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2026 Annual Quality Report (ICHAS)
CASE STUDIES RELATED to
Academic Year September 2024 –
August 2025

CASE STUDIES

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Title: A Reminder of Paradigmatic Orientations of QAE -

Theme (2-3 words): How external statutory requirements are incorporated into QAE and how it refocuses attention on paradigmatic vision.

Keywords (optional): Quality paradigms, Garda Vetting, Garda Clearance, Liaison Person Compliance

Description

Significant changes to Garda vetting procedures, more specifically adherence requirements to Liaison Person Compliance, were rolled out in the reporting period. This occurred over late summer 2025 and involved training followed by immediate implementation of statutory regulations. The process was presented and overseen by the National Vetting Bureau of An Garda Síochána. To ensure compliance, actions had to be fast-tracked involving immediate changes to existing policies and procedures which in turn involved extraordinary engagement with and from internal stakeholders on a directive rather than consultative basis over an unusually condensed timeframe. It also involved significant knock-on changes to other policies and procedures previously unaffected by the existing vetting process. For example, “onboarding obligations” required all identity documentation to be verified “in person” resulting in significant logistical changes and requirements for students and staff.

It is important to emphasise that the case event and the changes to the process were not in any way perceived or adopted resistantly in fact, there was full agreement within the College Community of the need for unerring compliance, in protecting vulnerable populations. While the implementation timeline was viewed as challenging, it was also accepted as necessity and is not the focus of the case study. The main focus of the study is that the case event served as a reminder that there are instances where normative approaches to the generation of policies and procedure need to be adopted if not partially suspended, most especially when involving statutory requirements and processes that require immediate and total compliance. This prompted reflection on the paradigmatic orientation of QAE at institutional level.

Analysis

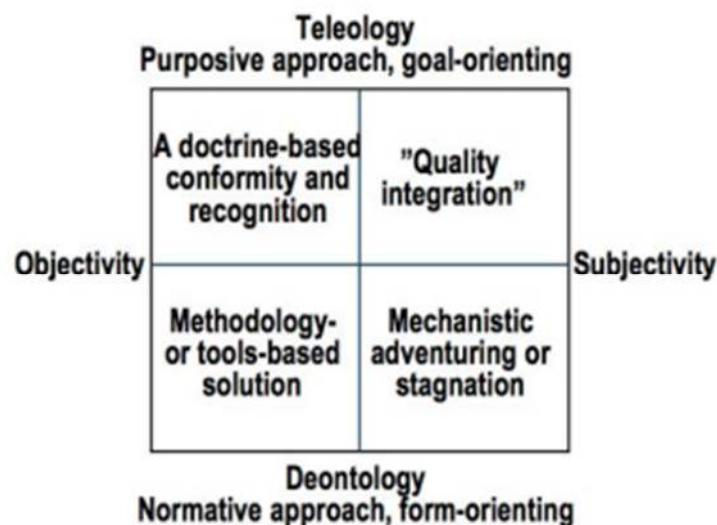
It can be reasonably argued that the development of QAE policies and procedures, particularly during the initialisation phase, has become increasingly oriented toward a philosophy of needs or, at least, that needs assessment is generally incorporated into the drafting process. This can be traced to one of two dominant schools of thought on quality assurance in third level education which associated quality with the “interests of the various stakeholders” and where “the different understanding [among stakeholders] of quality is appropriately articulated” (Mezgobo, 2015; p.5, Kis, 2005). Burell and Morgan’s (1979) foundational dual axis framework viewed through a quality assurance lens supplemented by Anttila & Jussila’s Four Quality Paradigms are also useful.

Even a cursory review of the policy development process in Irish third level education institutions, illustrates this trend with the identification of “need” often the origin-point for policy and procedures (ATU, 2025, p.10; TUS, p.9; Griffith College, 2026 p. 27; UCD, 2018, p.2). More significantly in this case, the means of assessing has also been generally assumed to involve agreement, consultation and collaboration and again is widely established across sectoral QAE norms. ATU’s policy is illustrative in that initial policy generation is captured in a two stepped process “identify need, scope, draft document” followed by “consult revise redraft, finalise”. This aligns with origin models of QAE such as the PDCA and the Shewhart cycle and adheres to normative, if not expected, practice (Moen & Clifford, 2011).

The principle of “consultation and collaboration” (QQI, 2016, p.4) has long been established as requisite within the policy generation space. In our case, the “Policy on Policies” outlines the process as follows: “Policy development is a core activity of the college and is informed by engagement from the entire college community, this Policy is designed to facilitate engagement with Quality assurances from all college stakeholders to build a quality culture that permeates through the college and all its activities” What is not perhaps as clear in this and similar policy statements across the sector, is the nature of consultation and at what stage consultative engagement occurs. In this instance (changes to Garda vetting procedures as a response to changes in legislation), consultation and collaboration occurred but it was, by necessity, directive and was located

within procedural implementation as opposed to procedural generation. Neither was it feasible nor possible to scope the process due to the immediacy of compliance pressure.

In Burrell and Morgan's Grid, two axes are developed around Objective/Subjective and Regulation/Radical poles resulting in four possible paradigmatic options which they argued had significant incompatibilities. The interpretivist paradigm (Subjective/Regulation) is noteworthy in the context of third level provision in that it views quality as socially constructed, based on how stakeholders feel and think about Quality and derived from shared understandings. The focus is therefore on organizational culture, communication, and "internalizing" quality values rather than just rules adherence. Though not directly translated, the four quadrants have been more recently reimagined by Anttila & Jussila (2013; 2017; 2018; Antilla, 2023) with specific reference to Quality. Their model envisages four paradigms of Quality across axes of Objectivity/Subjectivity and Teleology/Deontology.



(Anttila & Jussila, 2018, p.6)

Though this might be the espoused paradigm, the response of the College to the changes in vetting procedures is more easily understood within a functionalist paradigm (Objective + Regulation). This is strongly teleological in that it is purpose and outcome focussed with emphasis on established facts, metrics, and standardized processes. This can also be located within one of the five traditions of quality assurance defined by Harvey and Green as "Fitness for Purpose" which tightly relates quality assurance to the teleological

tradition (Mezgobo, 2015). The distinction is significant in that teleology positions need in terms of output rather than input, or more accurately it prioritises outcome over process - in this case process generation. Here the purpose was entirely defined by the outcome - full compliance with statutory requirements. The process was similarly defined according to functionalist principles.

Implications

The issue here is not in any way about the need, efficacy or necessity of incorporating legislative requirements into QAE procedures nor is the issue the primacy of statutory requirements. The issue relates to what might be termed paradigmatic contradiction and compatibility. As noted, Burrell and Morgan argued there was potential incompatibility between Interpretivist and Functionalist paradigms. The question arises whether these need to be addressed at policy level.

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