

Quality audit: Fit for what purpose?

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Quality audit: what and why

- Institutional approach
- Indirect approach
 - External assurance of an institution's internal quality assurance **system** and **practice**
- Many good reasons for institutional audit:
 - Economy,
 - intrusion and burden,
 - flexibility,
 - institutional autonomy
 - Institutional responsibility, etc.

Audit and ‘dominant philosophy’

- Eternal dichotomies:
 - control – trust
 - Control – enhancement
 - Control as the ‘no-word’
 - The question of effect
- The Quality Audit Network
 - Kastelliz/Mitterauer: *Quality audit in the European Higher Education Area: a Comparison of Approaches* (2014)

Audit in higher education

- Some characteristics:
 - Generic criteria
 - Evaluation of system
 - Often 'all-inclusive' rather than educational quality only
 - Self-evaluation, site visit, public report
 - Evidence: documentation and group interviews

- 'Classical' (financial) audit and 'educational' audit
 - From 'control' to 'trust' to 'enhancement'
 - From 'first line' evidence to 'policy' and 'strategy'
 - and to 'dialogue'
 - A much 'kinder' variant? (Too kind?)

Quality → quality system → quality audit: Are the gaps bridged?

- **Or: What about impact?**
- Limited transparency is a problem
- What we think we know
- What we ‘know’: About system features.
 - Most criticisms and recommendations concern the system
- Do institutions themselves know?
 - Institutions rarely document quality variation in portfolio

A blurred focus?

- The tendencies for institutional systems to expand, so as to become ‘all-inclusive’
 - Internal QA as steering tool: more strategic performance steering than quality steering. (Institutions need this too, but it is a different purpose!)
- Actually, we have external quality assurance in the EHEA for a rather ‘narrow’ purpose
 - Assurance of qualifications across national borders
 - Why are we then so afraid of the ‘control word’?
 - How much enhancement can we reasonably expect?
 - Could we address educational quality more head-on?

Audit criteria steer internal QA systems

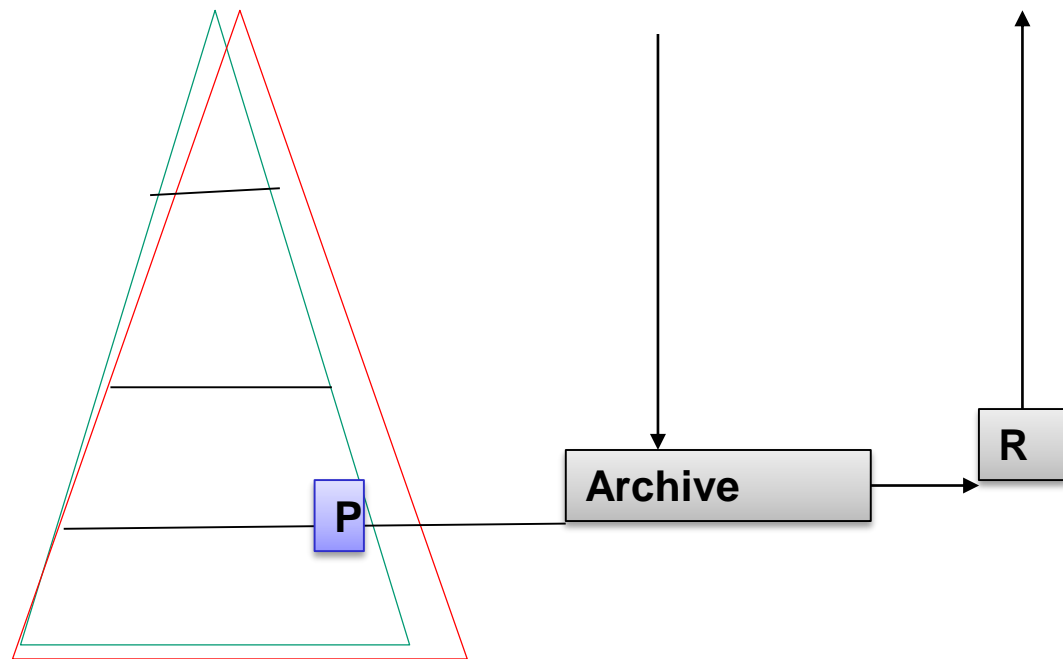
- The issue is more the internal QA system than the audit as such
- But it is the audit criteria that decide institutional focus in quality systems and quality work
- Are criteria often too broad and ‘global’?
- Too much oriented towards the institutional level?
- Too much focus on strategy and policy?

Criteria: a sharper focus?

- Quality resides in the curriculum and in the teaching/learning situation(s):
 - As it is experienced by the learner
 - As it meets (or exceeds) certain academic standards
 - As it meets societal demands in a wide sense
- Criteria should demand ***documented*** quality assurance **at the level of delivery.**
- Criteria should demand documentation of how QA information at the level of delivery is collated, analysed and aggregated at levels of responsibility

Internal QA and external audit

- Parallel pyramids



Purpose, knowledge – and control

- **Institutional management** is supposed to know about the quality situation of the portfolio
- **External auditors** are supposed to know – or know enough to trust – that the institutional management knows about the quality situation – and does something about it.
- This can only happen when the **basic information** of the internal QA system is the documented quality work of each programme unit (the ‘little QA circle’).

‘Classical’ audit revisited

- A reformed auditing method required?
 - More investigative, unpredictable and explorative
 - Less depending on SER and set group interviews
 - More indication and risk based: smelling rot and roses
- To ‘control’ means to ‘know’ – and how can enhancement come about if one doesn’t know?
- ‘Control’ does not necessarily imply naming, shaming and punishing!

If it is really **educational** quality we are after:

- There is a case for steering internal QA systems in a more **didactic** direction, not least because of the new stress on **learning outcomes**
- Quality work should be documented as working with information and indications about the learning effects of programmes, indicating what succeeds and what causes problems, and seeking improvements in the adjustment of input factors: the resources, the teaching, the curriculum and the assessment methods.
- We can never 'know' quality exactly, but we can know if we work seriously and sensibly with it!

This presentation

- Refers to a **discussion** paper and asks more questions than it provides answers
- And ends with yet another question:
- Is it not time for a thorough **evaluation** of our evaluation methods?
- ***Thank you for your attention!***