in the main report.

A.1. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Twomey (2020) provides a detailed review of the evolution of QA in Irish higher education up to that point. In summary, QA was initially considered by the Department of Education in Ireland in 1994 and formally adopted in Irish Higher Education through the Universities Act 1997 and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. This Act also established the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) to implement the statutory requirements of the Act. From 2001, HETAC and the NQAI progressed the implementation of the Act in higher education. HETAC was the external QA agency for higher education leading to awards in the National Qualifications Framework (NFQ) except for the university sector and Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). It issued guidelines for the development of internal QA procedures by the providers within its remit and was responsible for agreeing and periodically reviewing the effectiveness of those procedures.

The Universities Act required the universities to establish their own QA procedures and to arrange for their periodic evaluation and assessment. The universities established the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) to “increase the level of inter-university co-operation in developing quality assurance procedures and processes, in line with best international practice and to facilitate the conduct of reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures and their outcomes” (EUA, 2005). The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 effectively replaced the former oversight structures and established a more consistent framework for QA in the sector and a single QA agency, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Authority of Ireland (QQI).

As an independent national agency, QQI has a wide remit (QQI, 2021, 2022) that includes:

- Development and maintenance of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ);
- Issuing guidelines for the establishment of QA procedures by providers, approving⁵⁰ those procedures and periodically reviewing their effectiveness;
- Maintenance of the Irish Register of Qualifications covering all awards included on the NFQ and the programmes that lead to them;
- Validation of providers’ programmes of education and training leading to QQI awards (primarily in the private/independent HE sector as most public HEIs are now designated

⁵⁰ Except in the case of previously established universities.

- awarding bodies in their own right);
- Setting of standards for QQI awards;
- Delegation of awarding powers to certain institutions;
- Monitoring of quality;
- Conduct of focussed and thematic reviews.

The initial implementation of QA in Ireland was treated with suspicion – it was seen by academics as intrusive and controlling rather than supportive of learning and enhancement of quality standards and the traditions of what a university is⁵¹, but is now more readily accepted as part of the professional management and development of the institutions.

A. 2. THE QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS IN IRELAND

It is clear from discussions with a range of international QA practitioners that the Irish QA system is well regarded internationally and considered a mature system. The overall structure of the QA process in higher education in Ireland largely follows that outlined in Figure 2.1. (Section 2, main report). Education providers are responsible for quality assuring their own programmes and required by legislation to “have regard to QQI guidelines” in establishing their quality assurance procedures. QQI’s QA framework consists of internal quality monitoring and review by the provider, annual quality reporting to QQI, biennial bilateral dialogue meetings between institutions and QQI, and external periodic cyclical reviews conducted under the auspices of QQI. In addition, Ireland is apparently one of the few countries that undertakes quality assurance of support services within institutions⁵².

HE institutions in Ireland now have established Quality Offices and usually a dedicated Director of Quality/Quality Officer who reports to a senior institutional manager. There is considerable convergence in the role of Quality Officers due to the alignment of the Irish QA system and QQI’s core statutory quality assurance guidelines with the ESG (O’Sullivan, 2022). Many institutions have also established Quality Committees that report directly to either the Governing Authority or the Academic Council or its equivalent. Designated awarding bodies (DABs) establish their own internal QA procedures (having regard to the relevant QQI statutory guidelines). QQI approves (under Section 30 of the 2012 Act) the QA procedures of all relevant providers other than Previously Established Universities (PEUs) on the first occasion of the relevant provider establishing such procedures. DABs also set their own awards standards. However, the effectiveness of the QA procedures is reviewed by QQI on a maximum 7-year cycle (in effect a quality audit of institutions) conducted by panels of international experts with separate terms of reference for the various institutional types. The current QQI review cycle (the ‘CINNTE’ cycle) began in 2017 and will run until 2023. The institutional review evaluates the effectiveness of the institution-wide QA procedures, measures institutional accountability for compliance with the current European Standards and Guidelines and explores institutional enhancement of quality across all areas of activity⁵³.

51 From an interview with Elizabeth Noonan, Director of Quality, UCC – 7-7-2022.

52 From an interview with Fiona Crozier, Higher Education Consultant (Quality Assurance and International) and formerly of QAA – 28-6-2022.

53 QQI Policy for Cyclical Review of Higher Education Institutions; <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/qi-16-policy-for-cyclical-review-of-higher-education-institutions.pdf>.

Each review results in a published and publicly available report that contains sets of commendations, highlights examples of good practice in the institution, and recommendations for improvement. The institution is expected to publish an implementation plan based on the recommendations one month after the main review visit and submit to QQI for publication a follow-up report one year after the main review visit (QQI, 2021).

In addition, HEIs submit an annual quality report (AQR) as mentioned earlier, which sets out the internal QA reviews conducted over the past year, plans for future internal quality reviews, changes in QA policies etc. and any enhancements that have taken place during the reporting period. These allow QQI to summarise, on a national basis, overarching QA themes and examples of good practice (e.g. a collection of case studies from higher education institutions (QQI, 2020)).

Many of the DABs also have linked providers offering programmes that lead to awards made by the DAB. In these cases, the DAB is responsible for the approval, monitoring and review of the effectiveness of the QA procedures of each of its linked providers. The associated processes of the DAB are, in turn, assured during the QQI institutional review.

Institutes of technology previously had delegated authority for certain NFQ levels (5-8) and under HETAC arrangements, IOTs could get delegated authority at NFQ Levels 9 and 10 for research degrees in a specified disciplinary area if they met certain criteria. After QQI was established, awarding authority was delegated to IOTs at NFQ Level 9 without restrictions on discipline. A similar institutional review cycle was established but the objectives and expected outcomes differed from the university sector. The recent move to full technological university status (through amalgamations of former separate IOTs) has brought with it awarding powers at NFQ Level 10 since 2020.

HEIs have taken full advantage of professional accreditation in the development of certain types of programmes (e.g. engineering, accountancy, medical technician etc) but this has brought with it certain challenges⁵⁴. A question arises as to how to reconcile differing views on the value of transferable skills in professional programmes where the institution (or the outcome of a QA process) sees them as necessary but the professional body does not (an issue that would also apply to universities). Such differences in student learning development, curriculum needs, T&L protocols, views on online delivery and examinations between the institution and professional body can be problematic and may indicate different approaches to quality in different bodies.

QQI has statutory responsibility for quality assurance of private HE providers that offer awards included in the NFQ. QQI must approve QA procedures of private providers and the private providers must apply to QQI for validation (effectively accreditation – evaluation of a proposed programme against published criteria) of their programmes of study leading to QQI awards. Once validated by an external peer review panel and the QQI Board, the programme can be offered and learners who successfully complete the programme will be entitled to the relevant QQI award (QQI, 2021). Validation of programmes is normally for five years of enrolment. The 2012 Act provided a route for private providers to receive delegated authority to make awards and therefore to validate the programmes leading to those awards. Such authority has not yet been delegated but it is expected to be imminent subject to the establishment of ministerial regulations and those requesting DA meeting the relevant criteria.

54 From discussion meeting with Orla Flynn, current President of Atlantic TU and former President of GMIT.

Certain programmes offered by private and public bodies in Ireland are accredited by a number of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) for professional and regulatory purposes. These include the Irish Medical Council, Engineers Ireland, the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland, Dental Council, Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland, CORU (multi-profession health regulator), and the Law Society to name but a few. QQI works closely with these PSRBs in relation to QA under the 2012 Act and their role in the QA ecosystem is described in more detail in the main report.

The further education and training (FET) sector encompasses a very broad and diverse range of public (including the education and training boards (ETBs), SOLAS, Teagasc, Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM)), private and community providers and provision. Given how reliant society is on FET provision in critical sectors such as trades, healthcare and childcare, in addressing labour market skills needs, in providing alternative pathways to higher education and in fostering inclusion through, for example, adult and community education, it is essential that mechanisms be in place to support trust in the formation of knowledge and skills in this type of provision. The current Irish FET Strategy, *Future FET: Transforming Learning*, identifies ‘Quality Assurance’ as one of six core attributes comprising the ‘Foundation for Future FET’⁵⁵.

Historically, QA of provision in the FET sector was primarily managed at the level of the programme with a significant focus of quality assurance activity around the assessment and certification of learning. Providers offering FET programmes leading to awards included in the NFQ are now also subject to the requirements outlined in the 2012 Act relating to:

- the establishment of QA procedures, having regard to QQI’s statutory QA guidelines;
- the approval by QQI of those QA procedures and periodic review of their effectiveness;
- validation of programmes of education and training leading to QQI awards.

It is noteworthy that, to date, QQI has taken a unified approach to the external review of QA in FET and HE. As the largest providers of FET in the state, the ETBs were among the earliest providers in this sector to secure approval of their QA procedures (in 2018) and are currently the only FET group to have undergone an inaugural review of the effectiveness of those procedures. This was the first experience of a review of this nature in the FET sector (in contrast to the public higher education sector, in which it is a more established process). Whilst the focus of these reviews⁵⁶ was therefore necessarily different to that of the CINNTE review cycle, the core methodology adopted by QQI (i.e. provider self-evaluation considered by an independent review team of national and international reviewers with relevant expertise; review visit to the provider to explore and consider evidence; publication of a review report; preparation of an action plan; follow-up reporting) is consistent with that adopted for the HE sector.

This unified approach is also evident in the determination of award standards by QQI where they are relevant to both sectors e.g. in Early Learning and Care. The NFQ is, of course, another unifying device and recent Departmental policy outlines ambitions for the development of a more unified tertiary system (DFHERIS, 2023). Whilst there are certainly commonalities of approach and experience across the sectors and significant potential for cross-sectoral learning and co-operation (e.g. analyses of the recent review cycles in both sectors have highlighted the need for

⁵⁵ https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf

⁵⁶ [review-terms-of-reference-inaugural-review-of-quality-assurance-in-etbs.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

providers to make better use of data in QA systems⁵⁷), there are also elements of their respective missions that remain distinctive. As QA in the FET sector (and indeed the HE sector) continues to evolve and mature, the extent to which unified approaches remain optimal, or differentiated QA approaches are required, may need to remain under review.

A.3. ISSUES IN RELATION TO CURRENT QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES IN IRELAND

Is the current QA system in Ireland working well?

On a positive note, the COVID-19 epidemic, with the associated institutional lockdowns and shift from face-to face teaching to online teaching and assessment seriously tested the robustness of QA processes and standards. On the whole, despite some expected teething problems, most institutions reported that they coped extremely well and standards of awards were maintained (as assessed by external examiners and based on statistical comparisons of award levels with pre-COVID-19 years⁵⁸).

On the other hand, one can justifiably raise the question of how a well-functioning QA system can be reconciled with media reports suggestive of apparent grade ‘inflation’ at degree level in the HE sector. And one might also puzzle over how standards could have been considered to have been maintained by QA in the face of frequently stated chronic underfunding of the sector (decreasing funds per unit FTE, worsening staff : student ratios), perhaps coincident with a decline in staff wellbeing, an increase in academic workloads and service support and a loss of research activity due to increasing teaching and administration activity. Thirdly, the overall longer-term trend of a decline in Irish HEIs’ international rankings may be symptomatic of quality challenges actually impacting on the sector but not being identified through QA systems as currently constituted⁵⁹.

Discussions with QA practitioners have revealed a number of consistent issues arising from the implementation and ongoing practices of QA in the Irish HE sector. These views reflect impressions and perceptions of QA delivery ‘on the ground’ and consideration is needed in any revision of the QA system overall.

One issue raised relates to the use of data in the process. Data driven systems can allow universities to ‘game’ the system and data should be ‘informative’ rather than ‘performative’ and form a starting point for conversations during a QA process⁶⁰. The CINNTE Mid-Cycle review (QQI 2021b) concluded that the use of the data could be more systematic and that IT solutions underpinning data collection are frequently outdated.

There are perceptions that elements in the published versions of external quality reports have been altered following discussions between the institution and the panel, and as a result, elements of the published reports, in some cases, can be more of a negotiated affair, particularly where the institution could suffer from bad press or outcomes that could damage

57 See Quality Assurance of Further Education and Training in the ETB Sector: Sectoral Report (QQI, 2023) and Mid-Cycle Analysis CINNTE Review Reports (QQI, 2021 (b)).

58 Based on discussions with relevant colleagues in the various HEIs identified in the Acknowledgements to the report.

59 From an interview with Sinéad O’Sullivan, Director of Quality, UL – 21-9-2022.

60 From an interview with Elizabeth Noonan, Director of Quality, UCC.

their reputation⁶¹. This is justifiable where there are factual errors or misunderstandings, but the value of the report to the institution is diminished if the QA report recommendations are not hard-hitting enough (where warranted) and where critique could actually benefit the institution into the future. This raises the question as to whether this problem is a national sector QA maturity issue despite the push for openness and transparency within the process. But it is clear that institutional reputation is important nationally and internationally. Some of these issues are discussed in the main report.

The IUA Quality Directors⁶² have raised a number of issues. One is a discontinuity of institutional QA leadership (and loss of ‘institutional memory’) caused by continual staff turnover and changes in role description and responsibilities at departmental, school and institutional levels on a time scale out of sync with the QA review cycle (particularly for the institutional review). The long review cycle periodicity may not be conducive to successful quality enhancement in response to review recommendations, as this is not assessed until the following cycle (i.e. at least 7 years). In addition, the effectiveness of the external review [and hence the quality and appropriateness of the recommendations] is very dependent on both the quality of the review panel itself and on the self-assessment. There is also a desire, and even a need, to make QA engagement less burdensome and a recognition that the focus of reviews would be more beneficial if they were forward-looking rather than reflecting on the past [although it must be said that such reflection is valuable in highlighting issues that need to be resolved for the future] though not forgetting the present – the status quo. The lack of nationally agreed data definitions (e.g. what constitutes a completion rate) and limited compatibility across the various data systems used within the sector overall, raises issues of comparability which can impede evidence-led sector-level developments and improvements, and there is a danger that this issue may become more intractable over time.

Currently there appears to be somewhat of a blurring between performance management and accountability, which are managed at the institutional level under the auspices of the HEA, and quality monitoring, assessment and enhancement, which are the responsibility of QQI. Whilst this split line of responsibility could be considered beneficial⁶³, there is evidently potential for conflict and confusion, particularly if an institution is being forced or advised in two different directions at the same time. [It is worth noting that QQI and HEA developed a memorandum of agreement designed to help the two agencies work harmoniously.] In this context, accountability is becoming predominant and it is likely that performance management outcomes will take priority given the links to funding⁶⁴. At the same time it is considered not to be beneficial for the system to coalesce around an identical set of quality indicators but rather for it to retain some level of diversity within the national HE system (in fact QQI recognise that there is diversity within the system and thus expect institutions to identify their own indicators of quality, consistent with their own needs and mission).

Internally, whilst separate budgets were provided in the early days of QA development for institutional quality offices and the conduct of reviews, now the funding for quality must be found within an institution’s own budget. With the increasing tightening of overall funding for the HE sector, quality process and staffing must compete with other demands across the institution. This has apparently led to reduced funding of quality offices in many institutions, even in the face of increasing demands, with consequent curtailing of activities. In Ireland therefore, the falling

61 Based on discussions with Sinéad O’Sullivan, Director of Quality, UL – 21-9-2022.

62 Discussions with IUA Quality Directors 10-8-2022 and 15-9-2022.

63 Discussion with Achim Hopbach, member of QQI’s Policies and Standards Committee, former president of ENQA and worked as director of Austrian and German QA agencies and the General Rectors conference.

per-capita resource levels may well lead HEIs to adopt a highly competitive strategy and the danger is that this will drive institutional QA processes (and possibly the national system) to focus more on the enhancement of ranking and national and international standing rather than quality enhancement of teaching and learning and service delivery.

One further, perhaps quite glaring, issue within the Irish QA system is the lack of a national research quality assessment and assurance process. Some HEIs have developed internal review processes (e.g. UCC) but the willingness to adopt a national process and indeed its usefulness have yet to be debated.

In summary, whilst the Irish QA system has matured and is very well thought of internationally, there are issues within the current system, highlighted both by internal and external quality assurance professionals, that provide pointers towards opportunities for enhancement of the system along the lines discussed in Section 6 of the main report.

