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IMPLEMENTING AND USING QUALITY ASSURANCE: STRATEGY AND PRACTICE

A SELECTION OF PAPERS FROM THE 2ND EUROPEAN QUALITY ASSURANCE FORUM

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea of a European Quality Assurance Forum was proposed by EUA to the "E4 Group" (ENQA, ESU, EUA, and EURASHE) in 2003. This group has been meeting regularly since September 2001 to discuss ways to develop a European dimension for quality assurance. It was responsible for developing the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area" and for designing the structure and processes of the European Register for Quality Agencies.

The first European Quality Assurance Forum took place in 2006 at the Technical University of Munich and focused upon internal quality processes. The second Forum, hosted by the Sapienza Università di Roma, was focused upon "Implementing and Using Quality Assurance: Strategy and Practice" and attracted over 500 participants: academics, QA agencies and students. Thus, by the time registration for the second Forum closed, it became clear that this event had become the premier conference for quality discussions in Europe.

This publication gathers a representative sample of the contributions to the Forum. Some of the keynote presentations are included as well as a few of the many excellent papers that contributed to lively discussions in the parallel sessions. The keynotes discuss quality from a conceptual, historical and policy perspective. The papers are mostly focused on institutional case studies and show the variety of ways that higher education institutions and QA agencies ensure quality.

The Forum Organising Committee hopes that this collection of papers will inspire higher education institutions, academic staff, students and QA agencies to reflect upon ways that quality can be ensured while respecting the need for diversity and innovative practices in research and education.

On behalf of the Forum Organising Committee, I wish to thank the following for their support of this activity: the Sapienza Università di Roma which hosted the Forum with a great sense of organisation and hospitality, the 70 authors who submitted papers to the Forum, the Socrates Programme which funded it partially, and Harald Scheuthle, EUA, who spearheaded the organisation on behalf of the E4.

The European Quality Assurance Forum will be offered again on 20 - 22 November 2008 at Corvinus University in Budapest and will focus on an examination of current trends in quality assurance. We hope to repeat the success of the first two Forums and look forward to welcoming you then.

Henrik Toft Jensen
Chair, Forum Organising Committee

1. INTRODUCTION

Looking back – looking forward: Quality assurance and the Bologna process

Sybille Reichert[1]

Quality assurance is so omnipresent and its vocabulary so pervasive nowadays in higher education policy and discourse that one forgets how relatively recent the enthronement of the term "quality" actually is. Hence, before embarking on an attempt to trace the key paths and challenges which quality assurance will be facing in the years to come, it may be helpful to put the concern with assuring quality in higher education into context. This should not just be a historical exercise, of course, but should also serve to emphasise that quality development in higher education is a great deal more than the formal quality assurance processes that policymakers like to focus upon when they speak about quality in higher education. Clearly, quality enhancement is the sum of many methods of institutional development, ranging from competitive hiring procedures, creating appropriate funding opportunities, to facilitating communication between disciplines and supporting innovative initiatives through institutional incentives. The Bologna reforms may serve as a good case in point: while quality assurance is an important part of the Bologna reforms, the latter's relevance to quality goes far beyond the confines of quality assurance alone. Seen from their bright side, the Bologna reforms could improve quality in multiple ways: through the opportunities they offer to reflect and review curricula, to reform teaching methods (student-centred learning, continuous assessment, flexible learning paths) and even through strengthening horizontal communication and institutional transparency. Putting quality assurance into context thus means looking at quality concerns before Bologna, through Bologna, and beyond Bologna. Only then will we understand the value of quality assurance in Bologna and the conditions of its successful realisation at universities.

Before Bologna, higher education debates in the 90s were characterised by multiple national debates on quality problems in higher education, largely due to the effects of under-funded massification. Complaints about overcrowded classrooms and student-staff ratios, which did not allow for individualised attention, coupled with outdated teaching methodologies and teacher-centred curricula, long study duration and high drop-out rates, were among the most prominent of the many complaints about a higher education sector that was not equipped to respond to the demands of its time. At the same time, more and more systems saw the need for increased autonomy of higher education institutions to enable them to face the widening range of demands and accelerating pace of international research competition better. The introduction of institutional autonomy and the simultaneous cutting back of state control could only be realised, however, in conjunction with heightened accountability provisions. Hence, in many countries quality assurance agencies were either created or transformed to meet these new demands.

The 90s were also a decade of increasingly celebrated cooperation. The European Pilot Project on Comparing Quality Assurance Methodologies among five systems (1994, resulting in the Council Recommendations of 1995) was only one expression of the European optimism, which reflected the hope that increased cooperation and mutual understanding would ultimately result in quality enhancement of all parties. We should note that the key methodological features which were elaborated then are still part of the methodological creed of today's European QA Guidelines.

Finally, one should recall that the quality concerns of the 90s became all the more highly politicised as they became associated with the (lack of) competitiveness of European higher education, the latter being recognised as a key foundation of thriving knowledge economies. The concern with knowledge-intensive economies and societies moved higher education institutions, their problems and challenges, to the foreground. Quality enhancement became a charged theme and quality assurance its key guarantor.

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The Bologna Reform Process which became the focal point of reform in most European countries, from 1999 onwards, brought a wide range of quality concerns into the central arena of higher education discourse. Beyond the issues of quality assurance in the more narrow sense of institutional processes, quality enhancement can be said to be at the heart of all Bologna reform aims. Indeed at its origins, the Bologna reforms were conceived essentially as a process of quality enhancement, at least by the initiators of the reforms at European and national levels. The Bologna reforms were based on the assumption that the international readability of curricular structures and the underlying quality assurance systems would increase cooperation and competition, mobility and institutional good practice, with quality enhancement occurring as a natural consequence of wider and deeper comparisons. A second assumption seemed to be that increased mutual trust in each others 'quality assurance systems would result in increased trust in the quality of higher education provision in those systems, thereby resulting in cross-border movement.

Most importantly, in addition to new curricular structures, Bologna was supposed to bring quality enhancement in teaching: many higher education representatives believed Bologna would accelerate or even trigger the move to outcome-based and/or student-centred teaching in the countries in which traditional less inter-active approaches of teaching were still dominant. Quality assurance processes were supposed to support an increased institutional attention to the hitherto often neglected quality of teaching. Many students also associated the hope for more flexible learning paths with the Bologna reforms. Some academics welcomed Bologna curricular reforms as an opportunity for widening interdisciplinary courses. In particular, the possibility of disciplinary reorientation between the Bachelor and the Master level was seen as of benefit to the new degree structures. Some students and academics also hoped for more space for independent learning and were later disappointed to observe the opposite effect: the compression of longer degree programmes into shorter ones often led to content and work overload, thus leaving less time for independent projects and learning. To support these developments, quality improvements were also supposed to be brought about with respect to the transparency of student information and programme descriptions.

Most prominently for some national systems, the Bologna reforms were supposed to enhance quality in the response of higher education to labour market needs. Graduates were supposed to become more "employable", even though agreement on what such sustainable employability would mean in terms of student competences and desirable learning outcomes remains a heated and largely unresolved topic of discussion.

Last but not least, the Bologna reforms have addressed the quality of graduate education since 2003, in particular with respect to quality of supervision and supporting structures which help doctoral candidates prepare for diverse and often interdisciplinary academic or professional practices.

Of course, all of these quality aims and visions are often tripped up by the reality of higher education funding. As universities already pointed out in 2005 (Trends IV) and emphasised again in 2007, the most limiting factor for quality enhancement is not the nature of internal or external QA but the limits to resources when room for improvements is identified.

If we now zoom in on the quality assurance side of Bologna's manifold quality concerns, we observe that Bologna has focused strongly on processes of quality assurance agencies, their exchange and mutual understanding, moving towards common standards and guidelines which allow comparability across Europe. Other aspects of the various quality assurance ingredients of higher education such as quality expectations and the peer-review norms of funding agencies or journals were not part of the process since they relate more to research which only appears on the margins of the Bologna process.

Beyond the many changes in quality assurance, which were introduced in the context of Bologna in national systems, the development of the European Quality Assurance Standards and Guidelines (ESG) by

ENQA, EUA, ESIB, EURASHE, which were adopted by the Ministers of Education in 2005, are, beyond doubt, the paramount achievement at the European level. Their implementation is now assured through the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAR) endorsed by the Education Ministers (London, May 2007), which requires an external evaluation of an agency every five years and includes a judgement of substantial compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines. Without going into the details of the principles and procedures for external and internal QA which the ESG sets down and which are widely discussed in the context of this Forum, I would like to highlight three achievements which I believe these standards have contributed to QA in Europe:

First, the ESG emphasise strongly that the primary responsibility for QA lies with higher education institutions themselves, rather than with any outside body. This was already officially acknowledged by the Education Ministers in Berlin and Bergen, but the ESG add the noteworthy remark that the external control should be lighter if internal processes prove robust enough, which is precisely what universities had been hoping for (see Trends IV report, 2005): "If higher education institutions are to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes, and if those processes properly assure quality and standards, then external processes might be less intensive than otherwise."

The second achievement consists in the emphasis that internal quality assurance should not be reduced to formalised processes but should be likened more to a set of institutional and individual attitudes, a "quality culture", aiming at "continuous enhancement of quality."

Thirdly, the ESG, like the Bologna reforms in general, reflect a certain shift to student and stakeholder interests away from the pure supply perspective which had dominated universities for decades. This attention is reflected e.g. in the concern with student support and information, with graduate success and, of course, with the demand for including students as active participants in QA processes, even as members in agencies' external review teams.

So what are or will be the consequences of these European standards for university development? Clearly, in some countries, there will be more regular reviews at institutional level than before, feed-back will have to be organised more systematically, and a more systematic use of data will have to be developed. Furthermore, the inclusion of students in QA will be new in some systems. Some challenges will have to be addressed How can the teaching focus of the QA which the ESG restricts itself be integrated with concerns of continuous quality enhancement in research? How can the pool of peers be enlarged to include international peers, to allow for truly independent reviews, without incurring daunting costs and missing out on necessary knowledge of national conditions? And last but not least, with the increasing frequency of quality reviews, how can one prevent routine from settling in and undermining the motivation to invest the quality assurance with a genuine desire to identify one's weaknesses and to improve?

To pursue these questions further, I would like to share some of my impressions from recent university evaluations in which I have participated and which gave me the impression that, in those institutions at least, internal quality assurance was alive and kicking and far from being a merely bureaucratic exercise. While these evaluations were all institutionally initiated and formative in nature, they differed widely with respect to their aims and the level on which the review focussed (faculty and department, institutional or national level). Accordingly, they also differed in the benefits and challenges which they brought to the institution and which are worth pointing to, as they may show the complementary and diverse ways in which internal quality assurance can become a meaningful exercise.

At faculty and department level, the benefits of the evaluation relate, first of all, to the opportunity to connect curricular, institutional and research structures and activities around a common ground of the larger subject area which usually encompasses a wide number of fields, programmes and even disciplines but still within an orbit of rather compatible disciplinary cultures. In addition to allowing the combination

of teaching, research, and institutional development concerns, this subject area perspective offers the advantage that academics get more easily engaged since they expect some feed-back on contents and not just on the institutional conditions of their core activities and scientific development. Furthermore, reflections on institutional development are often more substantial if they are related to scientific development. Benefits also consist in the attention paid to real strategic decisions like hiring policy, restructuring, new interdisciplinary initiatives. There is however an important precondition for effective feed-back, namely the link to institutional strategy and institutional autonomy (e.g. with respect to prioritysetting in recruitment, infrastructural investment. Without an effective link back to institutional policies, the outcomes of a review may well remain without appropriate consequences.

Quality evaluations at institutional level can be an excellent way to sharpen strategic reflection, addressing such questions as, for instance:

- How to help the development of beneficial institutional perspectives in de-centralised institutions?
- How best to combine disciplinary with interdisciplinary developments and institutional structures?
- How to develop fair processes of rewarding performance in a non-mechanistic manner (leaving enough space for new initiatives) and still grant enough autonomy to de-central units?
- How to combine bottom-up development drive with institutional quality standards?
- How to identify and support institutional priority areas (hiring, infrastructural investment)?

Of course, in order to be useful, such institutional reviews presuppose a sufficient degree of institutional autonomy, otherwise the recommendations and action plans which they are likely to bring forward cannot be realised. If institutional autonomy and some resources for addressing the identified needs for improvement are given, however, they can contribute quite effectively to priority-setting and the professionalisation of university leadership and management.

Of course, relative autonomy or negotiation power with the decision-maker is a precondition for the effectiveness of any internal quality assurance process, at any level of institutional development. But other factors also play an important role for the success of the evaluation.

First and foremost, one should mention the time and willingness of academics, deans and institutional leadership to take the evaluation process and recommendations seriously. This attitude is based on the expectation that the reviewers will offer friendly well-informed advice rather than being perpetrators of a control exercise with an agenda that does not take the aims of the reviewed unit as the decisive reference point. One should add that every quality review which does not lead to some constructive development decision will undermine the readiness of academics and institutional leadership to engage in future evaluation processes openly and constructively.

A second success factor consists in the frequency of the quality assurance cycle. If the reviews occur too frequently, this may result in evaluation fatigue and routine which would negate the motivation and the willingness to engage in genuine dialogue.

Thirdly, a careful choice of peers is vital. They have to be sufficiently distant, i.e. without being too closely linked to the reviewed unit or in a conflict of interests toward it. Given the small size of academic communities in most countries, this usually means that international peers have to be included. A careful choice will presumably also include the attempt to make the peer group cover different disciplinary areas to allow for enlarged horizons.

Fourthly, a well organised feed-back should ensure that there are well-reflected and well-argued consequences to ensure that institutional trust is built around the planned actions. In some form it would also be useful to create opportunities for feed-back of institutional reviews into national system reflections so as to influence framework conditions that are set at national level.

Finally, at institutional and national level, resources should be reserved not just for the quality review process but also for implementing the recommendations and that the resources for the improvements should be significantly higher than the resources for the review processes. If this cannot be guaranteed, one should reduce the scope of the review accordingly.

Institutional quality assurance will be facing many challenges in the coming years: Education, research, knowledge transfer and services will have to become more connected in institutional development in general and quality assurance in particular. More meaningful and differentiated possibilities to benchmark and compare institutional performance internationally will have to be made available, well beyond the current reductive rankings.

Improvement-oriented QA will have to defend itself against the rising gusto for labels, branding and the resurgence of control orientation which even some Scandinavian QA agencies are beginning to observe in their environments. The number of QA processes which an institution has to undergo will have to be reduced in some countries. Synergies between different types of QA will have to be developed, to reduce the administrative burden on institutions. Most importantly, it cannot be emphasised enough that the future of QA as a meaningful contribution to institutional improvement depends on the survival of the willingness of individuals to improve. With the increasing routine of QA, universities and their supervisory bodies are running the risk of creating evaluation fatigue and even resentment of the disproportionate burden caused by QA. Wherever QA is perceived as keeping professors from their research and teaching rather than helping them achieve even better and more innovative results in teaching and research, it has capped its own lifeblood.

The contribution of QA to self-improvement is clearly predicated on the trust which the evaluated place in the evaluators. Even the most sophisticated quantitative and bibliometric data cannot replace the value of interpersonal qualitative dialogue between peers who respect one another's judgement. To sustain the basic trust in peer review, quality and funding agencies have to ensure the independence of the peers and beware of mainstreaming effects which may occur through peer review. The room for the radically new should not be taken away by conventional critics. Selecting groups of peers that minimise that danger or maximise that innovative space is (and will remain for the foreseeable future) the key challenge of peer review-based QA. National and institutional policies should try to develop programmes which protect such spaces in which the new, unpredictable and unfamiliar can grow - both through funding instruments and quality assurance processes.

Another challenge will consist in developing a system of differentiated and flexible quality assurance, as foreseen by the ESG, in which external QA becomes lighter as internal QA systems become more robust and reliable.

Beyond the bounds of quality assurance proper, national ministries and funding agencies have to become more aware of the potential quality effects of steering instruments such as funding channels and national regulations on institutional processes.

Finally - boring to repeat but all the more exciting to realise - national systems should accept that institutional autonomy is a necessary condition for effective quality assurance. Without such autonomy, coherent institutional QA will remain impotent and hardly worth the trouble. Likewise, only very few ideas for

improvement can be realised without extra resources. Thus, we may conclude that six conditions have to be given in order to ensure that QA is effective and worth the time and effort:

- At the level of the individuals, there has to be
  1. trust in the benefit of the evaluation,
  2. willingness to expose one's weaknesses and
  3. readiness to invest time and effort to improve one's performance where need for improvement is identified.
- At the level of the institution, there has to be a capacity to realise the outcomes of the evaluation, i.e.
  4. a sufficient degree of institutional autonomy,
  5. institutional leadership to orchestrate far-reaching and difficult changes and
  6. resources to support the change and incentivise corresponding initiatives.

The more we undertake quality assurance without having taken care of these pre-conditions, the more we run the risk of letting it degenerate into a mere lip service, into a comfortable method for bureaucratic consciences to be soothed and for politicians to say that they paid attention to quality without meaning it.

2. STANDARDS AND QUALITY MODELS: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

"Flexibilising" standards? The role of quality standards within a participative quality culture

Manfred Lueger[1] and Oliver Vettori[2]

Introduction

Quality standards are of undisputed importance within all types (i.e. institutional, regional, national or international) of QA systems in higher education. They can be found – though in various forms and differently labelled – on hundreds of higher education institution homepages worldwide; they can be read about in various QA guidelines (e.g. the European standards and guidelines, ENQA, 2007); and they are a regular component of political statements concerning the European Higher Education Area, e.g. in the Bergen Communiqué: "Furthermore, we urge higher education institutions to continue their efforts to enhance the quality of their activities through the systematic introduction of internal mechanisms and their direct correlation to external quality assurance" (Bergen Communiqué, 2005). Without a doubt, any set of general formal standards (often in the form of minimum standards) is able to constitute a framework for quality assurance systems by establishing points of reference for measurement procedures and comparative purposes. Needless to say such strategies do not only meet public accountability demands but also accommodate the increased competitive tendencies within the higher education area by providing a basis for various ranking or rating procedures. Yet, somehow, the introduction of (quality) standards rarely goes according to plan, and all too often the unintended consequences of their implementation thwart the initial intentions.

In our opinion, one of the main reasons for such difficulties and shortcomings can be found in an inadequate specification of the underlying constructs. Standards – much like quality for that matter – can be defined in multiple ways and for various purposes. In addition, they are often embedded in complex processes of definition, interpretation and implementation, which have a lasting impact on the institutional quality development. In this paper we delve deeper into the question: how to avoid such counterproductive effects and how to make sense of quality standards within a participative quality culture framework.

Standards in higher education: quality control or quality development?

As a concept, standards are rather difficult to grasp, and often get lumped together with similar concepts such as indicators, benchmarks, measures and norms. Definitions of standards vary internationally, which may be attributed to linguistic particularities as well as to differing contexts of application and use.

Standards can become quality standards if actors/institutions reach an agreement to link them to quality. Yet, since quality itself is a complex construct with various dimensions and different meanings (cf. Harvey, 2006, or the often-cited older version Harvey & Green, 1993), it is important to consider which quality notions they are built upon or aim at. Teaching quality for example has been frequently linked to student satisfaction standards or to competence standards. In each case, the implications for setting, changing or raising the respective standard differ substantially.

Yet, in principle, all standards have a normative function (cf. Lassnigg & Gruber, 2001), whether they provide consistent scales and measures, regulate actions, set limits or facilitate comparisons. It is necessary, though, to take a closer look at how such norms are handled. On the one hand, standards can be addressed as fixed parameters, which do not give much leeway to the actors involved while, on the other hand, they can be used as adaptable concepts which react sensitively to changes of their base of reference (e.g. in the

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case of upper/lower limit standards or standards with a broad range of tolerance). Extra consideration should be paid to the political aspects involved, especially if standards are mainly used to assist central management for controlling and steering processes.

Apart from their normative purpose, standards can be functionalised in various ways:

- **Easing manageability**: This function is among the most visible ones, as it aims at verifying whether quality goals have been achieved. It provides orientation and establishes a basis for action routines. In this regard, the compliance with standards is considered to allow conclusions about the quality of an institution, its activities, processes and outcomes which are assessed against the standards. Paradoxically, standards used in this way have some counterproductive effects as well: the more precisely they are defined, the more necessary it will become to specify them even further in order to include any potential circumstances (or exclude any unwanted alternative). In addition, the actors bound to such standards are dispossessed of a considerable degree of autonomy as all important decisions are already pre-made (even though it is certainly possible to formulate such standards in a less prescriptive way by leaving at least some room for manoeuvre).

- **Permitting comparability and assessments**: Standards can be used for comparative purposes as well as for assessments within various contexts (e.g. providing evidence whether certain quality goals have been met or presenting a basis for accreditation procedures). In order to make such comparisons/ assessments possible, standards should be defined quite clearly and allow easy verification whether they have been met (e.g. in the case of standard-based evaluations, cf. Stake, 2004). On the other hand, this may cause some problems as well, because standards fulfilling this function tend to be restricted to aspects that are easily measurable (e.g. number of publications as a measure for research quality or student satisfaction scales as measures of teaching quality), potentially overlooking aspects that might be at least equally important but are also more difficult to assess (cf. Lueger & Vettori, 2007). And, last but not least, as most universities can be characterised as organisations with a high degree of internal differentiation/heterogeneity, comparative standards can rarely claim general validity.

- **Meeting accountability demands**: Universities that want to claim (and prove) that they conform to the requirements for high-quality education, research and administration, can support such claims (and 'provide evidence') by formulating and implementing quality standards, thus making their quality efforts visible to the outside. Standards fulfilling such an accountability function ensure transparency and demonstrate what is being done in order to legitimate public trust (and financial support). On the downside, this leaning towards externally accepted success factors and best practices may very well lead to increased levels of standardisation and homogenisation within the higher education community. Strategies and activities that have proven useful elsewhere get adapted and copied (cf. the work of Powell and DiMaggio, 1991, on mimetic processes, normative pressures and coercion as mechanisms of institutional isomorphic change) without sufficient reflection on contextual factors and aspects of organisational culture, potentially leading to completely different outcomes.

- **Raising quality awareness and empowering quality promoters**: Quality standards can also direct the attention of institutional actors towards quality-relevant aspects of their daily work and interactions, thus encouraging them to consider these aspects in their actions and decision-making processes. Such process-oriented standards may unfold their full potential by supporting the development of localised, customised quality strategies which pay attention to the diverging interests, quality notions and subcultures within a university – an argument which we will further develop in our final section.

Even at this point of our discussion (and although our list of possible functions is far from complete), it becomes clear that the establishment of quality standards can provoke a multitude of differing – even opposite – effects: they can encourage individual and institutional engagement for quality development or

discourage it; they can contribute to a university's homogenisation or promote differentiation in the sense of localised quality standards; they can support the fulfilment of external requirements or focus on internal developments. As we have already shown in our previous work (Vettori *et al.*, 2007), not everything can be achieved at the same time and with the same means. Yet, within such zones of ambiguity, it is necessary to be aware of the benefits and costs of each option and to make sure that they suit the overall strategy. If the overall goal is to strengthen a certain kind of quality culture, some ways of functionalising quality standards may hinder than help. This is even more important to bear in mind, as most functions of quality standards seem to be closely related to the hope of attaining a reliable instrument for quality management, which helps to foresee (and influence) institutional progress, enables key actors to obtain control of development processes and demonstrates quality efforts to external stakeholders – an approach not entirely in line with the quality culture concept promoted by EUA and various other authors in recent years. Thus, after taking a second, complementary analytical perspective to quality standards, we will present, in our final section, an alternative strategy that agrees better with our understanding of quality cultures.

Quality standards and centralisation/decentralisation

In order to gain a better understanding of how quality standards can fulfil the functions described above, it may be necessary to take a look at different types of standards on a very abstract level. In the following, we propose a classification of standards depending on their contribution to an institution's quality assurance/quality improvement. This leads us to three different types of standards:

a) **Standards as minimum thresholds.** This type of standard constitutes some kind of minimum level as a basis for further actions/developments (e.g. an official authorisation to offer study programmes, admittance to an elitist community, allocation of public funding in the context of performance agreements etc). Minimum threshold standards are usually intended to reduce uncertainties and induce trust; in a way, they can be regarded as quality seals that work very much like conditional models: if "A" is given, then "B" will very likely occur. Such standards can be used for two types of regulatory actions: first, by making clear *what* has to be done in order to meet the standard; second, by specifying *how* something has to be done in order to meet the standard.
   Finally, minimum threshold standards make rather small contributions to an organisation's quality improvement/quality development. Even though, as Harvey states, "the threshold standards approach to quality implies that quality is improved if thresholds are raised" (Harvey, 2007, p. 8), the scope of such improvements seems very narrow, confining them to areas that can be easily measured and influenced.

b) **Standards as broad objectives**. The second type of standard is more output-oriented, defining certain *outcome- or performance-oriented objectives* that should be achieved, yet without necessarily specifying them or even breaking them down to palpable indicators (in contrast to minimum-threshold-standards). Consequently, such standards can often be found in mission statements or agreement-on-objectives documents. The actors guided by such standards are autonomous in their decision-making choices. On the other hand, they face increased pressure for substantiating and justifying their decisions and actions, especially if the results deviate from the requirements - which can have various reasons. Broad-objectives standards usually adhere to long-term perspectives and are intended to offer orientation. In most cases, how such standards should be met is not regulated. In other words even though the 'ends' are given, the 'means' are not (or only partly). Nevertheless, their implementation can well be accompanied by guidelines and recommendations. In general, the broad-objective type of standard seems to get along well with a development-oriented perspective, yet we should keep in mind that the direction and outcome of such developments is difficult to forecast and even more difficult to manage – with or without standards.

c) **Standards as descriptions of good practice**. This type of standard usually emerges from broadly accepted routines and gains most of its legitimacy from them: some principle has proven to be effective (and acceptable) and is therefore at some point declared a standard. Such good-practice-standards are usually procedure-oriented, meaning that, in contrast to broad-objectives-standards, they rather focus on the question, *how to achieve a certain aim*. On the other hand, good-practice-standards have the major advantage of being accepted by and relevant for the people concerned by them. On the minus side, they can be difficult to put into question and are often bound to a specific context, i.e. cannot easily be transferred to other contexts. Additional difficulties may arise if the implementers forget about adapting the practices to their specific organisational culture and environment.

It can be easily seen that each type of standard has different advantages and disadvantages: their success in terms of improving (or better, influencing) quality in the intended way is strongly dependant on embedding them within the overall quality framework of an institution and how they are adopted. Again, the major question is whether these standards are centrally defined, implemented from top down and monitored in order to ensure their persistent functioning, or rather negotiated among different actors and stakeholders, introduced in a way that pays close attention to differing claims, concerns and issues (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and being constantly revised and flexibly redesigned if necessary. Since quality standards will only be fully functioning if the actors concerned actually adhere to them (or even better, accept and support them), such questions of emergence and development seem to be of paramount importance.

But let us first take a more detailed look at the relationship between a centralised quality management-approach and a decentralised (which would require a different management-approach instead of being purely laissez-faire). Centrally organised quality assurance systems show a tendency to establish rules that are generally binding, not least to signal to the external stakeholders that the university management is paying close attention to the university's quality deficits. One quite popular means of achieving this effect is the implementation of threshold-standards as some minimum basis for future improvements and the definition of very clear and easily measurable objectives. For locally organised quality assurance systems, however, it is more important to encourage quality awareness on different levels than to establish an institution-wide system of rules, regulations and procedures. Based on such sensitivity for quality-related issues, the university members can develop local strategies of quality assurance and quality improvement (within the overall strategic framework) that may very well be subject to a system of central monitoring to some degree. Within such a framework, good-practice-standards and broad-objective-standards can provide inspiration and orientation, whereas minimum-threshold-standards would be more process-oriented, demanding the development of local strategies without succumbing to a purely formal and number-based approach.

Whereas centralised systems tend to focus on the top-down implementation of generalised quality management strategies and models, decentralised systems rely strongly on delegating decision-making power and monitoring duties to those actors that are ultimately the ones who establish quality within a university (e.g. teachers, researchers, students, administrators). In this latter approach, quality standards are mainly regarded as a participative instrument for organisational development oriented towards "flexibilisation" rather than towards standardisation.

After dealing with issues of homogenisation versus flexibility and centralisation versus decentralisation in our previous sections, we will finally focus on the question of how quality standards can be a meaningful instrument for change within a participative quality culture framework and outline a few options for putting such a model into practice.

Quality standards within a participative quality culture framework

The quality culture approach promoted by EUA (cf. EUA 2006, 2005, Sursock, 2004) differs clearly from more traditional quality management strategies, shifting attention to more development-oriented and value-based aspects. The approach demands the involvement of multiple internal and external stakeholders, underlining the fact that a quality culture cannot be implemented from above, yet on the other hand ambivalently stating that strong leadership may be necessary for starting and promoting the process in the first place. It is just this ambivalence concerning the relationship of top-down and bottom-up ideas (or differing management ideologies, respectively) that will pose one of the major challenges for the approach in future years.

It has to be stated that the concept is still underdeveloped in terms of theory, especially with regard to the meaning(s) of culture within the overall framework, even though this deficit seems to have gained increased attention in recent times (cf. Harvey & Stensaker, 2007, Lueger & Vettori, 2007, Vettori *et al.*, 2007). In our previous work we defined quality cultures as stakeholder-dependent, historically grown and learning oriented social phenomena that can be barely managed and make it difficult to predict future developments. Such a participative quality culture is never homogeneous since it reflects the complexity of the interactions and interpretation the culture(s) emerge(s) from. Interventions are possible, but often only in an indirect way that takes localised and sub-cultural differences into account, as the latent premises for perceptions and actions are only slowly changing and cannot be directly tackled.

As a consequence, focusing on sustainable internal developments will demand a strategy which basically understands central management as a function for supporting the other institutional actors developing and unfolding their potentials. Such a strategy has to take the factual heterogeneity (i.e. subcultures) of larger universities into account and emphasises localised and customised quality strategies. As paradoxical as it may seem, within such a framework, standards can even lead to more flexibility and inspire innovation instead of streamlining and homogenising individual efforts and thus losing much needed social acceptance. Elements of this type of strategy may include:

- Harmonising general (institutional) and local standards; general standards may work primarily as guidelines for orientation (e.g. the quality standards of the Swiss University Council (http://www.cus.ch/Englisch/publikationen/richtlinien/) which have to be locally adapted and implemented

- Involving all actors with serious claims, concerns and issues in negotiating and defining standards; here, the crucial factor is a common understanding of such standards, which can only be achieved through processes of continuous, reciprocal communication

- Delegating responsibility (autonomisation of quality development) and empowering stakeholders to develop their own goal and measures; this may well increase the commitment of the actors involved, even though the decentralised objectives and actions must fit into the overall mission/framework

- Allowing for the possibility that standards may change during various stages of development processes; this will require sufficient leeway for decision-making and an avoidance of inflexible process standardisations

- Emphasising the signal function of standards; basically it is not the university management or some specialised quality assurance unit that 'produces' quality, but various other actors (students, teachers, researchers, administrators etc.). Used in a certain way, quality standards can sensitise them towards certain problems and raise quality awareness

- Considering latent and symbolic aspects of standards; quality standards will be interpreted ('read') and used in different ways and on different levels – it is important to acknowledge the fact that implementing them can have effects other than the most obvious or desired ones and to make provision for dealing with subsequent difficulties.

It has been our main argument in this paper that different types of standards are differently suited for supporting and influencing quality assurance and quality development and that we should pay more attention to the ways they are adopted in order to realise the overall objective. Even if the quality culture approach may basically be a tool for analysing 'who we are' instead of 'who we want to be' (cf. Harvey & Stensaker, 2007), tackling the latter question is not beyond our influence. Dealing with quality standards in a cautious, reflexive and productive manner is certainly a step in a promising direction.

3. QUALITY ASSURANCE MODELS IN EUROPE

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Evaluation of teacher competence in Spain: The DOCENTIA programme

Esteve Arboix Codina[1] and Eduardo García Jiménez[2]

Teaching competence evaluation: an overview

The current approach and practice of teaching assessment is, to a great extent, a consequence of the pressure put during the 1980s on the role of the teacher, which was considered to be a key factor in both the accountability process and the way to achieve excellence in higher education institutions (HEIs). Two approaches to teaching assessment have developed as a result. First, the criterion of teaching effectiveness has been used in the impact analysis of teaching activity, with performance indicators and questionnaires on students' opinions of teacher activity as the main tools used to assess teaching activity (Seldin, 1993; Shao, Anderson, and Newsome, 2007).

Second, teaching evaluation has been developed according to the criterion of teaching excellence, with consideration being given to enhancement and innovation processes introduced by teachers. This approach is based on the use of procedures such as teaching profiles, portfolio and peer review. Teaching profiles enable the teacher's activity in the classroom, as well as teaching innovations and learning outcomes, to be documented (Malik, 1996; Hutchings, 1996). A more updated version of teaching profiles is defined in the Performance Assessment for California Teachers (PACT) teacher portfolio (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Lastly, peer review serves as a support for the evaluation of teaching activity as it involves the participation of the teacher's more experienced colleagues.

A new approach was introduced with the student portfolio, which involves an analysis of teaching development by both the teacher and students. This joint analysis helps to establish the effectiveness of teacher activity and also provides feedback on teaching (Saravia, 2004). This new approach goes beyond the contrasting of effectiveness with excellence, whereby the continual enhancement of teaching involves the search for excellence in teaching, which results in better learning outcomes. By the same token, the portfolio permits the participation of both students and teacher and strikes a balance between teaching and research: research into learning leads to better teaching. This idea of linking the quality of teaching with learning outcomes has led to models like Teaching-For-Learning (Conrad, Johnson and Gutka, 2007), which makes the teacher a researcher of his/her own teaching activity through an assessment of teaching and learning outcomes.

These approaches have often been used in teaching assessment, although no consensus has been reached regarding the best indicators to measure the impact of teacher activity, teaching profile structure or a process for carrying out a peer review. This lack of agreement probably conceals the fact that it is impossible to look at teaching assessment without consideration being given to the HEIs where teachers work (Darling-Hammond, 1986). A better assessment is achieved when a more comprehensive approach to the HEI and the political and social context of teaching activity is adopted.

A more comprehensive approach to teaching assessment also calls for an analysis of teaching competence, namely, the teacher's capability to deal with the challenges of teaching in the HEI. Such an analysis should take into account the institution's general goals, the academic programmes, student characteristics and the social context, together with its human resources policy.

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2 Innovation Coordinator, ANECA, Spain.

Teaching activity linked to teacher competence is mentioned in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA. Specific mention is made in standard 1.4 of the fact that HEIs must have the necessary means to assure that their teaching staff is qualified and competent to teach[3].

The Spanish context

The assessment of teachers' qualifications and competence gives rise to different results. Of the two, qualifications assessment is a more systematic practice and has been established for a longer period of time in the Spanish higher education system. A more systematic and transparent approach to the assessment of teaching competence is required in Spanish universities, although innovations in this field will need to be made in accordance with the universities' autonomy and capabilities.

The assessment of teaching staff in higher education in Spain involves different aspects and stakeholders. Jurisdiction over teacher assessment is shared between the universities and the Spanish central and regional governments through the quality assurance agencies. Both their qualifications and their teaching competence are assessed. A PhD qualification is a sine qua non condition to become a university teacher. Applicants take part in a two-part process of evaluation: a quality assurance agency first assesses their teaching and research competence, and applicants whose teaching competence is certified then participate in a recruitment selection process carried out by the university. This twofold process is the same for recruitment to public service and for teaching staff promotion. A university assessment is also made of the teaching competence of candidates applying for public service, promotion in their university, and to make improvements in teaching.

Therefore, the teachers' hiring process in Spanish universities (see Chart 1 and Chart 2) was mainly based in teacher qualifications. In order to assess the quality of a teacher two significant aspects are primarily taken into account: index impacts on publications and the number of years the candidate has practiced as a teacher.

DOUBLE SCENERY	
Evaluation of their **QUALIFICATION**	Evaluation of their **COMPETENCE**
Someone who wants to be a university teacher in Spain needs 1) a PhD Qualification and 2) a positive evaluation from a quality assurance agency. This evaluation is based on their teaching, research and management merits.	To assure the quality of teaching and learning, universities apply evaluation procedures. It is an evaluation that is done by the university and that is focused on what the teacher does in the classroom. Students' surveys are the most common assessment tool.
It is an evaluation of the teacher's CAPACITY in terms of teaching, research and management.	It is an evaluation of the teacher's COMPETENCE in terms of teaching.

Chart 1. Teachers' evaluation in Spain: Sceneries

3 ENQA (2005). Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

	Evaluation of their **QUALIFICATION**	Evaluation of their **COMPETENCE**
FOCUS	Teacher's CAPACITY	Teacher's COMPETENCE
OBJECT	Research Teaching (planning) Management	Teaching (classroom activity)
APPLIES TO	Someone who wants to be a teacher	Someone who is already a teacher
CHARACTER	Compulsory. External	Volunteer / Comp. Internal
MAIN EVALUATION METHOD	Expert panel	Survey
STUDENTS	NO	YES
MANAGEMENT OF THE PROCESS	Quality Assurance Agency	University
VALIDITY	National / Regional	University
PROXIMITY	Distance	Nearness

Chart 2. Teachers' evaluation in Spain: Characteristics

DOCENTIA implies an important change in this context by shifting the teaching duty of the teacher to the centre of the quality assessment of their activity. The DOCENTIA programme is a process for the certification of teaching competence, which is assessed on the basis of the teacher's ability to deal with the challenges of an academic programme in a particular university, and within a given social and academic context. Decisions stemming from this process are also related to the human resources policy and strategic planning of the university, which must ultimately decide on the suitability of the teacher's competence, his/her training needs and possibilities for promotion.

The DOCENTIA programme

DOCENTIA is an evaluation and certification programme applied by ANECA and the regional Spanish quality assurance agencies. The programme was designed on the basis of the experience of the Catalan quality assurance agency (AQU Catalunya, a regional Autonomous Community agency in Spain) in teaching assessment in seven public universities between 2002 and 2007, which initially dealt with teachers' eligibility for salary increments.

The initial stage of AQU's tasks related to the evaluation of the teaching staff and involved an explicit agreement concerning the general model as well as the criteria of the evaluation process between the Agency itself and the universities and the regional government (given the prevailing legislative framework, the Autonomous Government of Catalonia may allocate five-year salary increments for teaching). The basis of the agreement was a **specific regional budgetary item** for salary increments linked to the results of teaching evaluation. This preliminary agreement between the main stakeholders was an atypical procedure in the educational systems where quality assurance agencies are involved.

A second stage involved AQU drawing up the guidelines (in a series of guides) for universities to design their own teaching assessment models. This involved the universities preparing a handbook where they had to define exactly what they wanted in terms of teaching assessment, such as the dimensions for evaluation (planning, development and results of teaching), tools (portfolios, reports by the heads of

department), decision-making, reviewers and the follow-up procedure. Compliance of the universities' design for teaching assessment with the prerequisites was then certified by AQU. Following the completion of this period of experimentation, a final stage of accreditation is to be carried out by AQU. This essentially describes the process carried out in DOCENTIA.

DOCENTIA assesses three basic dimensions of teaching competence: teaching planning, classroom activity and learning outcomes. The evaluation of teaching planning assesses different aspects including types of teaching organisation, coordination between teachers in planning teaching, breakthrough learning outcomes and teaching activities, educational resources and materials that the teacher intends to use in the classroom, and the criteria and procedure to evaluate learning outcomes. The evaluation of classroom activities analyses the teacher's work and the way that planned teaching activities have actually been applied and how the teacher assesses student learning. Learning outcomes are assessed in terms of the competences acquired by students and the activities carried out by teaching staff to review, enhance and develop innovative teaching.

The following table shows the dimensions of teaching assessment, the stakeholders and evaluation procedures most frequently used by universities in the DOCENTIA programme.

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">DIMENSIONS OF TEACHING ASSESSMENT</th><th colspan="3">STAKEHOLDERS AND ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES</th></tr>
<tr><th>Teachers</th><th>Academic managers</th><th>Students</th></tr>
<tr><td>Planning</td><td rowspan="3">Teacher portfolio</td><td rowspan="3">Report</td><td rowspan="3">Survey</td></tr>
<tr><td>Classroom activities</td></tr>
<tr><td>Learning outcomes</td></tr>
</table>

Table 1. The dimensions, stakeholders and procedures in assessment

Teaching assessment in DOCENTIA is carried out on the basis of four criteria: teaching suitability according to the university's requirements and learning outcomes established in the curriculum; the satisfaction of students, academic managers and colleagues with the teacher's work; the teacher's effectiveness and capability to develop the envisaged competences in students within a particular context; and innovativeness in teaching.

The stakeholders participating in DOCENTIA have different roles. The quality assurance agencies establish the standards and guidelines to verify procedures designed by the universities to assess teaching staff competence and certify application of the procedures. The universities design and put into practice their own procedures for teaching competence assessment, and the academic managers, students and the teachers themselves carry out the assessment of teaching.

There are thus two external quality assurance procedures used in DOCENTIA, one where agencies verify the design for teaching assessment produced by the universities prior to their application, and another where agencies certify the results of teaching assessment within a period of two years following verification of the designs. At the end, a peer review procedure to assess the results is also carried out between the Spanish national agency (ANECA) and the regional agencies in the Autonomous Communities.

Results

One initial result that is worth highlighting is that the DOCENTIA programme has been well accepted by the Spanish universities, above all because the evaluation of teaching competence – which takes into account planning, development and teaching results – is not a customary practice in Spanish universities. The process that was started in Catalonia in 2002 in 7 public universities has evolved into an evaluation programme in which 62 universities (44 public and 18 private) participate, out of a total of 74 universities located in Spain as a whole.

A second result worthy of mention is that the teaching competence evaluation process developed in the seven Catalan universities between 2002 and 2007 was set up on the basis of **joint work** by a group of academic experts from public universities, together with the Catalan agency (AQU) and the Catalan Regional Ministry of Education. Further revisions were agreed in several meetings with the universities' governing bodies and technical staff. The process does not affect the universities' autonomy and they are ultimately responsible for the quality assurance of their teaching staff.

A third achievement of the evaluation process is that the universities have become aware of teaching staff assessment as **an overall process** with its various related dimensions (selection, recruitment, teaching assessment, promotion, and so on). Prior to 2002, there was no legally established relationship between teaching assessment and promotion or salary increments for teaching staff, and the universities had relatively little influence over pre-selection assessment processes.

A fourth achievement is that the model enables **the main objects of the teaching assessment to be identified**. Objects such as teaching planning, classroom activities, teaching results, reflection on teaching by means of portfolios, innovation in teaching, and so on, can thus be considered. In the case of teaching assessment in the seven Catalonian universities in relation to salary increments, however, more emphasis was put on the individual's teaching load.

A review of the main procedures used by Catalan universities shows that the teacher portfolio is the key tool to teaching assessment, especially when the portfolio includes the teacher's own reflections on planning, classroom activities and learning outcomes. While the AQU model for teaching assessment proposes certain items to help the teacher write up the portfolio, the review mechanism turned out to be a complex task given the qualitative nature of much of the information provided by the teachers on their ideas about teaching. In relation to another evaluation procedure, experience has shown that the reports by academic managers are of limited use due to insufficient differentiation being made, i.e. most of them give a positive result.

The students' opinions on whether teaching staff are competent need to be analysed in order to improve how the information they provide is managed. One particular issue is the students' views on the consequences of assessment. In general, students consider that the universities should have the means to remove teachers if consecutive assessments show them to be ineffective.

The evaluation of teaching competence has **reinforced the quality culture** in Catalan universities, especially with staff involved in developing internal quality assurance. Particular note is made of the use of several types of complementary evidence for assessment validity (teacher portfolios, surveys, reports by academic managers). One of the main criticisms, however, is the associated bureaucratic process for teachers; in some universities they are required to provide information about teaching activity that should be available in university databases. Improvements have been made to computer applications as a result, although there are still areas in need of further improvement.

Lastly, the validity of the assessment procedure in its ability to discriminate is also worthy of particular mention. Table 2 shows the aggregate results for teaching competence assessment in the 2002-2007 period in Catalan universities. The potential number of teachers in a position to apply for assessment (i.e. that have completed at least five years of teaching) is given for each year, together with the number of actual applicants, and the positive and negative results.

Call for participation	Potential no. of applicants	Actual no. of applicants	%	Positive	%	Negative	%	Positive / potential
2003	1,544	1,241	80%	1,175	95%	60	5%	76%
2004	1,358	1,037	76%	1,004	97%	31	3%	74%
2005	1,031*	1,020	na	1,002	98%	18	2%	na
2006	1,869	1,168	62%	1,116	95%	52	4%	59%
TOTAL	**5,802**	**4,466**	**na**	**4,297**	**96%**	**161**	**4%**	**74%**

- **na: not available**
- **Catalan public universities: Universitat de Barcelona (UB); Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB); Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya (UPC); Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF); Universitat de Lleida (UdL); Universitat de Girona (UdG); Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV).**

Table 2. Aggregate results for teaching competence assessment. Public universities in Catalonia

The data show that the majority of teachers who applied have passed the assessment (96%). The questions are if the Catalonian model discriminates among teachers and if it necessary to develop a model which only evaluates in a negative way 4% of teachers. Discrimination by the assessment procedure, which occurs when applications for assessment are made, shows however that approximately 25% of the potential number does not apply. Various different reasons were given by teachers for not applying although it is evident, from a cost-benefit analysis, that the most important included that it involves more bureaucratic work, the teaching assessment is not set out well, and that potential applicants have previously simulated their case and know they will not pass the assessment.

Teachers' assessment by teaching activity is not compulsory and, at the beginning, this assessment model was associated with salary increments. Nevertheless, teaching staff at the public universities have become increasingly aware of the merits required to pass the assessment.

Looking to the future

Following the experience involving the evaluation of teaching competency carried out in Catalan universities, the universities participating in DOCENTIA have prepared their own procedures to evaluate the competence of teaching staff, the verification of which is to be started by a group of experts in October 2007.

DOCENTIA is expected to bring change to the dynamics of evaluation and, with the legislative change of the new Spanish Universities Act (April 2007), to reinforce teaching assessment in Spanish universities in two ways: firstly, by guiding the selection, training and promotion of teaching staff on the basis of the evaluation of teaching competence, and secondly, with the universities replacing the public administrations in designing and developing the assessment of their teaching staff. This would lead to a radical change by doing away with the universities' long-standing dependence, thereby contributing to their autonomy regarding human resources management.

Multiplicity of methods in assessment as a form of quality assurance, quality control & quality improvement

Justin Rami and John Lalor[1]

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe how educators in higher education can adopt certain approaches to assessing student learning and understanding and thus create assessment mechanisms that can be regarded as quality assured. This paper is derived from research carried out in a teacher education programme in the School of Education Studies at Dublin City University (DCU), Ireland. At the heart of this research are the learners, the lecturers and the wider community of stakeholders. This paper outlines a bottom-up approach focussing primarily on best practice whilst adhering to and fulfilling the entire quality requirements espoused by the University, the National Qualification Framework and EUA.

Quality assurance within teaching & learning

In the teacher education context at DCU, quality assurance can be defined as those systems, procedures, processes and actions intended to lead to the achievement, maintenance, monitoring and enhancement of quality. A sound quality system enables one to achieve, maintain and improve quality. Within the vast literature relating to quality, differing aspects of the design of a quality system can be identified simply as quality control, quality assurance, and quality improvement.

National and local context of quality assurance

This research is primarily concerned with the evaluation of assessment procedures, particularly the practice-oriented assessment procedures, used to establish quality and certify standards. To explore the quality assurance arrangements, systems and procedures in vocationally related higher education in Ireland it is important to put this in an overall national context. A number of recent events and initiatives contribute to give impetus to the development of QA (Quality Assurance) systems in teaching, learning and assessment. The Irish Universities Act 1997 requires Universities *'to establish and implement procedures for quality assurance aimed at improving the quality of education and related services provided by the university'*. The concept of quality qssurance is currently high on the agenda of educators and policy makers in Ireland. There are a number of driving forces that have set these developments in motion. This chapter outlines some of these policies, systems and organisations. In relation to the quality procedures at Dublin City University, DCU's recent strategic publication *Learning Innovation Strategy 2006-2008* states that: Professional quality standards of excellence in teaching and learning will be developed. Excellence in teaching will be a more formal and visible criterion for promotion. (sec.5.1)

Specifically in relation to **assessment** the Plan (2005) also states that:

- All programmes will include both formative and summative assessment techniques that test both understanding and knowledge.
- There will be increasing emphasis on assessment of higher level competencies such as synthesis, analysis and application.
- Assessment styles will be informed by the research-led nature of DCU and to complement the techniques identified in 1.1.above. (sec.3.4)

1 Lecturers and research coordinators in the School of Education Studies at Dublin City University, Ireland.

The HEA (Higher Education Authority) which is the statutory planning and development body for higher education and research in Ireland has taken this issue seriously and has provided funding for quality assurance/improvement for:

- Dedicated personnel in each university, and networked across sector
- Preparation of a common set of procedures for the management of quality reviews
- Costs associated with reviews and implementation of findings
- The establishment of the Irish Universities Quality Board

In their Review of Quality in Irish Universities (2005) EUA stated that in relation to QA: *'This systematic organisation and promotion of quality assurance at the initiative of the universities themselves is, in the opinion of the EUA teams, unparalleled in any other country in Europe, or indeed in the United States and Canada'* (sec.43). They went on to say, *'It encourages a greater focus on quality and improvement than some systems worldwide, while at the same time being less intrusive than some other systems in Europe' (ibid)*. In relation to teaching and learning in Irish Universities, the report went on to say that *'the QA process is helping to keep the contents of courses up to date, and is supporting a practical approach to improving teaching and learning methodology'* (sec.89).

However the new assessment processes that we are advocating as good practice in this paper are not necessarily common practice within the whole Irish University sector. In fact the EUA review also said

> 'The EUA teams were unanimously surprised to find that students have almost no formal input into monitoring or evaluating the quality of teaching and learning in Irish universities. ... Student input is essential in the ongoing improvement of quality in the teaching and learning fields, and, as a basic minimum, the Irish universities need to ensure coherent and regular student feedback on all courses and modules, and for this feedback to be an explicit input to the QA process' (Sect. 91).

Recent quality assurance developments in European higher education and training have largely been driven by the Bologna Declaration. In the Irish context there have been numerous developments within the Irish State that have had an influence on the provision of higher education ensuring that quality is a key pillar within the process of education and training in Ireland. Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, three new organisations were established in 2001 – the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and two new awards Councils, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). The Qualifications Act (1999) required that HETAC (Higher Education & Training Awards Council) ensure that all higher education providers have:

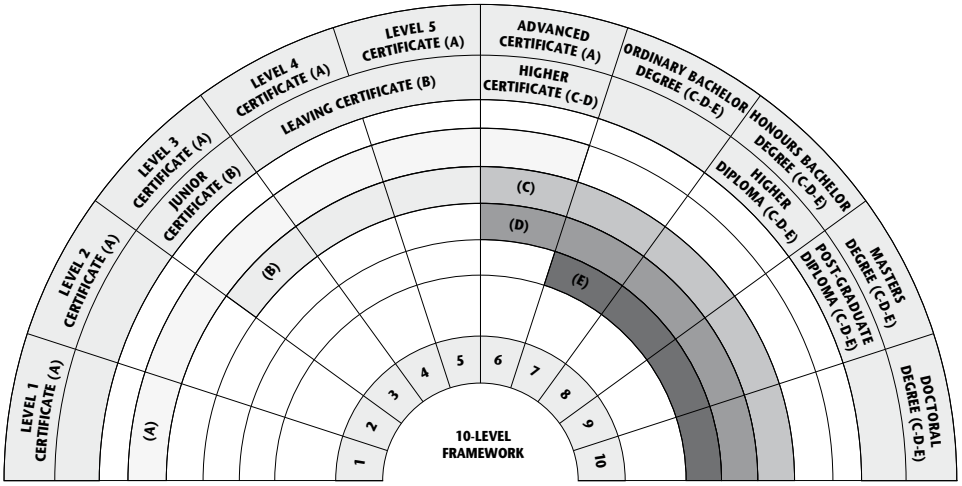
> An acceptable system of quality assurance in higher education and training (which) rests on three pillars: *Self-evaluation, External review, Information to and from stakeholders*. A weakness in any of the three pillars threatens the stability of the structure (p.4).

A further development in the assessment landscape has been the introduction of a new Framework of National Qualifications (NFQ) by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). The main task of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has been to develop a national framework of qualifications. The National Framework of Qualifications is defined as:

> The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training. (NQAI, 2003)

The qualifications that are included in the NFQ, the providers that offer programmes leading to NFQ qualifications and the awarding bodies that make these awards, are all subject to quality assurance

arrangements. The principal legislation underpinning quality assurance in education and training in Ireland is the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 and the Universities Act 1997. The framework should bring an increased clarity to the meaning of each type of qualification allowing qualifications to be compared easily. The new Framework of Qualifications will help add clarity and transparency within the whole Irish education system. **Figure 1** shows a visual representation of the new Framework. Without these new organisations fulfilling dedicated roles (uncomplicated by curriculum or examination matters), it is hard to imagine how an initiative such as the development of a national framework of qualifications could be carried through. These recent developments will have a great impact on the modes and methods used in work-based learning and performance-oriented assessment.



(A) FETAC - Further Education and Training Awards Council
(B) SEC - State Examinations Commission (Department of Education & Science)
(C) HETAC - Higher Education and Training Awards Council
(D) DIT - Dublin institute of Technology
(E) Universities

Figure 1. A visual representation of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (source NQAI 2005)

Multiplicity of methods

In educational settings, especially in the area of vocational and interdisciplinary courses, adopting a multiplicity of assessments can result in a more accurate picture of student achievement. By combining multiple observers, methods, and empirical materials, educators and assessors can hope to overcome the weaknesses, inherent biases and problems that may be contained within single method, single-observer assessment techniques.

Using a multiplicity of methods is a form of triangulation[2] and within practice-oriented assessment it may become an alternative to traditional vocabulary such as reliability and validity. When multiple threats to the validity of measures emerge, we should use multiple sources of data (generated by multiple methods of analysis) to meet them (Thomas et al 2004). If the different measures seem to lead to similar observations, then the level of validity and reliability is increased. Triangulating the mode of assessment methods should also increases validity. Commentators such as King, Keohane, Verba, (1994) recommend using both quantitative and qualitative methods to produce accurate results. In general terms, methodological triangulation can be used for a number of purposes:

- *To collect different types of information (qualitative and quantitative, primary and secondary, for example).*
- *With two or more assessors using the same method (observation, for example) their observations can be compared to see if they agree that they have seen the same things in the same ways.*

2 **Triangulate (triangulation)**: the use of a combination of assessment methods in a study. An example of triangulation would be an assessment that incorporated surveys, interviews, and observations.

- *To check that data collected in one form (for example, through an analysis of a reflective journal) is both reliable and valid. Some form of observational method could be used to check these things.*
- *To verify (that is, "confirm") that any data collected is accurate. (ibid)*

Multiple methods in specific contexts

The research that this paper is drawn from examined assessment process as a form of ensuring, controlling and improving quality in the School of Education Studies. The module examined was called Microteaching and is primarily used in Teacher Education / Training. Microteaching, originated and developed in Stanford University in the 1970s, is a technique for professional reflection which is designed to help teachers analyse and reflect on their practice. It provides opportunities for teachers to examine their teaching in a supported, controlled environment with a view to discovering their strengths and weaknesses as professional educators.

The Microteaching module provides students with an opportunity to develop their teaching strategies relevant to their chosen educational contexts. The students develop confidence in a range of core teaching skills through reviews, analysis, demonstration, peer coaching and practice. In the course of the module, the students are given an opportunity to use a variety of different audio-visual technologies and to evaluate their potential and limitations from an educational viewpoint. A key focus of this module within the programme involves the students engaging in critical analysis of their own context and developing an understanding of the links between core competencies and underpinning learning theories. The programme duration is three years and the Microteaching module occurs within the second semester of Year One and Year Two of the programme. In Year Three, students are mainly off-campus in real life vocational contexts e.g. schools or training departments within organisations.

In practice, Microteaching involves two students working as a team who devise and implement a series of short lessons over a twelve-week semester in an authentic or simulated[3], lab-like, learning environment to a small number of their peers using a range of teaching strategies and audio/visual teaching aids. This process is digitally recorded using customised digital video cameras and then critically analysed by an external teaching/training expert and the student pair. This process is subsequently peer-reviewed by the student teachers and their student group under the supervision of the teaching/training expert using a specially devised assessment sheet which lists a number of core competencies and provides an opportunity for the students to comment on each other's performance. The verbal peer review happens at the end of each teaching episode with the learning and the amendments to the students' practice brought forward and implemented in the following week's teaching. A further element to this reflection ensures that the student then posts a series of reflections to a VLE (Virtual learning Environment) called MOODLE[4]. Based on these reflections the teaching/training expert then replies constructively to these students' written reflections pointing out areas of success and areas for development. This element of the assessment ensures that the student is involved in a continuous cycle of learning, doing, reflecting, amending and re-planning. This cycle of learning and practice ensures that the students are given the skills to continually reflect on and improve their practice as teachers. The process echoes Schön's (1984) reflective practitioner model.

3 Authentic or Simulated here refers to the fact that during specific periods of the Microteaching module the students may have a real class of primary or post-primary students as their audience/learners and at other times this is simulated when the audience/learners are made up from their fellow students/peers.

4 DCU's Moodle platform includes the core functionality provided by WebCT, along with some useful features and pedagogical tools that are not currently available in typical commercial VLEs. It was considered very significant that the design of Moodle had been strongly influenced by an explicit pedagogical theory and orientation (social constructionism) which we considered to be well aligned with DCU's philosophy and approach. (Munroe, M. & McMullin, B, 2004) DCUs Moodle platform can be accessed at https://moodle.dcu.ie.

In addition to this the students also reflect individually on their Microteaching experiences in an end-of module-essay. This essay is marked by the course lecturer. This triangulation of approaches to assessment outlined above is designed to ensure validity and academic rigour in the areas of performance assessment, competence-based assessment and authentic assessment. *Table 1* outlines the Microteaching process:

Student Activity	Assessment Process
1. Student teaching pair deliver a short 10-minute session to a small group of their peers. They practice a specific teaching skill or set of skills.	1. This process is video-taped by the students. The teaching pair view the video tape and reflect on the specific element(s) of their teaching practice with a teaching/ training expert using a specially designed assessment sheet.
2. Student teaching pair deliver a second short 10-minute session to a small group of their peers. They practice another specific teaching skill or set of skills. This process is repeated over the course of the semester.	2. This process is again video-taped by the students. The teaching pair view the video tape and reflect on the specific element(s) of their teaching practice with a teaching/ training expert using a specially designed assessment sheet.
3. Individual student then ensures that he / she then posts a series of reflections to a VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) called MOODLE (the tutor who is an experienced teacher or trainer, provides guidelines for the direction of these discussions).	3. Based on these reflections the tutor (teaching/training expert) then replies constructively to these students written reflections pointing out areas of success and areas for development. This element of the assessment ensures that the student is involved in a continuous cycle of learning, doing, reflecting, amending and re-planning.
4. Towards the end of the semester the student pair deliver a lesson to their peers which incorporates all of the teaching skills they have been using up to this point.	4. The video tape of this session is viewed and reflected on by the teaching pair and their peers using the same assessment sheet.
5. The students complete a written assignment which reflects on their Microteaching experiences and understandings.	5. This assignment is corrected and marked by the teaching/ training expert. The entire process allows the students to implement teaching strategies in a controlled environment, to reflect on their practice with the support of their peers and supervisors and to analyse and reflect on their experiences in a written assignment.

Table 1. Microteaching Process

This use of multiplicity of methods not only focuses on competencies and knowledge but on the learners' deeper understanding of themselves as practitioners, which should help to ensure not only quality assurance but quality improvement. Coupled with the use of additional assessment methods such as supervised and online reflection, learning logs, and virtual diaries, the learners' understanding of the assessment methods ensures that there is an element of quality control at work. In a joint research project called QualPraxis, this research contributed to the development of a model which aims to show assessment processes that can assure quality at all levels of the process.

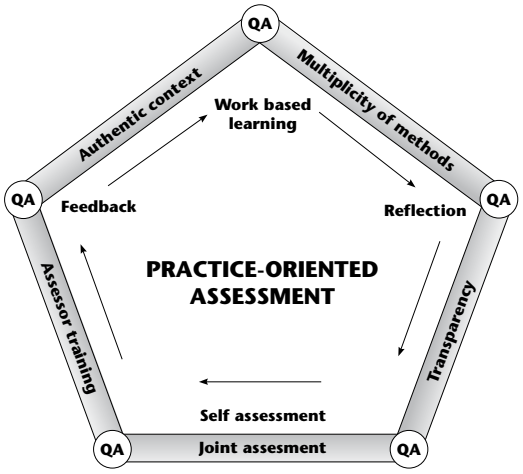


Figure 2. Quality Assurance using multiple approaches to assessment in Higher Education. (Stenström & Laine (Eds.) 2006)

The inner circle describes the **learning process** assessed by using practice-oriented methods while the outer circle outlines the activity environment of practice-oriented assessment itself. The **environmental factors** surrounding the assessment process act as constituents of quality assurance (QA) and thus enhance the successful implementation of assessment of this type. In higher education the focus of quality and the consumer has now embraced the learner as a key stakeholder in the process echoing Lincoln & Guba's (1989) work on evaluation, which places the stakeholder at the centre of the process. The experiences of the students are vital for their continued development as learners and practitioners. This embraces the Irish government's view on encouraging practices that will enhance the concept of lifelong learning (Govt Ireland 2000). DCU go on to state within their Strategic Plan (2005), that there should be:

> A shift from summative to formative assessment, assessment approaches to support research-led learning and a move to reflective practice, problem based learning and independent learning, will address many of the issues surrounding assessment, while maintaining the benefits of rigorous assessment. (7.0)

The main aim of many interdisciplinary programmes is integrative learning and transferable skills: learning that '*…offers students opportunities to see connections as well as differences among disciplines*' (Huber & Hutching, 2003). Within these contexts, performance-based assessments, coupled with observation, are traditionally the norm. Performance-based assessments are said to be relevant because they mirror the real-life application of skills and knowledge; it should not be assumed, however, that these assessments measure complex thinking skills. In their 2002 document *Guidelines and Criteria for Quality Assurance Procedures in Higher Education and Training* HETAC state that the 1999 Qualifications Act requires them to ensure that:

> The provider should also have, as part of its quality assurance procedures, systematic arrangements for evaluating the effectiveness of the learner assessment procedures, to ensure that they are in practice fair, consistent and in compliance with Council standards, in the context of the national framework of qualifications (p.7-8).

Conclusion

The research conducted within DCU demonstrated that quality assurance should not be seen only as an over-arching aspirational policy umbrella. Quality assurance needs to permeate the fabric of all aspects of programme delivery and assessment.

On a micro level this research outlines that quality assurance in assessment can be complex and at times difficult to measure. However as long as curriculum alignment is observed rigorously then we can hope to achieve quality assurance in assessment processes. It is also important to ensure that the overall context of the assessment is put into perspective as higher education involves a broad range of stakeholder interests. With the ever increasing need for third level institutions to justify their work through evaluative processes such as the EUA Review of Quality in Irish Universities and keeping in line with the EQF (European Qualifications Framework) and the National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland, we are now more than ever responsible for ensuring that our students receive value for money. Flexible, transparent and stakeholder centred process are vital for this to happen.

SECTORAL MODELS

Introduction of a UK wide, risk-based quality assurance framework for professional education

Roger Thompson[1]

Introduction

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), an independent body, regulates 689,000 health care professionals across the UK. It sets standards for entry to its register, maintains the register and removes individuals who fail to continue to meet its standards. It provides quality assurance of higher education programmes designed to meet its standards.

This paper introduces the changes the NMC has made to its QA framework to make it more consistent in application and to provide the NMC with assurance that risk is being managed effectively.

Background

The NMC and predecessor bodies had always set standards for the education and training of nurses. Change came in 2002 when the NMC itself became responsible for their quality assurance. A peer-review model was adopted in England but previous approaches involving professional officers were used elsewhere in the UK. These produced inconsistent outputs of QA activity making it difficult for the NMC to judge how well its standards for education and training were being met across the UK. In October 2005, the NMC decided to review its approaches and consulted with a wide range of stakeholders from across the UK to determine what worked well and what improvements should be made. A decision was also made to outsource the supply of QA services to external suppliers so that the NMC could have a more strategic and less operational focus on QA. Other objectives included gathering and disseminating evidence of positive practice to contribute to quality enhancement as well as quality assurance.

The NMC is fully committed to the Higher Education Regulation Review Group's core principles and those of the Better Regulation Taskforce that regulation should be "transparent, accountable, targeted, consistent and proportionate".

In addition, the NMC is mindful of Walshe's (2003) additional principles of improvement, rigour and cost-consciousness. The NMC wants to focus on areas of weak performance and take action to encourage improvement (Kennedy 2006). The new model is directed towards key risk areas in terms of programmes and their providers. In this way, the NMC will be able to direct its activity away from those providers who demonstrate effective control of risk and towards those who fail to do so (DfES 2006).

The concept of risk as *potential* is fundamental to this approach (DH 2005). Adopting a risk-based approach allows the NMC to identify potential risks, informed by previous experience and a wide range of evidence sources. Its subsequent QA activity can then identify the extent to which a risk may be realised. This would result in further action to minimise the risk by revisiting a standard, liaising with programme commissioners or other strategic activity.

In the past the NMC has attempted to quality assure a vast myriad of programme standards with an inconsistent model that has not provided consistent outputs. Whilst NMC standards have a long life, the

1 Education Advisor, Nursing and Midwifery Council, UK.

key risk areas are much more flexible and amenable to change. This enables the regulator to focus on the risks it believes to present the most significant potential challenges to public protection.

The NMC not only sets standards for entry to its register, it considers removal of individuals from it. The NMC wants to learn from its experience of removing individuals from the register. Generalising from this is difficult as only a very small percentage of the nursing and midwifery professions are ever referred to the NMC. Some themes, however, do continue to emerge about particular reasons for referral and a higher incidence of referral from some branches of the professions.

Implementation

During the first year of operation of the new framework NMC, reviewers completed a baseline assessment. This involved reviews of 184 programmes delivered by all 84 institutions. These reviews were of a similar level of engagement to previous activity. The main change was in the way the visits were planned and organised. A managing reviewer attended the institution to make initial contact and explain the scope of the review to the provider. At this stage they also compiled a pre-review commentary that provided detailed information for reviewers in advance of their visit. As a result of this, the visits, mostly held over two days, were well focussed and had clear hypotheses to be tested out. The outcome of the visit was a report that contributed to the overall analysis of provision in each UK country.

Since the introduction of the framework the NMC has also been reviewing its key risk areas for quality assurance. These have been informed by previous QA activity and the outcomes of a series of interviews and meetings conducted with key stakeholders from across the UK. This resulted in a number of themes that were refined and prioritised. The result was 5 key risk areas that the NMC wished to address in future monitoring. The importance of a risk-based approach is that it provides an opportunity to focus on potential problems or issues. These risks may or may not have been realised, but if realised, would be detrimental to public protection.

Themes	Key Risks
1. Resources	1.1 Programme providers have inadequate resources to deliver approved programmes to the standards required by the NMC
	1.2 Inadequate resources available in practice settings to enable students to achieve learning outcomes
2. Admissions	2. Public is put at risk through admission of inappropriate persons to NMC approved programmes
3. Practice Learning	3.1 Programme providers fail to provide learning opportunities of suitable quality for students
	3.2 Inadequate governance of practice learning experience
	3.3 Confirmation of achievement unreliable and invalid
4. Fitness to Practice	4.1 Newly qualified nurses and midwives are unable to administer drugs in safe and appropriate manner (whether under supervision or not)
	4.2 Newly qualified nurses and midwives are unable to perform to the required standard of essential skills / do not meet NMC requirements to practice at the point of registration
	4.3 Learning opportunities fail to address specific requirements of NMC approved programmes
5. Quality Assurance	5. Programme providers' internal QA systems fail to provide assurance against NMC standards

A risk analysis of programmes monitored was undertaken against the NMC Key Risk Areas. Two parameters have been used to determine the level of risk, *probability* – the likelihood of the risk occurring and *impact* – the consequences if the risk does occur. Assessment of both probability and impact was made using a five-point scale for each parameter from very low (1) to very high (5). Using the NMC assessment of impact and the findings of the baseline assessment to inform probability, the assessed level of risk has been plotted for each programme monitored.

The baseline work confirmed that the key risk areas were of importance to public protection and accorded with contemporary themes and trends in programme delivery. The key risk scores for particular programmes have been used to identify the monitoring activity for the second year of the framework. In the past a 20 per cent of a provider's programmes would be identified for monitoring. This process judged whether programmes continued to be delivered to the required standards. For each programme there could be literally hundreds of individual standard statements as well as additional advice and guidance issued in NMC circulars. This made it difficult for reviewers to behave consistently and provide reports that could inform the NMC across the whole of its provision. The new focus on risks drives the review process so that a review plan can direct individual reviewers to work in the same way and deliver consistent outputs. This makes the process of analysis much more effective and improves the quality of information the NMC uses to inform strategic policy decisions.

Whilst a risk-based approach has attractions for quality assurance, the NMC is also committed to enhancing the quality of its approved programmes. Evidence of effective practice will be examined and analysed and shared with all other programme providers. This will enable providers to learn from each other and to improve programme delivery.

Internal and external quality assurance

NMC approved programme providers operate in higher education across the UK. They are institutions that have demonstrated on a number of levels that they are fit to deliver programmes of higher education (QAA). There is therefore a considerable volume of activity already conducted within organisations to demonstrate that they deliver good quality programmes. Providers account to QAA for quality, to HEFCE for the efficient use of resources and so on. There are many different layers of regulation and quality assurance (QAA 2004).

Programme providers, quite naturally, seek assurance for their own benefit to confirm that the quality of their programmes is comparable to similar activity elsewhere. The well-established role of external examiners contributes to such judgements. In addition, the evaluation of learning by students provides important feedback to support ongoing improvement. The challenge presented by professional programmes such as those approved by the NMC is that there is a significant proportion (50 per cent for nursing and midwifery programmes) of such courses undertaken in practice. This actually requires that students are in direct contact with patients for such experience. There are therefore two domains in which quality must be evaluated: theory and practice.

The NMC takes the view that there is a significant range of QA activities directed at the theoretical components of programmes that is not replicated in practice settings. For example, regulators continue to require external examiners to engage with all aspects of the programme. In reality, engagement with practice based learning is, at best, mixed. There are few, if any, systems for the verification and validation of practitioners' judgements of students' clinical competence. This is unacceptable for a practice-based profession such as nursing.

Timescales

Work on the new framework began in October 2005 when the NMC undertook a comprehensive review of its quality assurance activity. A review of the existing approaches was made in order to capitalise on their strengths and to improve upon the weaknesses. Services to deliver were put out to tender and an advert was placed in the Official Journal of the European Union in January 2006. The contract specification was developed and five of the initial eight organisations that expressed interest were invited to submit a full tender.

Three suppliers finally bid for the work in England. The winning contractor, HLSP, put together a comprehensive response to the NMC's requirements and started working under contract in August 2006. From that point the NMC had benchmark material to inform the contractual negotiations for the supply of QA services in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Existing suppliers were invited to address the NMC's requirements and HLSP won the contracts for Northern Ireland and Scotland and the Healthcare Inspectorate Wales won the contract for Wales.

Both suppliers are now delivering a UK-wide framework using the same approaches across the UK. Reviewers are now able to operate anywhere in the UK and this has resulted in more consistent outputs to the NMC.

Work is underway analysing the outcomes of the baseline gathered in Year 1 and scoring the impact and probability of key risks relative to specific programmes. This has enabled the NMC to score all its programmes and identify a focus for next year's monitoring activity. A review plan is being created to direct reviewers to activities that will verify controls in place against risk areas.

As can be seen in the table below major themes are broken down into key risk areas that could be demonstrated through various types of evidence. The control column identifies measures providers should have in place to mitigate such risk being realised. The review plan clarifies the quality assurance activity to be undertaken by reviewers in order that they operate consistently. This will demonstrate equity in delivery of the framework but also enable the production of consistent outputs that will be analysed and reported to the NMC.

Themes	Key Risks	Identified Risks and Issues	Controls	Review Plan
3. Practice Learning	3.1 Programme providers fail to provide learning opportunities of suitable quality for students	Evidence of inadequate partnership between education and service providers	Signed statement of compliance	Determine level and nature of interaction between service education partners, minutes of meetings, actions taken to address concerns
		Limited involvement of practitioners in programme development and delivery	Programme management committee	Evidence of practitioner attendance and issues addressed by programme committees
		Lack of presence of education staff within practice settings	Time dedicated to education staff to engage with practice	Review policies for lecturer time in practice, gather evidence of time spent in practice, and evidence of outcomes on programme delivery

Comparing QA systems

A comparison of previous arrangements for QA against the new framework is detailed in the table below:

Activity	Previous Model	UK-wide QA Framework
Reviewers	Mixture of permanent staff and peer reviewers (mainly England)	Peer reviewers operating across UK
Monitoring NMC Standards	Different reporting methods for each country	Same reporting template with qualitative evidence for each standard
Objectivity	Mixed – ongoing relationship between agents and programme providers	Improved – new reviewers sent to each event
Preparation for visits	Documentary analysis by reviewers	Pre-review commentary and documentary analysis
Management of reviewers	Sporadic; limited oversight by NMC, different approaches across UK	Managing reviewers in attendance during monitoring visits, contracts have improved management of reviewers
Outputs received	Reports in varying formats – difficult to collate and analyse to inform strategic decisions	Standard format for reporting with key risk focus and standards reported in tables against graded outcomes
Impact on programme providers	Some very intense periods of activity – planned for months in advance and drawing on significant resources	Stronger focus on sampling internal processes and verifying self assessment made by provider
Costs to provider	Appointment of review coordinator by provider, organisation of large volumes of evidence	Managing reviewer co-ordinates event in liaison with provider, focus on risk areas reduces amount of evidence required
Visits to practice	Opportunity for advance preparation of practice areas chosen by provider	Greater objectivity as practice areas chosen by reviewers with shorter notice

Conclusions

The new UK-wide QA framework conforms to several key principles that QA agents and programme providers subscribe to: openness and transparency, consistency, risk-based, proportionate approach.

The new framework is designed to optimise the capture of data over very short timescales. This has reduced the extent of engagement with providers with managing reviewers preparing pre-review commentaries to guide review visits. The outputs are now presented in graphic form and provide clarity for the QA Committee at the NMC and help it to make decisions. This informs strategic decisions at committees that have very limited time to engage with the raw data. The reports enable the NMC to direct its QA activity going forward and to take any action required to amend its standards for education and training. Behind the charts are detailed reports that illustrate the specific issues for programmes and providers.

The NMC has introduced a more consistent framework and has been receiving more consistent reporting from across the UK. Peer reviewers now operate across UK boundaries and all meet currency and credibility criteria for the role. The baseline monitoring has been completed and targets for monitoring in year 2 have been agreed. For the future the NMC will clearly direct QA activity to areas of weakness in terms of specific programmes or providers and will have reduced engagement with those areas shown to have strong controls against risk. This approach will reduce the volume of QA activity but maintain appropriate levels of assurance for the regulatory body.

Quality assurance and accreditation in the European Higher Education Area: Music as a case study

Martin Prchal[1]

Quality assurance and higher music education

Few subject areas have such an intrinsic obsession with demonstrating quality as does music: students are constantly asked to perform for committees, auditions, competitions and (the ultimate test of all) the concert-going public. At the same time, a limited experience exists with external quality assurance and accreditation procedures in music. Indeed, external review processes are still often approached with some suspicion, especially when done by non-specialist organisations and experts.

AEC action in this area

To address this issue, a SOCRATES project entitled 'Accreditation in European Professional Music Training' was undertaken by the European Association of Conservatories (AEC) with quality assurance and accreditation as its main theme. The project built upon the successful results of the EU/USA project entitled 'Music Study, Mobility and Accountability', which ran from 2002 to 2004 in partnership with the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) in the United States, a specialist accrediting organisation for professional music institutions[2].

What do we mean by 'quality'?

In this AEC project, a profound discussion emerged regarding the use of the term 'quality'. When applying the Bologna principles on quality assurance to higher music education, what kind of quality should be addressed: should we discuss musical, educational or managerial quality, or maybe a combination of these?

In order to be able to address issues on quality assurance in a more general sense, the working group had to start with making some statements on musical quality and its relation to the general quality assurance issues. The group felt the need to stress that the esthetical value of a piece of art is inherent in the art-work itself, hence no general norms can be defined for musical quality. A piece of music may well have qualities related to use and function. Such qualities are important and should not be underestimated, but they can never replace the intrinsic artistic quality.

Moreover, qualitative standards in music are developed in musical traditions. The artistic experience and expectations embedded in a musical tradition form the backdrop against which musical quality can be assessed. In other words, music creates qualitative standards for music, all within cultural contexts and traditions. This is eloquently described in the document "Quality, Assurance, Accountability: A Briefing Paper":

> "Music study is permeated with accountability. Music requires a special relationship between accuracy and freedom. In practice sessions, rehearsal, and even in performance, constant evaluation and adjustment are the norm. The success of professional music study is evaluated in light of the high standards and high expectations of the larger musical world. Tours, recordings, and international competition continue to define professional expectations by exchange of work at the highest levels. In music, we have standards because we have art, not art because we have standards."[3]

1 Chief Executive European Association of Conservatoires (AEC).

2 The outcomes of the project, nominated by the European Commission as the first (and so far only) 'Best Practice Project' in the EU/USA programme, can be found on the project website http://msma.arts-accredit.org.

3 For a full version of this document, see www.bologna-and-music.org/externalqa

Therefore, because of these assumptions, it was seen as essential that whenever higher music education institutions were faced with quality assurance or accreditation procedures set up for higher education in general, these would have to use criteria and procedures that would address the artistic function of the institutions in addition to other more general issues.

Higher music education

Before providing more information on the work on quality assurance and accreditation in higher music education done by the project, the term higher music education requires explanation and definition. The 'Tuning' Group for the subject area, working in the framework of the ERASMUS Thematic Network for Music 'Polifonia'[4], characterises higher music education as musical study undertaken in the context of higher education that has a primary focus upon students' practical and creative development. These kinds of music study are mainly offered by specialist institutions of the kind referred to as conservatoires, musikhochschulen, music academies and music universities, which may be stand-alone institutions or departments within larger multidisciplinary institutions.

Higher music education places a professionally oriented principal study area at the core of the student's learning. For most students the principal study is of a practical nature. Study elements of academic, theoretical and practical nature are arranged around each principal study area to support it.

There are several aspects important to higher music education that need to be recognised and preserved in any attempt to harmonise this training with the requirements of the Bologna Declaration. Some of the assumptions embedded in the Declaration need special qualification when applied to higher music education:

- The concept of employability, to which the Bologna Declaration refers, is problematic when applied to higher music education. Even if there are a number of organised professions for musicians many conservatory graduates become freelance artists

- Training in higher music education depends fundamentally upon students having obtained a significant level of musical skills prior to entry. Primary and secondary schools do not always offer opportunities for obtaining such skills. Consequently, conservatoires need to assess their applicants through specially designed entrance examinations, which may consist of live auditions with juries of teachers.

- The objective of removing barriers to mobility needs to be seen in the context of a long tradition within higher music education of students moving from one institution – and country – to another as they pursue their personal growth as musicians. Again, though, even with readable and increasingly compatible qualifications, the principle of verifying a student's capabilities through entrance examinations remains an important cornerstone to any of the three cycles of higher education in a conservatoire.

- The learning process in higher music education centres on the personal and artistic development of the individual student. For most conservatoire students, one-to-one tuition is of paramount importance for this development.

- At the same time, when taken as a whole, the field of music involves many other learning and teaching approaches, some of which reflect the interdisciplinary character of the subject. A student's higher music education often combines formal, non-formal and informal elements and regularly includes experiences that take place within the professional environment.

4 Visit for more information about 'Polifonia' the extensive website at www.polifonia-tn.org

- Since obtaining a high artistic level is not only a matter of mastering technical and intellectual challenges but is also dependent upon acquiring inner maturity as a musician, the duration of music study is likely to be longer than for most other disciplines and, specifically, longer for the first cycle than the three-year minimum indicated in the Bologna Declaration.

- Institutions specialising in higher music education support a wide range of original and innovative work across the performing, creative, and academic fields. They welcome the broad definition of research employed in, for example, the shared Dublin Descriptors of the Joint Quality Initiative, and they recognise a special responsibility to develop research in and through practice in the performing and creative arts.

As a consequence, in addition to the comments made on musical quality above, these characteristics would also have to be taken into account in quality assurance and accreditation procedures for higher music education.

The AEC framework document on quality assurance and accreditation

It was with these facts in mind that a framework document was developed by a Europe-wide working group, which contains suggestions and guidelines to support quality assurance and accreditation procedures in higher music education. This document, entitled 'Quality assurance and accreditation in higher music education: characteristics, criteria and procedures', includes the following chapters:

- Characteristics of higher music studies, highlighting the special features of higher music education as an introduction

- Characteristics of an effective evaluation system for the professional music training sector

- Programme outcomes to be used as references points: the 'Polifonia/Dublin Descriptors', illustrating the typical profiles of the three study cycles in higher music education, and the 'Descriptions of learning outcomes for the first, second and third cycles in music study', as developed in the ERASMUS Network for Music 'Polifonia'.

- Criteria for programme and institutional review in music, which have been formulated in a list with specific sections (mission and vision; educational processes; student qualifications; teaching staff; facilities, resources and support; public interaction).

- Procedures for programme and institutional review in music, which have been developed taking into account the 'European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (ENQA 2005) and the ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts. These procedures include several stages (self-study; peer review visit; a report with findings and recommendations; follow-up procedures).

The developed standards and procedures are applicable to institutional accreditation procedures, as well as to programme accreditation procedures. They can be used for reviews of independent higher music education institutions and music faculties, schools or departments in larger educational institutions. The suggested criteria and guidelines were thoroughly tested during pilot review visits in institutions in Weimar, Prague, Oslo and Trieste during the spring of 2007.

The document takes into account that quality assurance and accreditation can involve many different stakeholders and take place in national and European contexts. In most countries, educational authorities conduct quality assurance or accreditation reviews to ensure minimum standards for all its programmes

and/or institutions of higher learning. At the same time, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area now exist and European-level subject-specific review programmes (e.g. for engineering, chemistry and business management), some of which award so-called 'European Quality Labels', are emerging.

In order to be fully informed about the national procedures for quality assurance and accreditation in higher education in European countries, the project produced a detailed 'Overview and analysis in English of existing national accreditation and external quality assurance procedures in the EU'. Based on the information compiled on this overview, it was decided that instead of making different documents for the various stakeholders, systems and contexts, one overarching framework document would be developed, designed in such a way that it can be used in the following scenarios in quality assurance and accreditation processes at national level:

- where more information is sought about the subject area music, such as a list of experts
- where criteria for reviews of higher music education institutions or programmes are needed
- where criteria and procedures for reviews of higher music education institutions or programmes are sought

When the combined sections are read, the document contains a proposal for the establishment of an institutional and programme review scheme at European level conducted within the framework of the AEC.

Viewed in this way, the proposed framework document can be used in a highly flexible manner, taking into account the diversity of systems and approaches to quality assurance and accreditation in higher education that exist in Europe today. Therefore, the document should be able to assist European higher music institutions in their quality assurance or accreditation procedures and quality enhancement activities. The basic assumption, however, is that everything written in this document is based on a thorough understanding of the characteristics and needs of the higher music education sector. For example, the procedure clearly specifies visits to lessons, music performances and rehearsals with the aim of avoiding that this will be a 'paper exercise' only. This also assumes the review visit must be done by peers: in order to facilitate this, the project has developed a 'Register of experts', listing experts for the review panels and including guidelines on how experts will be selected.

Some observations

The work done in this area also identified the following issues.

Raising awareness on quality issues in the sector
The project helped to raise the awareness of quality assurance and accreditation issues in the sector by repeatedly putting these subjects on the agenda of congresses, meetings and the final project conference. One could say that a greater understanding now exists of the potential for quality enhancement of these processes, which has been strengthened by the work done in the project on the development of programme outcomes, criteria and procedures that are based on a thorough understanding of the needs and characteristics of the higher music education sector. In addition, a need for objective evaluations of institutions and programmes by 'critical friends' was clearly identified throughout the sector. A strong positive factor was the successful implementation of the pilot review visits, which were perceived as a rigorous but helpful process by the participating institutions.

At the same time, the pilot review visits clearly showed that the debate about the kind of quality being addressed (as mentioned above) was an important one and that when reviewing a higher music education institution a balance had to be found between musical quality issues and quality issues of a more general nature. For example, what to do when the review team finds an institution (as actually occurred during one pilot review) with high musical standards and graduates without any problems finding their way into the profession, but with a poorly developed internal quality assurance system according to the European Standards and Guidelines? Such questions will need to be addressed.

Taking into account the national and European contexts

As explained before, the approach suggested in the AEC framework document constitutes an approach to quality assurance and accreditation that is innovative and constructed in such a way that it can serve various contexts and various stakeholders. The suggested framework (or parts of it) can be used in national quality assurance and accreditation procedures in higher music education. At the same time, when seen as a whole, it constitutes a complete European-level review programme for the evaluation of institutions and programmes in music. This is an approach that differs from other subject-specific systems: for example, the EUR-ACE system for engineering programmes is one that is highly decentralised and based on national procedures. The system existing in chemistry is organised with evaluation teams travelling throughout Europe without direct connections to national procedures. By choosing a middle way and taking into account both the national and European contexts, the approach suggested by music is one that builds bridges between both and can therefore serve as an example of good practice to other disciplines.

Linguistic issues

Another problem encountered in the project was the use of languages. Musicians are used to resolving problems related to languages, as they normally use music as the ultimate non-verbal way of communication for which no translation is needed. However, in this project, in which processes were developed with a high level of verbalisation in the criteria, programme outcomes, the self-evaluation documents and the visit reports, it was clear that in the European developments in quality assurance and accreditation, the issue of languages is a tremendous challenge, which will require further consideration in the future.

International comparability

Another unique feature of this project was the close alignment with the ERASMUS MUNDUS project 'Mundus Musicalis'[5]. In this project, partner institutions from all over the world addressed international recognition and comparability issues in higher music education, including issues related to quality assurance and accreditation. The AEC framework document on quality assurance and accreditation in higher music education was discussed by the 'Mundus Musicalis' working group throughout its development and was given valuable feedback that would increase its international comparability. One of the partners in this project, NASM, was in particular of great value to the development in the AEC accreditation project. NASM served as a consultative partner to the accreditation project, a role which will be continued in the future, e.g. by the establishment of joint evaluation panels.

Future perspectives

The project has also formulated a feasibility study, which describes how the work done in this area should be taken further. The study describes the current situation at the European level with regards to quality assurance, including the establishment of the European Register for Quality Assurance Agencies. In brief, the study explores a future strategy for the higher music education, trying to find a balance between the immediate needs of the sector in some countries and the current reality of the AEC.

5 For more information about this project, see www.aecinfo.org/mundus

The feasibility study therefore suggests establishing an 'AEC Review Scheme' for the evaluation of institutions and programmes in music, similar to the programme developed by EUA, which in effect is a procedure focused on quality enhancement. Such an 'AEC Review Programme' would take place in the framework of the second cycle of the large ERASMUS Network for Music 'Polifonia' for the period 2007-2010, which has recently been approved by the European Commission. In addition, an 'AEC quality assurance desk' should be established, where institutions, quality assurance and accreditation organisations and ministries could receive advice on quality assurance and accreditation procedures in higher music education, e.g. by offering the various stakeholders the criteria, procedures and register of experts developed in this project.

What can higher education in Europe learn from this case study?

Based on the results of the project, one of the main conclusions must be that any approach towards quality, 'quality culture', or formal quality assurance and accreditation procedures cannot be done without the framework of a specific discipline. Generic and non-specialist systems will therefore be less helpful, as they will be more inclined to focus on the assurance of a bureaucratic approach to quality and less on quality enhancement. It is our strong conviction that, as the Bologna Process is clearly entering a new phase, the further development of 'Bologna' must be sought in more subject-specific approaches.

Accreditation and QA of engineering education in Europe: Setting up a pan-European system[1]

Giuliano Augusti[2], Ian Freeston[3], Günter Heitmann[4] and René-Paul Martin[5]

Introduction and background

Accreditation of engineering educational programmes as entry route to the engineering profession has proved to be a powerful tool to improve both academic quality and relevance for the job market.

Indeed, the word "accreditation", used in the United States since the 1930s, did not find its way into European specialised literature and official documents until recently: however, historically, Europe has been in the forefront.

Within Continental Europe, formal accreditation ("habilitation") started in France: a 1934 law established the Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur (CTI), in which not only academia but also employers and social stakeholders are represented on a parity basis: only graduates from an accredited programme can use the title of "ingénieur diplômé"; at present, about 700 engineering programmes are accredited in the French engineering schools.

In the UK, a similar role has been played since the 19th Century by the professional institutions of the different engineering disciplines (branches): hence, accreditation was (and is) distinguished by discipline. In 1981 the overarching Engineering Council UK (ECUK) was established to coordinate and maintain the standards of the accreditation process.

Thus, although there is no formal obligation in France nor in the UK to register in order to practice as a professional engineer, in both countries the established standards provide a strong incentive for the accreditation of engineering degree programmes.

Engineering accreditation in UK and France is dealt with in detail in Part 2 of the full EQAF paper (Augusti et al., 2007); the situation in other countries is very varied as can be seen in other papers (e.g. Augusti 2005, Augusti 2006). For example in Germany, up to a few years ago all higher education programmes had to conform to strict (State or Federal) rules, which made accreditation superfluous. "Bachelor" and "Master" programmes, introduced in the 1990s, are gradually replacing the old programmes: formal accreditation has been prescribed for these, and a great number of programmes have been already accredited, especially in engineering.

In other countries, where QA assurance procedures are being introduced in the context of the Bologna process, procedures for programme accreditation are being developed in parallel, sometimes using different terminology as is the case in Italy.

In Portugal (and in some other countries) accreditation of engineering programmes has preceded general quality assurance procedures: the "Order of Engineers" established its accreditation procedure in 1994, well before the establishment of an overall QA system of higher education.

1 The support by the DG "Education and Culture" of the EC through the "Socrates" and Tempus" programmes is gratefully acknowledged, as is the cooperation of the many people, institutions and associations that have and are still collaborating with EUR-ACE and connected projects, and with the establishment of ENAEE and the EUR-ACE system.

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It is, however, fair to state that the quality of European engineering programmes is generally quite high on a global standard, and on the whole continuously improving thanks not only to QA practices but also to the continuous contacts and exchanges between engineering faculties, encouraged over several decades by international associations such as SEFI (Société Européenne pour la Formation des Ingénieurs) and CESAER (Conference of European Schools for Advanced Engineering Education and Research), and more recently by EC-supported Thematic Networks on Engineering Education (either general: H3E, 1997-99; E4, 2000-04; TREE, 2004-2008; or branch-specific, e.g. EUCEET).

Motivation for a European system of accreditation of engineering education (EE)

The variety of educational situations and of degrees awarded in Europe makes trans-national recognition of academic and professional qualifications rather difficult. The Bologna process is working towards the creation of a transparent "system of easily readable and comparable degrees", but as far as "accreditation" and recognition with professional implications is concerned, no shared project or system exists on the continental scale, while in the engineering field several international agreements for mutual recognition of degrees and/or qualifications are active (e.g. the Washington Accord). Notwithstanding the prestige of national systems and academic titles, this deficiency weakens the position of the European engineer in the global employment market.

The relevance of this problem has been felt for quite some time. Already in 1994, the European Commission issued a communication on the possible synergies between recognition of qualifications for academic and professional purposes (EC, 1994). More recently, after three "European Workshops for Accreditation of Engineering Programmes" promoted by Thematic Network H3E, a few academic and professional organisations were set up in September 2000, such as the "European Standing Observatory for the Engineering Profession and Education" (ESOEPE).

Thus, when in March 2004, the European Commission (DG Education and Culture) issued a "Call for Proposals for Europe-wide Participation Projects contributing to the Realisation of the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Process)", in which it was stated that "the Commission supports the setting up and testing phase of transnational evaluation and accreditation" and "would welcome ... proposals from subject specific professional organisations developing European Cooperation in Accreditation in fields like medicine or engineering", it was quite natural for ESOEPE to promote the EUR-ACE (EURopean ACredited Engineer) project, that was launched in September 2004 and completed on 31 March 2006.

The EUR-ACE project and the EUR-ACE Framework Standards

The main purpose of the EUR-ACE project (Augusti, 2007) was to develop a set of standards and procedures for comparing the degree programmes across Europe that have contributed to the education of professional engineers. A preliminary detailed survey of the standards used by the partners in the project revealed striking similarities behind different façades, and in particular a strong preference for using outcomes-based standards, i.e. on what is achieved rather than how it is achieved. This approach has four direct advantages:

(a) it respects the many existing traditions and methods of engineering education in Europe;

(b) it can accommodate developments and innovation in teaching methods and practices;

(c) it encourages the sharing of good practice among the different traditions and methods; and

(d) it can accommodate the development of new branches of engineering.

The resulting EUR-ACE Framework Standards (EUR-ACE 2006) were developed after successive versions were commented on by the project partners and other stakeholders, both academic and non-academic,

and after testing in a number of countries. They identify 21 outputs for accredited first-cycle degrees and 23 for second-cycle degrees, grouped under six headings:

- Knowledge and understanding;
- Engineering analysis;
- Engineering design;
- Investigations;
- Engineering practice;
- Transferable skills.

The Framework Standards include "Guidelines" and "Procedures for Programme Assessment and Programme Accreditation" (that include the assessment, among other requirements, of the human resources and facilities available for the programme), and also a "Template for Publication of Accredited Programmes".

In order to be as flexible and comprehensive as possible, and not to exclude any "compatible" accreditation system, the standards are framed to encompass all engineering disciplines and profiles, and distinguish only between first- and second-cycle degrees. The standards are also applicable to the accreditation of programmes leading directly to a degree equivalent to a second -cycle degree (conventionally termed 'Integrated Programmes'). Indeed, such integrated programmes are an important aspect of European engineering education, not only in the long-established "Continental Schools", but also in the U.K., Ireland and other countries.

Furthermore, in some European countries engineering degrees are characterised by "profiles", in addition to the distinction between FC and SC degrees; the accreditation in some countries distinguishes between engineering branches (disciplines), while this is not the case in others. Clearly, to accommodate these differences the EUR-ACE Framework Standards must be interpreted (and if necessary completed) to reflect the specific demands of different branches, cycles and profiles. However, HEIs will still retain the freedom to formulate programmes with an individual emphasis and character, including new and innovative programmes, and to prescribe conditions for entry into each programme.

The EUR-ACE Standards are consistent with the Bologna Process, and in particular with the 'Dublin Descriptors' (JQI, 2004), the 'Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area' (EQF, 2005) and the 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (ENQA, 2005). Indeed, the EUR-ACE Framework Standards address the five generic qualification dimensions of the EQF on each level by specifying and expanding them with regard to engineering.

A major difficulty in establishing programme outcomes linked to different cycles is that of specifying an absolute standard. This is particularly so in engineering, because the standard must apply consistently to the many different and overlapping branches, and should also be applicable to new branches that will emerge because of continuing scientific and technical developments.

The EUR-ACE Framework express the standard to be achieved by graduates in the three direct engineering requirements 'engineering analysis', 'engineering design', and 'Investigations' by using the phrase *'consistent with their level of knowledge and understanding'* and this "level" is described using the concept of the "forefront" of the particular branch of engineering.

In the requirement "knowledge and understanding" the relevant phrase is for first-cycle graduates to achieve *'coherent knowledge of their branch of engineering including some at the forefront of the branch'*, and for second-cycle graduates *'a critical awareness of the forefront of their branch'*.

It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to obtain an agreed specification of the forefront for all engineering disciplines, and, even if it could be obtained, a fixed specification would inhibit innovation in programme design and teaching methods. Nor would it be relevant or applicable to new and emerging technologies. The identification of the forefront of the branch is the responsibility of the members of the accrediting panel who are experts in that particular branch of engineering. The reasons for their decision will be reviewed and assessed by the committees responsible for the final accreditation decision.

The EUR-ACE accreditation system and its implementation

The "EUR-ACE Framework Standards" do not intend to substitute national standards, but to provide a common reference framework as the basis for the award of a common European quality label (the EUR-ACE label). As described in a working document of the EUR-ACE project, the basic idea is "a bottom-up approach which involves the active participation of present and future national accreditation agencies and which should embrace a multilateral mutual recognition agreement based on agreed standards and procedures. No supra-national accreditation board should be formed: accreditation should always be awarded by a national (or regional) agency which may already be in existence or may be created in the future."

This "decentralised" approach appears to be rather novel in the worldwide panorama of programme accreditation systems: a central body accredits established national agencies that already accredit (and will continue to accredit) engineering programmes (the term "*meta-accreditation*" can be used with reference to this approach) and authorises them to add the common European EUR-ACE Quality Label to their accreditation.

To provide this central body, ESOEPE has been transformed into the "European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education" (ENAEE), an international not-for-profit association founded in February 2006 by 14 associations concerned with EE throughout Europe (three more organisations have joined ENAEE since).

ENAEE has ascertained that six Accreditation Agencies in six different countries (namely, Engineering Council-UK, EngineersIreland; Order of Engineers, Portugal; RAEE, Russia; CTI, France; ASIIN, Germany) already fulfil the requirements set by the Framework Standards, and has authorised them to award the EUR-ACE label for a period of two years, after which they will be assessed again. These six countries, covering a variety of educational, political and social realities throughout Europe, constitute the initial "core" of the EUR-ACE system: approximately 100 EUR-ACE labels have already been granted in 2007, first year of operation, notwithstanding the late start and remaining difficulties, in particular in France.

In the meantime, appropriate procedures are being set up in order to enlarge the EUR-ACE system beyond the initial core. Three possible alternatives are at present envisaged:

1. Include other Agencies in the system, provided they fulfil the Framework Standards: this may soon be the case of a couple of organisations that are already members of ENAEE.
2. In countries without any accreditation system, create a new Engineering Accreditation Agency; in the meantime, programmes can be accredited by any agency already active in the system.
3. An established "general" accreditation agency that requires the fulfilment of specific standards (in our case, the EUR-ACE Framework Standards) when an accreditation implies (or is a requirement for) professional recognition, can be authorised to add the EUR-ACE label: agreements for meta-accreditations in this line are already being elaborated.

The global context of EUR-ACE

Apart from the "European" context, the EUR-ACE project was (and now ENAEE is) challenged to deal on a global scale with existing accreditation standards, procedures and "labels" in other parts of the world, hence with the standards and regulations of the US Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) and of the above mentioned Washington Accord.

In the USA accreditation, as an approach for quality assurance in higher education has a long-standing tradition, started as accreditation of institutions but now includes also programme accreditation, in particular for professionally oriented qualifications. ABET is a federation of 28 professional and technical societies representing all branches of engineering, operational since 1934 and recognised by the American Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and the US Department of Education as the sole agency in the field of EE.

ABET was the first agency to shift in the late 90s from a primarily input-based to a mainly outcomes- and performance-based accreditation: the so-called Criteria 2000, now compulsory for all ABET programme accreditations in engineering, list 11 programme outcomes for engineering in general, that may be enhanced by additional branch-specific outcomes.

The Washington Accord, originally signed in 1989, is an international agreement among bodies accrediting engineering programmes: full members are agencies operating in USA (ABET), UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South-Africa, Japan, Hong Kong China, Chinese Taipei and Korea, i.e. essentially in countries following a system of the Anglo-American type, with a first-cycle (Bachelor) degree after three or (mostly) four years of study and a second-cycle (Master) degree after one or two additional years.

The Accord recognises the substantial equivalency of programmes accredited by the signatory bodies and recommends that graduates of programmes accredited by any of them be recognised by the other bodies, but - in the USA and in most signatory countries - accreditation focuses mainly on the first degree as the regular entry into the engineering profession. However, quoting from a recent paper (Liu et al., 2007), "accreditation at the Master's degree level has emerged out of different reasons among the signatories, namely Engineers Ireland and JABEE [Japan Accreditation Board of Engineering Education]. ASIIN, a provisional signatory of the Washington Accord, has also launched accreditation for the Master's degree level. IEET [Institute of Engineering Education Taiwan] will launch accreditation for the Master's degree program beginning in 2007." The Engineering Council UK has also accredited Master degrees for a number of years.

A recommendation for accreditation at both the Bachelor and Master levels has also been made by the US National Academy of Engineering. Thus, although these current debates have not yet led to a change in the US accreditation patterns (only the American Society of Civil Engineers calls for an accredited degree at the Master level as a necessary entry requirement to the profession), it appears that the Washington Accord might soon move towards a two-tier system very similar to EUR-ACE.

The Washington Accord may be compared to the EUR-ACE system: but while, in the latter, mutual recognition is in a "quality label" awarded by the participating agencies on the basis of shared standards and procedures, the former relies on comparable accreditation procedures, independently applied by the participating agencies, who only drew up a common list of outcome standards in 2005, together with a typical requirement of four years of study for an engineering degree. In parallel, standards referring to the same outcome criteria have been developed for 3- and 2-years programmes, leading respectively to "engineering technology" degrees and "engineering technicians" qualifications recognised in the so-called Sidney and Dublin Accords.

The rigid and formal connection of outcomes with years of study and semantic definitions of technical professions in this three-accord (W-S-D) system, causes difficulties in the mutual professional recognition for programmes defined in accordance with the Bologna two-cycle system, as well as for the academic recognition of such programmes for graduates applying for admission to graduate studies. In principle, such problems should not exist in an outcome approach if the achieved outcomes are equivalent.

The Bologna Process and the EQF provide a more flexible connection to the duration of study and tend to follow the European approach of separating the achievement of certified learning outcomes and gained competences from the how they were achieved and the time it took.

Discussion and conclusions

If coupled with rigorous QA rules, as it should always be, programme accreditation ensures that the educational programme is not only of high academic standard, but is also fit for purpose in the job market: the participation of non-academic stakeholders in the process is a guarantee to this effect. An international recognised qualification like the EUR-ACE label, added to such an accreditation, will facilitate job mobility.

Engineering has always been in the forefront of discipline-specific accreditation, that in many (if not in most) cases has preceded general QA procedures, not only in France and the Anglo-Saxon countries, but also in the aforementioned example of Portugal. Indeed, the "engineering" model can be (and in some cases is) used as a pilot for other professional disciplines.

Discipline-specific accreditation usually refers to individual educational programmes rather than departments or HEIs, but of course does not exclude an overall system of QA of the whole educational system, authorising only "quality" HEIs to deliver academic degrees.

If confronted with the W-S-D system of three "accords" described in the previous Section, it is fair to state that the EUR-ACE system is at the same time simpler and more flexible: it does not create a rigid barrier between "engineers" and "technologist" (against the spirit of the Bologna Process, and in many languages not even very clear) but allows national differences and appropriate distinction between the "cycles".

It can be expected, however, that in order to make the EUR-ACE label fully recognised on the global scale, the relation with the Washington Accord will be a crucial point, if anything because two members of the EUR-ACE "core" are also signatories of the Washington Accord.

This will be another challenge for EUR-ACE, and at the same time will be a test of the applicability of the EQF, the Dublin Descriptors and the EU Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications (EU, 2005).

But, apart from technical and operative difficulties in creating a European system like the envisaged EUR-ACE system, a major difficulty certainly lies in the great differences between educational practices, legal provisions and professional organisations in the various European countries: these are, however, the typical difficulties encountered in building a unified (but not homogenised) Europe. The fact that common standards could be written and can be now tentatively implemented from Portugal to Russia, in continental and Anglo-Saxon countries, is a matter of great pride for us, the initiators of EUR-ACE.

NATIONAL MODELS

The changing political framework of quality assurance in German higher education: National debates in the European context

Johanna Witte[1]

Introduction

A great deal is happening in the governance of quality in German higher education that is not always transparent for international observers, primarily because of the unique competitive set-up of the programme accreditation system in a federal framework. This paper takes as a starting point the current efforts to abandon the system of programme accreditation in favour of the accreditation of quality management (QM) systems for teaching and learning – referred to as "system accreditation" in the German context. These efforts are pertinent in a European context, given that emphasising and strengthening the capability of higher education institutions (HEIs) to manage the quality of their services is at the heart of the Bologna process. At the same time, which path should be pursued to achieve these aims is a subject of great debate in Germany. The paper seeks to illuminate the debate and explain the main issues with reference to the blind spots and unsolved issues in the programme accreditation system that was set up around 1998, hand in hand with the introduction of Bachelor and Masters programmes, and by putting these issues in international context. The contribution builds on material used and insights from a recent PhD thesis (Witte, 2006). It is based on the analysis of policy documents over the period 1998-2007 and a range of interviews with key actors in higher education policy.

Features of German quality assurance in higher education

A quick recapitulation of a few special features of the German governance of quality assurance (QA) will help to understand the current debate.

First, authority over higher education (HE), including quality assurance, is in the hands of the 16 federal states, the Länder. In their Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (*Kultusministerkonferenz*, KMK), they meet to agree upon common policies which, however, are not binding and have to be translated into *Länder* policies and regulations before they have an immediate effect upon HEIs.

Before 1998, each new HE degree programme had to be authorised by the respective Länder ministry in charge of HE. They did so based on national, subject-specific curriculum frameworks *(Rahmenprüfungs-ordnungen)* which were meant to ensure the standards and comparability of degrees across Germany and were agreed upon in a lengthy negotiation process among representatives of the state, HEIs and the subject associations (see Toens, 2007). Internal QA in HEIs was weakly developed; different forms and procedures of evaluation were practised to varying degrees at institutional and *Länder* level, but no consistent broad-scale system was in place.

In 1998, the national curriculum frameworks were abandoned for the new Bachelor and Masters degrees and replaced by programme accreditation (KMK, 1998). This was meant to allow for faster curriculum innovation and more diversity, and give HEIs more independence from the state. In the dominant policy discourse at the time, programme accreditation was treated as the 'natural' form of QA for a Bachelor and Masters degree system by the German rectors' conference (*Hochschulrektorenkonferenz*, HRK) and state representatives alike. The accreditation system was composed of a national accreditation council

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(*Akkreditierungsrat*, AR) and six private, non-profit accreditation agencies; three of which are subject-specific and three generic, but with a regional focus. The *Akkreditierungsrat* is composed according to a corporatist stakeholder model with representatives from the state, HEIs, employers, students, another country and an accreditation agency; this composition is to some extent replicated in the governing boards of the agencies and their peer review teams. While the original idea was to replace state authorisation of new degrees by accreditation, in practice a new task distribution emerged which varies among the 16 Länder, but roughly the ministries are in charge of financial and planning aspects and the accreditation agencies of curriculum aspects (see Kehm, 2007 for details).

This system has been in place for about eight years now, but gained momentum with the transition to the Bachelor and Masters structure speeding up in the last few years. In the winter semester 2007/08, 61% of programmes lead to either Bachelor or Masters degrees, and 20% of students are enrolled in these programmes. Thirty-seven% of the new degrees programmes are accredited (HRK, 2007), which means that 2531 programme accreditation procedures have taken place.

Where Germany stands today with respect to quality assurance

In June 2007, the KMK decided to open the doors for the accreditation of internal QA systems of HEIs – referred to as 'system accreditation' – as an alternative to programme accreditation (KMK, 2007a). The new system is to operate in parallel to the accreditation of single Bachelor and Masters programmes (or groups of them) which has been in place for more than eight years. Its design is still quite open, as is the question of how many HEIs are in a position to opt for the accreditation of the QM systems instead of individual programmes; and how many will actually choose to do so. In practice, many observers expect both systems to exist in parallel for several years to come.

Upon request of the KMK, in October 2007, the *Akkreditierungsrat* published criteria for system accreditation (AR 2007a). At its meeting in December 2007, the KMK decided that system accreditation can start working from 2008 onwards (KMK 2007b), pending revision of the criteria and accreditation of the agencies for system accreditation.

Background of the debate

Even if the two forms of accreditation will work in parallel for some years to come, introducing the possibility of system instead of programme accreditation constitutes an important policy change. What is behind this change; how did it become possible?

Two main aims are given in the KMK press release from June 2007. First, "to decrease the time and effort (*Verfahrensaufwand*) of the HEIs while providing evidence of a reliable internal QA system, and thereby speed up the certification" and second, "to strengthen the responsibility of each single HEI for assuring the quality of their programmes" (KMK, 2007a). This reflects the main arguments of the proponents for abandoning programme accreditation:

(1) *Programme accreditation is too costly and time-consuming*. So far, German universities had to accredit every single new Bachelor and Masters programme, and pay for this themselves. The fact that even eight years after the introduction of the new system, only 37% of the new programmes are accredited (HRK, 2007) is in part attributed to the 'prohibitive' direct costs of more than 10.000 per accredited programme (even when several programmes in one department are accredited in one go), in part to the sheer resource and time constraints of accrediting each programme individually by means of peer review (Müller-Böling, 2001). What also plays a role is that some professors are so weakly convinced of programme accreditation that they have postponed it as long as possible, hoping that the system might be abandoned before they

have to undergo the process. (Critics of the recent reform say that these evaders have now been rewarded.)

(2) *Programme accreditation interferes too deeply with institutional autonomy*. The move to accreditation was originally meant to bring HEIs more curricular autonomy and to stimulate curricular innovation and diversity (HRK, 1998). But the fact that private agencies now have a say about curricula instead of the state is seen as ambiguous by many. The imposition of the accreditation criteria is experienced by universities as deep interference with their affairs. Just making sure that the formal Bologna criteria are fulfilled requires detailed checks of the implementation of ECTS, modularisation, competence-based learning and the like, and agencies often go far beyond checking these issues. Also, as most *Länder* ministries still approve degree programmes on top of accreditation, some say that the control of curricula has become tighter than before (HRK, 2006; Krücken, 2005).

It was mainly for these reasons that dissatisfaction with the programme accreditation model was widespread among HEIs and other actors in German HE policy. In April 2007, the ministries in charge of HE of the *Länder* Baden-Wurttemberg, Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia published a joint statement demanding the introduction of system accreditation as an alternative option to programme accreditation (Wissenschaftsministerien von Baden-Württemberg, Bayern und Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2007). They actually threatened to quit the joint accreditation system if their demands were not met. This would have meant the end of an integrated German accreditation system. In this situation, the KMK asked the *Akkreditierungsrat* at short notice to come up with a report that would allow the KMK to decide positively upon the introduction of system accreditation in June 2007 (AR, 2007b). The original plan to base such policy change upon a careful evaluation of experience with programme accreditation was given up under this pressure. To save the common accreditation system in Germany, the members of the *Akkreditierungsrat* had to produce recommendations for the introduction of system accreditation, and they did.

A stimulus for this development was provided by a pilot project conducted by one of the six German accreditation agencies in co-operation with the HRK and with funding from the federal ministry. Their particular approach to system accreditation, called 'process accreditation', was tested in four German HEIs between 2004 and 2006 (HRK & ACQUIN, 2007). It focuses on checking the internal processes by which HEIs ensure the quality of their programmes. In spite mixed experience, the project was influential. Largely due to this pilot project, the terms 'process' and 'system' accreditation were for a long time used interchangeably in German HE policy; but finally the term 'system accreditation' was chosen as the more generic term, acknowledging that QM in HEIs is not only about processes, but equally about aims, structures and outcomes. Another effect of this publicly funded pilot is that the private agency which was one of the project organisers is now one of the best-placed actors to engage in system accreditation – a problematic situation in a decentralised accreditation system meant to be truly competitive. Meanwhile one other German accreditation agency offers an "institutional evaluation" model – based on an audit approach – as an alternative (ZEvA, 2007); other agencies are working on their variants, too.

The future of the German quality assurance system

Even after the *Akkreditierungsrat* published its 'criteria for system accreditation' (AR 2007a), many aspects of the new model remain unclear. The big challenge is to design methods that are less intrusive and less resource-consuming than programme accreditation, but at least as effective. It waits to be seen if the criteria of the *Akkreditierungsrat* are a step in this direction. A major thrust of the criteria as they stand is the delegation of public supervision tasks from the agencies further down into HEIs, who will have to ensure themselves the compliance with national and federal regulations. This focus might not be the most supportive approach to stimulating curricular initiative and innovation in HEIs.

It is also unclear what will happen in the transition phase. German HEIs have just begun to establish functioning institutional QM systems (see Nickel, 2007). So the big question is what will happen until there are institutional QM systems that can actually be accredited. If the transition is made immediately, there is a two-fold danger: either the status quo is accredited without bringing about change, or the institutional QM systems will be strongly influenced by the specific accreditation model that is applied. In this context, a related danger is that system accreditation will imply even deeper interference with institutional autonomy than programme accreditation, as it is now the entire steering system that is subject to accreditation. In both cases, a deep and sustainable development of a quality culture in institutions is hindered, and mere window-dressing is a likely outcome.

These considerations show that the current debate masks deeper unsolved issues in the current QA system in Germany. If the reforms are to be successful, these issues need to be urgently addressed:

(1) *It should be acknowledged that quality assurance costs resources*. The accreditation system and quality assurance system is under-funded, as the *Länder* delegated authority and operational responsibility to the accreditation system and HEIs without shifting the according resources. It is an illusion to think that the accreditation of QM systems can be less costly than programme accreditation. At face value, this can be the case for large universities with many new Bachelor and Masters programmes yet to be accredited. However, a certain minimum percentage of accredited programmes is one of the preconditions for system accreditation. More importantly, building up functioning internal QM for teaching is a demanding and resource-intensive process. The resources cannot be saved; they need to be shifted from the end of the pipeline to the beginning of the pipeline; that is, from the ministries who previously authorised new degree programmes into HEIs who now have to ensure the quality of these programmes' quality themselves.

(2) *HEIs need to develop quality management systems and a quality culture*. At the time of the introduction of programme accreditation, internal QM in HEIs was relatively weakly developed. Nevertheless, initiatives at strengthening different forms of internal and external evaluation had spread before the Bologna process. While they were diverse and scattered given the federal structure, they did exist (Schmidt, forthcoming). But the debate about QA for Bachelor and Masters degrees did not build upon this experience. It focused nearly completely on external QA by means of accreditation. It now becomes clear that this was a mistake. So the current debate is an opportunity to bring together the efforts to strengthen the responsibility of HEIs for the quality of their degree programmes with the demands for public accountability.

(3) *The formative role of QA needs to be strengthened*. In this context, it seems worth considering if a quality audit system such as in the UK (QAA, 2002) is not better suited to fostering institutional responsibility than the sometimes artificial yes/no dichotomy of an accreditation decision, particularly in a situation where institutions are only just beginning to build QM systems. It can be asked how realistic accrediting the QM of public HEIs is. If it was politically difficult to turn down a new programme, it is hardly thinkable to attest a well-established university that it is not able to ensure the quality of its degrees. Actually, by now several actors in German HE are aware of this issue. In practice, the programme accreditation process often took a 'coaching'-like shape, the yes/no decision being avoided, postponed, or replaced by 'yes with conditions'. A 'formative' role for accreditation agencies will in practice become even more common in system accreditation – a critical issue being where should the staff and peers who could fulfil this role come from. The reasons why Germany nevertheless continues to pursue an accreditation model are at least twofold: fear of loss of face among policy makers who introduced accreditation as the quality assurance instrument to go along with Bachelor and Masters programmes; and the fact that it is still the state who has ultimate responsibility for HE degrees in Germany (as opposed to institutional degree awarding power in Britain). A formally strict form of public control – such as accreditation – seems legally and culturally more attuned to the German system than an audit design which looks 'looser' at face value. But in practice, a transparent audit system can be at least as effective in bringing about enhancement.

(4) *The task distribution among actors needs to be clarified*. One of the difficulties with the current accreditation system is that the new task distribution between the state, the accreditation council and the agencies is not entirely clear. This has led to redundancies in the control system and made the system confusing and sometimes contradictory for actors (HRK, 2006). The recent considerations of some *Länder* to move back towards state approval are a reflection of the unsolved issues. A clear and well-thought distribution between different actors of the financial, planning and curriculum development tasks involved in the set-up of new degrees programmes is needed.

(5) *The institutional interest in lean institutional quality management needs to be balanced with students' interest in transparent information on programme quality*. A way needs to be found to ensure that with the shift to system accreditation, students can be sure about the quality of individual programmes, and find reliable information about them. The current idea is to ensure this through so-called 'sample programme accreditation' as well as through the development of internal certification capability within institutions (Akkreditierungsrat, 2007); but the exact functioning is not yet clear. The transition to the Bachelor-Masters structure poses an additional challenge: ensuring that curriculum development takes into account 'Bologna requirements' such as proper application of ECTS, modularisation, formulation of learning goals and the like is not a trivial task. Curriculum development needs to be established as serious professional task within HEIs.

(6) *The tensions between a competitive accreditation system and common standards need to be addressed*. Since the inception of the German accreditation system, the system has been prone to internal tensions – if not contradictions – between offering autonomous HEIs free choice between accreditation agencies with different profiles in order to support their own profiling, and ensuring common (minimum) standards across the system. The idea of a competitive accreditation system is hard to realise given the rooting and history of the different agencies in a federal system and the nature of co-operation in professional and subject communities. Among the six agencies, three have a specific subject focus, effectively bundling the national policy dialogue among academia and the professions in their respective communities. It is only natural for agencies in such a system to seek to enhance their profiles, which causes permanent tensions with the task of the Akkreditierungsrat to ensure a fair level-playing field and common standards (see Witte, forthcoming).

(7) *Curricular diversity and comparability need to be balanced*. A task formerly laid down in the Federal Framework Act for HE (*§9 Hochschulrahmengesetz*, HRG) was for the *Länder* to ensure the comparability and mutual recognition of studies and degrees within Germany. Before the move to accreditation, national curriculum frameworks were a major instrument to achieve this. Now that they have been abandoned for being overly restrictive and inert, new ways need to be found to achieve comparability in more flexible frameworks. The subject and professional associations have a natural role to play in this process. The British practice of using 'benchmark statements' could provide some helpful suggestions in this regard.

The thrust to strengthen HEIs' capability to ensure the quality of their programmes and the student experience is not only in line with current European trends, it is right and should be maintained. But unless the above issues are addressed, the reforms risk leading from the frying pan into the fire. The intriguing question that German HE shares with many – if not all – other European systems is how a productive interplay between internal and external governance of quality can be achieved and to what extent European HE systems can come together in this regard.

How can external quality assurance support institutional quality management

Anke Hanft[1] and Alexander Kohler[2]

Introduction

Universities all over Europe take increasing responsibility for quality development in teaching, research and organisation. External quality assurance is expected to support universities in their efforts. The Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA) is implementing a procedure that provides universities with external expertise for the development of their quality management (QM) and offers the certification of quality management processes and systems.

The procedure benefits from international experience and follows the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance (ESG). The implementation illustrates some critical aspects and confirms the need for further European co-operation on institutional approaches of external quality assurance.

The universities need to set up quality management processes

The development of the internal quality management (QM) is a key element of the reform of higher education in Europe. Universities have a primary responsibility for assuring the quality of teaching, research and internal organisation. All over Europe, universities are in a process of systematising measures and instruments for quality assurance and implementing quality management systems.

The high level of autonomy given to universities as regards safeguarding and developing quality in teaching and research is key to the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG). The Standards provide a reference for internal quality assurance without, however, determining procedures, methods and instruments. External quality assurance should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance. Thus, external quality assurance plays a role in supporting universities and in developing their quality. The function of quality control, which traditionally dominated evaluations and many accreditation procedures, is no longer the main focus.

The responsibility of higher education institutions in Austria for the development of internal university quality management systems is defined in the legal regulations for public and private universities, universities of applied science (Fachhochschulen) and teacher training colleges. However, no parameters are supplied for the design of quality management systems. It is up to the universities to choose which quality management instruments or procedures they will use, at which organisational levels and into which organisation management processes they will be implemented and which resources and competences will be assigned to organisational units of internal quality assurance.

Public universities are not subject to any accreditation requirements in Austria[3]. This has been advantageous in that it allows universities to develop their quality assurance systems and processes in accordance with their own aims and requirements and can request external monitoring and support where necessary. This lack of compulsion, however, runs the risk of external quality assurance being largely avoided.

Public universities are required to commit to their quality targets in a three-year performance agreement with the Federal Ministry for Science and Research with reference to individual performance areas (teaching,

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3 This does not apply to universities of applied science and private universities. These are subject to accreditation requirements by their relevant authorities. Both sectors were newly established in the mid to late 1990s.

research, development of the arts, personnel management and personnel development, internationalisation and mobility) and to report on their measures for quality assurance.

It is not yet clear how the controlling of target achievement will be carried out. The large degree of freedom given to universities in regard to the establishment and monitoring of their quality management puts external quality assurance agencies under pressure to develop and provide procedures which universities will voluntarily take part in, as they offer added value for their institution. AQA has set itself this challenge and has developed a procedure which might serve as an example for other countries.

Combining support and evidence for internal quality management

AQA has developed a procedure that combines a support function for the development of internal quality management systems with a function of evidence about the factual effectiveness of internal quality management.

In Austria, as in many other European countries, higher education institutions are currently developing and implementing quality management systems (QM). Universities require support and time to develop their QM gradually and according to their own needs. It must also be considered that most universities have a tradition in assessing their teaching and research: course evaluation, peer reviews, research performance indicators are widely used, but there is a significant discrepancy between evaluation recommendations and their implementation. The effects of evaluations can particularly be improved by putting a stronger emphasis on the implementation within the relevant steering mechanisms.

Once the universities are able to prove that they are making progress in the establishment of quality management systems, assessment procedures can be initiated and further support offered. In this respect, a clear separation between external support and external assessment is required, which is an established feature of the AQA procedure.

The AQA-procedure follows three phases, which reflect the evolution of internal quality management systems. The three phases are clearly separated and operationally independent of each other.

- **Phase 1**: Expertise and support of quality management within a selected performance area (teaching and further education/ research/ internationalisation/ human resource management)
- **Phase 2**: Quality audit and certification of the quality management in a selected performance area
- **Phase 3**: Quality audit and certification of the whole quality management system of a higher education institution

Phase 1 provides professional, external support for the development and implementation of a quality management system.

Phases 2 and 3 offer an independent assessment of the quality management (Quality Audit). The certification proves the effectiveness of the quality management with an international label.

Phase 1: Expertise and support of quality management within a selected performance area

External support and expertise is provided to strengthen the university's own capacity to adapt its steering processes to its quality targets as well as to implement quality management and monitoring processes.

The university selects a performance area (e.g. teaching, research) in which it defines quality targets and further develops internal quality assurance processes. Quality targets and strategies are explained explicitly

in a self-documentation. The university's management and steering instruments are then analysed with reference to their contribution to the achievement of the quality targets. A selected set of steering instruments and measures are adapted and implemented in a pilot run. Following a period of self-monitoring, the relevant instruments may be adapted and, if applicable, transferred to other process and performance areas.

The result of phase 1 is the implementation of quality-led management processes in one or more selected key areas and the university's internal monitoring procedure.

AQA promotes the process with the help of external experts and process promoters within a timeframe of two years. Experts and promoters are selected with the agreement of the university.

AQA's experience shows several factors of a successful external support:

- Quality targets need to be clearly identified and they should be made explicit in operational terms (e.g. qualitative and quantitative indicators). Enough time must be given to the exact definition of the aims as different expectations and viewpoints about key processes may exist within the university.

- In this context, the involvement of university staff with formal and/or specialist competence is important. Students are included in this process as they provide invaluable contributions for quality improvement.

- Relevant steering processes and instruments (e.g. internal agreements, resource distribution) are levers in a QM system. Such instruments, as well as their potential effects, need to be carefully identified.

- The development of a QM system and mechanisms may require small initial steps in order to achieve first results and experience. This will stimulate acceptance for the process and support further progress.

The participating universities show a high level of commitment and acceptance to work on the selected topics of quality. It is generally the case that internal quality work and the level of target achievement during phase 1 vary with each participating university.

It is important that the external expertise provided by AQA is seen as an impetus for the university's quality work. The external support should help to initiate the development of QM processes and to reflect on progress. The principal share of works lies with the university, which has to implement the results of expert workshops and to report about the progress of the implementation of QM processes.

It is considered to be an important principle of quality that the comprehensive and sustainable implementation of quality concepts is taken into account within the workshops.

The implementation of QM mechanisms also implies the establishment of internal monitoring by the means of internal handbooks and standards. These may be a basis for the development of QM mechanisms in other areas of the university and may also be of relevance for other universities.

For many universities the participation in phase 1 will be an important step in the development of QM processes in some selected key areas. Counselling and support in phase 1 is not a precondition for certification in phases 2 or 3.

Phase 2: Quality audit and certification of the quality management in a selected performance area

The university submits to an external assessment of its quality management system in a chosen performance area (e.g. teaching, research). The assessment will determine the effectiveness of the university's own management and quality assurance system in contributing to the university's defined quality targets and strategies. Therefore, an audit will analyse the effectiveness of the quality management within two relevant key processes.

In a first part of the assessment, the university will explain the organisation and structure of its internal quality management and it will show how it assures the accomplishment of a set of six standards which integrate the principles of a quality enhancement process as well the ESG. The second part of the assessment consists of audits where the university will demonstrate the effectiveness of its internal quality management for two selected key processes. These processes will relate to principal quality targets of the university, which should be documented in performance agreements between the university and the federal ministry.

AQA's assessment procedure consists of a structured self-documentation by the university, an external evaluation with two site visits and a follow-up process. An independent review team selected by AQA receives documentation provided by the university to prepare for the site visit. This documentation describes the quality management system and its effects on the relevant key processes and monitoring of target achievements.

The university, therefore, has to keep a record of how they set their quality targets, how they organise the implementation and how the results are evaluated. For this purpose, quality targets, available resources and responsible persons are to be named and internal workflows and monitoring processes to be defined by the university. These can take the form of documentation which is already available and a part of the internal quality assurance and, therefore, does not have to be created specifically for the purpose of the assessment.

AQA coordinates the assessment procedure and selects a review team consisting mainly of international evaluators. These have expertise in quality management in the chosen performance areas, knowledge about the disciplines and evaluation experience. Furthermore, a student representative is included in the group of evaluators. Experts who promoted the process in phase 1 are excluded from the group of evaluators.

The result of phase 2 is a report in which the evaluators give their assessment of the quality management's stage of development in one performance area and offer recommendations for improvement and development measures. The assessment will be made against the six audit standards which are specified for the various performance areas.

Certification may be given for a period of six years. Public universities in Austria will be able to use the certificate as a proof for the accomplishment of relevant parts of their performance agreements with the federal ministry. The universities should also be exempted from reporting obligations that can (partly) be covered by the certificate. AQA proposes that the certificate should also be used by Fachhochschulen and private universities to fulfil the legal obligation to set up quality management systems.

Phase 3: Quality audit and certification of the whole quality management system of a higher education institution

The university subjects its entire quality management system to an external assessment. The quality assurance system includes all performance areas of the university (teaching, research, staff management and internationalisation), supports the attainment of strategic targets and fulfils the standards set by AQA. These standards are in accordance with international and European quality assurance system requirements.

AQA's assessment follows the same procedure as in phase 2. The audit will, however, cover four key processes (one for each performance area). The external peer assessment will be based on structured self-documentation supplemented by documentation already available. An international review team carries out a site visit based on the self-report. The review team has experience in university management, knowledge about the university's disciplines and experience of evaluation procedures.

A certification of the entire quality management system will be awarded if effectiveness is proven according to the university's own quality targets and key processes in all performance areas and the general standards for quality management processes are fulfilled.

Conclusions

AQA's procedure tries to carefully combine a support function with an assessment. This approach, which is quite unusual compared to normal international practice, has its reasons in the very specific Austrian legislative context: Austrian universities are not obliged to undergo any accreditation, but will have to fulfil their legal obligation to develop and implement internal quality management systems. This obligation is specified for each university according to its institutional framework conditions and laid down in performance agreements with the federal ministry. These agreements are the basis for the principal share of public funding and therefore a powerful instrument. Performance agreements currently define the universities' aims and actions within several performance areas and set measures for quality assurance for each of these areas. Although quality management should be considered to be a transversal task of the university, a gradual implementation for the various performance areas appears more realistic than a straight implementation of a system covering all areas of a university.

The following opportunities and risks appear relevant for the implementation of the AQA-procedure:

a. need for a successive implementation of QM systems in universities
Many universities are in a stage of development of their internal quality management system. The careful implementation requires not only acceptance of the process within the university (management, academic and non-academic staff, students) but also know-how and resources. A step-by-step process, where initiatives are set in key performance areas, has a good chance for success and acceptance. It turns out that external expertise combined with the promotion of the implementation process by experts in university management encourage internal commitment. In addition, internal QM processes need to be made visible over time.

b. reduction of the load of external evaluation
Universities have experience in the evaluation of studies and research. Many complain about the cost of evaluations without seeing any benefits. Evaluation is seen as mere bureaucracy and is less and less accepted. Internal and external evaluations make sense when integrated in a quality enhancement process and seen as a part of a quality cycle which is owned by the university.

c. co-operation with internal quality management of the university is crucial

Quality management processes and cycles should be under the responsibility of the university management (rectorate), but have to be co-ordinated by relevant administrative departments. These departments need to be equipped with adequate resources and they need to have influence at the various levels of operation of the university. The lack of such departments will make it difficult to support and implement a QM system.

d. distinction between support and assessment

Despite the evidence that external support and expertise is needed, a precise distinction between support and assessment must be made. The result of a counselling process cannot be the basis or the condition for an external assessment. In the same vein, access to certification must be given for those universities that have not benefited from support and advice.

The combination, therefore, appears legitimate where universities are free to choose a quality assurance agency. In contrast to most European countries, this is the case for Austrian universities.

An operational separation of counselling and assessment is necessary: Experts who have been involved in support processes must be excluded from assessments of the same institution.

e. material standards for quality assessments

The linkage of the procedure to the system of performance agreements between the universities and the federal ministry must avoid running in parallel to steering decisions at the system and at the institutional level. The procedure should refer to agreed quality targets and measures. This, however, implies that reference standards for the assessment are not entirely controlled by AQA, but depend upon the profile of the performance agreements. The quality of the agreements between the universities and the state, therefore, influences the accuracy of criteria for the certification of QM systems by AQA. European practice as well as the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality assurance, therefore, are an important reference for institutional assessments: They will have an impact on the quality of performance agreements and form a 'material' basis for the evaluation of QM systems.

f. the European standards and guidelines (ESG) refer to studies, not to research and organisation

The ESG have a strong role for the advancement of quality assurance schemes which have a primary focus on the university's responsibility and capacity to assure its quality. The ESG, however, have been generated in the tradition of the Bologna Process, which, above all, provides for a reference to quality in teaching and learning. The ESG raise some questions of quality of organisational processes within a university, but they refer neither to research nor to the relation between teaching and research.

As a result, the ESG can be used as a weak reference for the assessment of QM systems in other areas than teaching and studies. This means that they do not promote the often-claimed need to consider quality management as a transversal matter, which should integrate all areas of performance of a university. For audit purposes, the ESG therefore need to be amended through quality aspects that refer to research (e.g. promotion of young scientists, transfer of technology, interdisciplinary profiling), human resource development (e.g. recruitment, staff development and career) and internationalisation (e.g. international co-operation and profiling, mobility).

g. institutional approaches for external quality assurance are new and need to prove themselves

Several European countries have implemented institutional approaches or are in the process of strengthening accreditation and evaluation systems. An institutional system approach implies that higher education institutions assume a major responsibility for quality assurance. Development, implementation, visualisation and proof of institutional quality management systems require time. Therefore, the viability of institutional approaches has to be established over a longer period. The exchange of experience with higher education institutions (especially through EUA) and the co-operation between quality assurance agencies (especially through ENQA) on these issues are crucial.

4. ASSESSMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE MODELS

University institutional evaluation and academic achievement

Samuel Fernández, J. Esteban Fernández and Alberto Álvarez[1]

Because of the scope of our activity, university institutional evaluation and the control of the teaching-learning process, we are especially *interested in finding out what influence official degree evaluation has had on the outcomes of university education. We are also interested in the effects of any improvement policies resulting from recommendations made in evaluation reports.* Therefore, *the present paper attempts to appraise the effects of institutional degree evaluation on student achievement*.

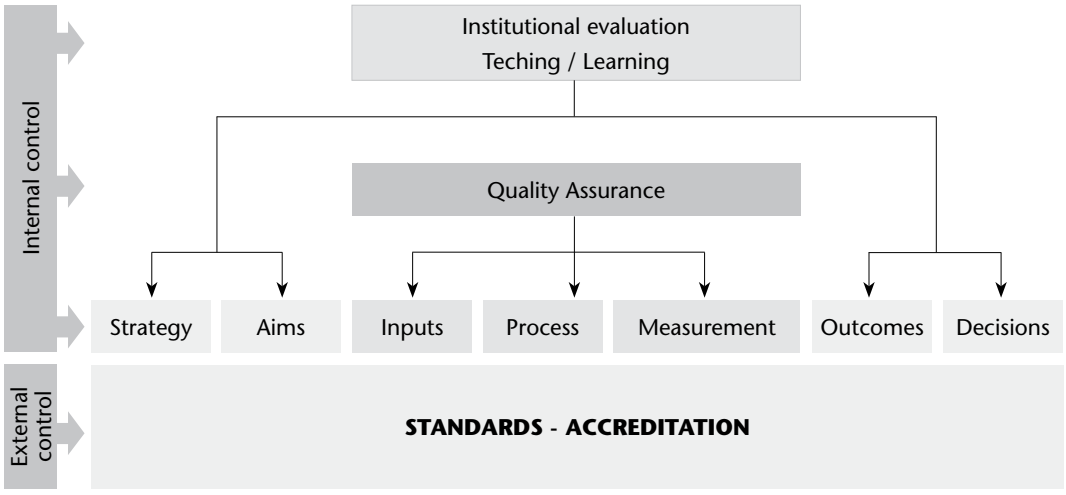
We approach the issue from the perspective of university institutional research. This is a field that has obtained scarce recognition from Spanish educational and academic institutions, despite its increasing international resonance, and regardless of the abundance of contributions it has generated.

University institutional evaluation and quality assurance

By university institutional evaluation we understand an analysis of all the activities of a university, carried out with the aim of getting to know the value of its contributions to society. In particular, of the way it provides professional instruction and produces academic research. The purpose, therefore, is to facilitate information about strategy development as well as about the economic and managerial effects on aim fulfilment and not to assess directly the teaching or research methodologies (ENQA, 2001).

The main mechanism of institutional evaluation consists in providing the management of the institution with information about the strengths and weaknesses of the unit under analysis with the aim of improving its outcomes (Lloret i Mir, 2007). Other desired effects are accountability, information transparency and the possibility of establishing comparisons between different organisations.

The control criteria do not contain specific requirements or standards that institutions must necessarily meet. In this respect, the references for analysis are considered guidelines and the evaluation describes the functioning of the organisation by comparing what was appraised by the participants from within the institution or by external experts either using a set of clearly stated purposes and objectives, official guidelines or knowledge derived from other similar institutions.



Graph 1. Evaluation, Quality Assurance & Accreditation

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Institutional evaluation is frequently confused with quality control or quality assurance and accreditation. The main reference for the evaluation of a university unit is the overall coherence between the principles stated as aims and the achieved outcomes, while quality control or assurance is more the functioning of those processes and procedures. Frequently some of the conclusions of institutional evaluations point to the need to improve process control in order to achieve greater efficiency of the assessed unit.

The purpose of accreditation, in turn, is to certify that an organisation or programme fulfils specific organisational and achievement requirements. This is a formal decision and has a number of consequences, either on the continuation of the educational centre or programme or on financial policies, or even on the social recognition of the institution and its degrees.

All of these – institutional evaluation, quality control, assurance and accreditation – follow similar procedures, with the writing of an internal report by a team within the unit under examination and an external appraisal carried out by experts in the proposed evaluation model. The differences are in whether or not the unit is obliged to meet specific parameters. Therefore, since institutional evaluation is not based on norms or standards, it does not require a statement concerning criterion fulfilment. Rather, the mere reflection about relevant references within the sector by either of the teams is considered sufficient. Quality control or assurance, as well as accreditation, however, demand such a statement, since in both cases the institution or programme is measured against standard criteria, which in the case of quality control relate to a set of minimums of management processes and procedures and for accreditation purposes, also refer to the established level of process organisation and achievement.

Self-assessment has the purpose of encouraging teacher reflection and is supported by visits by an external committee. This model may be an efficient tool to motivate individuals to participate (Foucault, 1977; Spender, 2000), but it generally has an important disadvantage in the reluctance of staff to get involved in the setting up of improvement measures (HEQC, 1995).

The certification model with its emphasis on procedure fulfilment, however, may have the side-effect of increasing bureaucratisation and causing process compliance, with a view of professionalism based on lists of skills and achievements to be determined externally and this might exclude reflection (Smith, Armstrong and Brown, 1999).

Seeking achievement improvement by means of institutional evaluation: methodology and outcomes

The study we have carried out aims at estimating the effect of degree evaluation in terms of the improvement of student academic performance.

The alternative hypothesis of this study can be established from the basis that degree institutional evaluation is associated with a consistent increase of performance rates because it can be a remarkable opportunity for reflection and this allows the drawing up of a list of strengths and weaknesses that can then form the basis of specific improvement measures.

In order to appraise the impact of evaluation on the degrees of the University of Oviedo (Spain), we have analysed the students' academic performance rate – i.e. the relationship between the number of students who have obtained a pass in their compulsory subjects and the number of students who enrolled for those subjects.

The independent variable to be considered is the set of improvement measures carried out from the academic years 2000-01 to 2005-06 within the evaluation framework of the National Plan for University

Quality Evaluation. This was operative during the first two years of the period and was followed by the University Quality Plan whose methodological principles were applied in the two subsequent years. The Institutional Evaluation Plan then followed. These measures are characterised by actions concerning the evaluation criteria of the model used.

Therefore, this is an exploratory analysis of the degrees of the University of Oviedo based on a "Recurrent institutional cycle design" (Campbell and Stanley, 1982) with two combined approaches: a diachronic approach with a set of improvements within a given time period; and a synchronic approach where the analysis focused on the two groups into which the degrees can be classified each year (those to which improvement measures were applied / and those with no improvement measures applied). These groupings were made with the help of the evaluation programmes. The findings discussed below are based on descriptive statistics and on the contrast of hypotheses.

The information was obtained from the University's databases and from the reports generated during the evaluation and improvement processes, which are managed by the Quality Division of the Vice-chancellorship of Quality, Planning and Innovation.

The evaluation process

The evaluation process was carried out following steps and tasks according to guidelines from the Council of Spanish Universities and occurred in three stages: self-evaluation, external evaluation and final report.

The information analysed by the committees stemmed from a variety of sources. Some came directly from lecturers, students and administration staff, as well as from professionals and graduates while other information was collected from the relevant administrative units of the university and of the faculty/college itself. Yet other data came from internal surveys written by the committees and applied to the different sample groups.

The methodology applied under the Institutional Evaluation Programme has maintained this force and, in the case of the University of Oviedo, it has allowed us to comply with the pre-established six-year-period programme for degree evaluation.

Degree improvement process

In line with Brennan and Shah's insights about the consequences of quality evaluation (2000: 99), it is worth pointing out the possible inherent contradiction between evaluation and improvement. If the outcomes of evaluations are linked either to rewards or penalties, they could provoke a "system of complicities", so that the potential benefits of analysis and self-criticism could be disallowed. If, however, quality control has no consequences, we could wonder why it should be taken seriously at all.

Since improvement measures are considered the lasting solution targeted by any form of evaluation (Coba, 2003) and, assuming that the institutional context has overcome the naïve idea that improvements are derived directly from the evaluation process (Mateo, 2000: 222), the University of Oviedo Quality Area, with its Technical Unit, has established a support process for the development of measures proposed in the evaluation reports.

In this perspective of adaptation to the context, and with the purpose either of achieving everything possible or of promoting measures that could actually be endorsed by the persons in charge of the university centres, the procedures put into practice for improvement measures conform to a simpler procedure than the one devised by other authors (Rodríguez et al, 2002).

The typology of improvements put into practice according to the current criteria of the Institutional Evaluation Programme allows us to appreciate the distribution of the improvement measures carried out, which have been reported by the persons in charge of the degrees and of the funds devoted to financing the process.

Criterion / sub-criterion	Amount of proposals	Amount of improvement measures carried out	Cost (%)
TRAINING PROGRAMME			
Aims of the training programme	4	6	0.77
Syllabus and its structure	11	15	8.74
Subtotal:	**15**	**21**	**9.51**
EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATION			
Direction and planning	1	13	10.87
Management and organization	12	15	7.44
Subtotal:	**13**	**28**	**18.31**
HUMAN RESOURCES			
Academic staff	13	13	4.66
Administration and services staff	4	4	0.28
Subtotal:	**17**	**17**	**4.94**
MATERIAL RESOURCES			
Classrooms	5	7	6.84
Working spaces	3	5	2.52
Laboratories, workshops, experiment rooms,..	4	4	3.90
Library and documentation	1	2	1.55
Subtotal:	**13**	**18**	**14.81**
EDUCATIONAL PROCESS			
Student attention and integral education	24	46	24.13
Teaching-learning process.	7	15	4.42
Subtotal:	**31**	**61**	**28.55**
OUTCOMES			
Outcomes of the educational programme	14	16	7.73
Outcomes for graduates	11	13	12.67
Outcomes for society	8	9	3.38
Subtotal:	**33**	**39**	**23.78**
TOTAL	**122**	**184**	**99.90**

Table 1. Improvement Funding

Each centre with evaluated degrees received financial support for improvement measures during the three years following the evaluation. As can be seen, each proposal materialises in one or two measures, and the average cost of each improvement measure is about 1,400€.

Most of the initiatives were devoted to the educational process (33%) by circulating information about the educational offer, in improving student reception and tutorial actions, in the reinforcement of information and communication with students, the use of new technologies and multimedia support equipment, in the implementation of study-skill courses and peer support to foster class attendance. The improvement and distribution of class notes, student follow-up and the increase of external work-placements and student exchange programmes were also part of this activity.

Twenty per cent of the interventions were devoted to improving achievement. They involved gathering students' and graduates' opinions, getting to know the graduate employment rates, promoting and improving the relationship with professional associations and supplying information about the degree as well as about university research, by organising events amongst other things.

Fifteen per cent of the measures were related to educational organisation. Many aimed at getting to know the experiences and communicate the outcomes as well as giving information about subjects, improving web information and developing strategic plans and processes to be certified.

Eleven per cent of the measures concerned material resources and included the improvement of teaching spaces and tools, safety measures in laboratories and access to specialised information, as well as the development of protocols for use of equipment in support of the learning process.

The educational programme and human resources made up the remaining 21 per cent, with a preponderance of proposals involving the analysis of degree goals and objectives and the training of lecturing staff. Other measures tackled the analysis from a social perspective, as well as the plan to revise study fields and develop specialisation programmes.

The frequency of these actions is due in part to the orientation towards improvement that the Vice-chancellorship of Quality, Planning and Innovation promoted amongst previously evaluated centres.

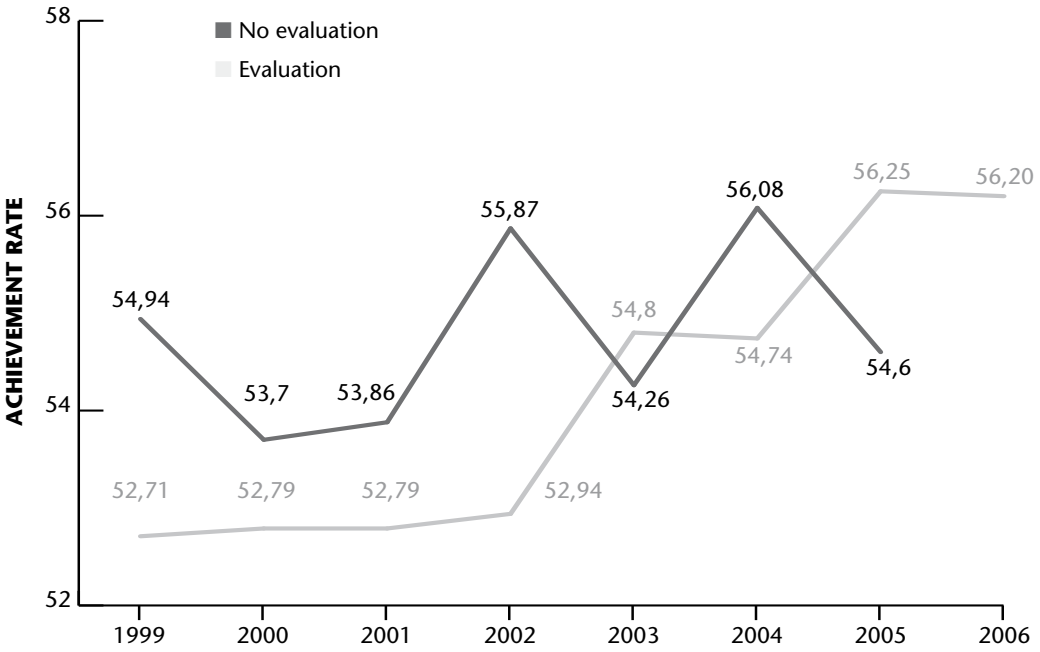
Effects of the evaluation processes on student performance and degree improvement

The table below shows the achievement rates of the assessed and not-assessed degrees. We can thus observe the increase in the amount of degrees assessed and the differences in the values for average achievement between the two groups in each academic year.

Evaluation	Variables	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
No	*Degrees*	45	31	27	24	18	18	11
	Achievement rate	**54,94**	**53,70**	**53,86**	**55,87**	**54,26**	**56,08**	**54,60**
Yes	*Degrees*	5	19	23	26	32	32	39
	Achievement rate	**52,71**	**52,79**	**52,79**	**52,94**	**54,80**	**54,74**	**56,25**
Total	*Degrees*	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
	Achievement rate	**54,56**	**53,17**	**53,16**	**53,84**	**54,73**	**54,93**	**55,95**

Table 2. Achievement rates of assessed and not-assessed degrees

As can be observed, the achievement rate tends to increase with the number of degrees participating in evaluation and institutional improvement programmes.



Graph 2. Evolution of the achievement rate

In order to establish the extent to which this trend can be linked to the improvement measures applied, we will analyse the values concerning the 26 degrees whose evaluation cycle and the three-year period of improvement measures planned in the programme have been completed so far. In order to do this we have compared the achievement rates of each degree in the year in which the evaluation took place and during the three following years, when the improvement plan was put into practice.

Evaluation (A) and Improvement (I)	1999-00	2001-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
5 degrees	A	I	I	I				
14 degrees		A	I	I	I			
4 degrees			A	I	I	I		
3 degrees				A	I	I	I	
6 degrees					A	I	I	I
4 degrees						A	I	I
7 degrees							A	I
7 degrees								A

Table 3. Schedule of Evaluation and Improvement

As a result, we obtain a design with one factor, which we will call "time-period", and four levels (the years of the evaluation and improvements) as well as a dependent variable, the achievement rate, which reflects the rate of students who passed as compared with the number of students who enrolled.

We have used a *one-way ANOVA with repeated measures*, because it requires fewer experimental subjects and can better control the differences between degrees assessed in different circumstances. We assume an intrinsic wash-back effect (improvement continuity) owing to the interest of the evolution of the achievement rate associated with the desirable accumulation of effects.

The following tables show the values for achievement rates as well as the statistics offered by the SPSS programme for this test.

	Average	Typical ...	N
Evaluation year	54,25	12,12	26
Year 1 (improvement measures)	52,86	12,03	26
Year 2	52,48	11,99	26
Year 3	52,33	11,34	26

Table 4. Descriptive statistics

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis GI	Error GI	Significance Si
factor1	Pillai's Trace	,255	2,621(a)	3,000	23,000	,075
	Wlilks' Lambda	,745	2,621(a)	3,000	23,000	,075
	Hotelling's Trace	,342	2,621(a)	3,000	23,000	,075
	Roy's Largest Root	,342	2,621(a)	3,000	23,000	,075

a. Exact statistics b. Design: Intercept; Intra-subject Design: factor1

Table 5. Multivaried contrasts

The outcomes of this test show no relevant differences (p=0.075). In other words, *the improvement measures implemented in the degrees during the three years after the evaluation have not resulted in any variation of the achievement rates*. However, as we have seen in the previous table, the trend allows a degree of optimism because it can be expected that in the future, we will be able to demonstrate a clear link between these two variables.

Research conclusions

Relevance of the process and of the management of the education programme

Even though the analysis of the outcomes remains the dominant perspective in institutional research (Schalock, R.L. 1995), reflecting on process effectiveness allows the identification of elements which must receive further attention and improvement (Lloret i Mir, 2007). In this respect, we have been able to ascertain that the evaluation procedure generates little improvement within university educational centres and thus any improvement plans generated this way do not manage to achieve significant changes in degree achievement rates. In spite of that, many improvement measures are focused on the teaching-learning process, but probably without an efficient deployment of activities.

Going back to the arguments used in the present study concerning evaluation approaches, the approach of the institutional evaluation of a given educational centre or degree must firstly be considered an initial stage within a recurrent improvement process, rather than an aim in itself. The evaluation effort should last no longer than six to eight months of the academic year. *The greatest effort should be devoted to defining and implementing a detailed improvement plan, which ought to be operative and involve achievement responsibilities for the management of the different faculties and departments*. It should also involve a deep reflection about the attitudes required within the teaching-learning process as well as by the management of the educational programme resources, since these are the most influential variables in student satisfaction and achievement.

In our opinion, improvements should be linked to responsibilities and competences of the management of faculties and departments, which should set in their annual plans the objectives directly related to the main indicators of academic achievement, administration and management as well as teaching performance.

The need for teaching improvement measures

The narrow link between educational organisation and the analysis of academic activity itself has been evident in the pedagogic reflections about quality education within our field (Tejedor, 2007, Mateo, 2000), in spite of the fact that the term "quality education" has not yet been operationally defined (Mateo et al. 1996).

The launching of general pedagogic training measures, both for the initial and for the continuing training of lecturers, is the first step for teaching quality improvement. Developing specific educational training measures, together with quality improvement plans for the different educational centres, is a complement to the general measures and contributes to maintaining up-dated teaching processes.

		EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH			
		Active Learning	Problems Solving	Technical Resources	Tutorial System
SUPPORT VALUES	Proposal of teaching connected with professional initiatives				
	To promote the publication of learning support document				
	Promoting publications and documents to support the learning				
	Adapting the teaching to the student's learning styles and needs				

Table 6. Quality Improvement Plans

Academic improvement associated with a student-centred teaching approach demands the application of a variety of educational methodologies and didactic techniques (De Miguel, 2006). It also asks, however, for the organisation of a model of university community which links study programmes, infrastructure, social and residential resources in order to achieve the learning goals, thus emphasising the importance of the direct relationship between lecturers and students. *In this respect, the teacher/student ratio in each degree should be established in such a way that it allows constant and efficient personal communication.*

The fifteen year evaluation experience in Italian universities with its crisis factors and a desire for Europe

Eliana Minelli[1], Gianfranco Rebora[2] and Matteo Turri[3]

Towards a new evaluation phase in Italian universities

The promotion of teaching and scientific quality in universities through incentives linked to evaluation results has been at the forefront of an initiative taken by the Italian Government. This is confirmed by the setting up of the ANVUR (National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research) and the Pact for universities and research signed on 2 August 2007 by the Minister of the University and Research and the Minister of the Economy. The Pact fundamentally accepts the points set out in the report made by the Technical Commission for public finance "Measures for financial reorganisation and promotion of the efficacy and efficiency of the university system" (31 July 2007). This report acknowledges the fact that Italian universities have had to deal with huge changes in the past fifteen years, highlights the shadows and strong points and underlines in particular "the substantial lack of any kind of competitive system for rewarding universities that adequately meet the requirements of families and enterprises". It also recognises that attempts have been made to resolve the critical state of the system by "taking steps to reduce expenses and encourage sound management behaviour even if the results have not been completely satisfactory owing to their limited extent and great discontinuity over the years". The Commission has therefore singled out the essential factors for rationalising the Italian university system, namely, giving greater autonomy to universities, guaranteeing the financial stability of the system and improving incentive schemes.

These recent authoritative documents are in line with the conclusions of our research work that revealed the great commitment to evaluation activities by the system as a whole and by many single universities and has shown its weak side in the uses of the results of evaluation (Rebora, Minelli, Turri, 2007).

Bearing in mind the new evaluation period foreseen for universities by the Italian government, this paper aims to make a critical analysis of the last fifteen years, highlight and discuss current difficulties by using the results of a survey conducted especially for the purpose and ultimately put forward suggestions for improvement.

Fifteen years of evaluation in Italy

In 1994 the law laid down that each university should set up an internal evaluation unit with the task of certifying the existence of the necessary resources for carrying out and coordinating the different evaluation activities. Since then, these units have worked with a certain degree of continuity, used a wide range of evaluation methodologies and made annual reports that have progressively included more information and data.

In the same period, national committees also worked intensely. The CNVSU (National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System) has produced an enormous quantity of statistical data on the system and individual universities. In order to carry out these activities, together with others aimed at guaranteeing the existence of minimum quality standards in universities (e.g. student-professor ratio, suitability of the premises, ascertainment of student satisfaction among attending students in each course of study), the CNVSU has used evaluation units for collecting and guaranteeing the reliability of data. The CIVR (National Committee for the Evaluation of Research), through the triennial evaluation of research (VTR) in the years

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2001-2003, made available an unprecedented acknowledgement of the quality of research in universities. Evaluation examined the international excellence of a selection of research products submitted by the universities to the peer review process. The assessment came to an end in February 2007 with the publication of a ranking list of universities based on the various disciplines. The CRUI (Association of Italian Rectors) promoted voluntary self evaluation in degree courses which led to widespread experimentation of evaluation methodologies fostering the spread of quality awareness.

The combined effect of these different factors has had important consequences. Information available universally on the internet has greatly increased and deals with virtually every aspect of the working of these organisations. As regards university teaching, the compulsory survey of student satisfaction using the scheme prepared by CNVSU has made academics face up to student learning needs. In the research field the assessment promoted by CIVR has drawn attention to research evaluation: over 800,000 contacts were made in the three months following the first publication of the results of the VTR. The system's overall qualitative leap in terms of the extent and quality of information is clearly evident.

Evaluation, however, continues to vary considerably from one university to another as the evaluation units have not all worked equally efficiently (Dente, 2006).

Analysis of evaluation in the Italian university system has taken place in an institutional context that continues to be rather confused, conflicting and continually changing (Boffo, 1997; Boffo and Moscati, 1998). Opening the door to Europe by taking part in the Bologna Process, with its reform of degree courses and introduction of credit systems, has been extremely important even if there has been widespread resistance from university staff who have not always approved of the innovations. Although complete autonomy of the universities is declared in principle it is actually hampered by three factors.

- The state mechanism for the allocation of funds restricts the true autonomy of the universities in deciding how these funds are to be used as they are tied up for specific expenses (Capano, 2007).
- The recruitment of academic and non-academic university staff is also strictly regulated by the state. In addition, academic staff still have a "non-contractual" status, which means that management is less flexible and salaries are not performance-related.
- University governance, based on collegial bodies elected by university professors, pushes any degree of autonomy towards solutions that favour academic power such as the rapid increase in the number of degree courses offered by the university regardless of actual student and labour market demand (Capano, 2007).

In this context, evaluation has not been able to curb degenerative phenomena connected to irresponsible management of autonomy such as the unusual proliferation of universities and degree courses or the career structure of academic and non-academic staff that is not based on their merits.

For this reason and others such as the needs to comply with European Standards and Guidelines for QA in the Higher Education Area and to adopt a system of credits and also stimulated by the positive outcome of the CIVR procedure, the Ministry of the University started procedures for setting up ANVUR, the agency replacing CNVSU and CIVR.

Factors of crisis encountered in the past

In order to get a true picture of evaluation in Italian universities it is necessary to consider the elements that hinder and limit the efficacy of evaluation practices. Consequently a survey was made with a closed answer questionnaire and divided into the following two sections[4]:

- Section A, with questions on the importance given to six crisis factors that result from the study of literature and can lead to the failure of evaluation systems.
- Section B, where the interviewees were asked to give their opinion on 24 items linked to the six factors mentioned.

The questionnaire was sent in 2006 to all rectors, administrative directors (as evaluated subjects) and presidents and members of evaluation units (as evaluators) in Italian universities. More than 580 questionnaires were sent; 175 of them returned filled in, with a reply rate of 31%. The interviewees were asked to express their opinion with a rating from 1 (no problems) to 6 (critical factor in the failure of audits).
The analysis carried out with the closed answer questionnaire (table 1) shows that 6 different factors have a rating of at least 3 (corresponding to a "fairly serious problem" in the questionnaire scale) and 4 ("serious problem") in the case of "university governance". Examination of the responses from the interviewed categories highlights that the most critical area is "university governance". In the opinion of the presidents and members of evaluation units and administrative directors, this area is the most critical whereas the rectors hold that "inappropriate relationships and conflicts of interests" and, to a lesser extent, the "technical aspects of evaluation" more greatly affect the effectiveness of evaluation systems. Less importance is given to factors such as the "organisation and policies of staff in evaluation units", "personal characteristics of evaluators" and "public policies and system factors".

	SECTION A FACTORS CAUSING PROBLEMS FOR THE EFFEECTIVENESS OF EVALUATION ACTIVITIES (mean rating for each interviewed category)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Technical aspects of evaluation	**Personal characteristics of evaluators**	**Organisation and policies of staff in evaluation units**	**University governance**	**Public policies and system factors**	**Inappropriate relationships and conflicts of interests**
P.N.V.	3.19	3.76	3.62	4.24	2.81	2.81
C.N.V.	3.48	2.94	3.32	3.89	3.06	3.00
RETT.	3.85	3.30	3.60	3.55	3.70	4.10
DIR.	3.44	3.34	3.31	4.16	3.38	3.94
MEAN	*3.49*	*3.34*	*3.46*	*3.96*	*3.24*	*3.46*

Table 1. Responses to section A of questionnaire – P.N.V.: president of evaluation unit; C.N.V.: member of evaluation unit; RETT.: rector; DIR.: administrative/general director. Scale: rating from 1 to 6 where 1= no problems - 6 = critical factor in the failure of audits

The collected data thus highlight a significant difference in the responses from the categories of interviewees who have varying points of view and sensitivity on the issue.

4 For further details on this survey, cf. Rebora, 2007 – Minelli, Rebora, Turri, 2007(a); Minelli, Rebora, Turri, 2007(b).

In particular, the differing opinions of the rectors and presidents of evaluation units is an important symptom of unease. The rectors underline "inappropriate and unethical relationships" between evaluators and those being evaluated (rating 4.10 out of 6) giving the impression that the large number of academics who are members of the units and, more often than not, also work in the university itself compromises objectivity. The presidents, on the other hand, emphasise problems of governance (rating 4.24 out of 6) describing them as the "indifference of university government bodies towards evaluation", thus casting a shadow on the behaviour of those in charge of the university, that is to say the rectors.

Table 2 shows the points in section B of the questionnaire that the interviewees consider to be the most critical for determining the failure of evaluation systems. The presidents of evaluation units and administrative directors put the "indifference of university government bodies towards evaluation" as the most important point out of the 24 in the list whereas members of evaluation units put it third. The rectors' point of view is completely different: the first three places in the list all concern factors that are linked to problems of inappropriate relations or conflicts of interests and in particular involve the relationship between evaluators and evaluated subjects. The difficulty of evaluation in entering the decision-making circuits rises to the surface. It is a paradoxical situation: evaluators find decision makers not interested in the output of evaluation and the latter distrust evaluation because they doubt the evaluators they themselves have appointed.

President of evaluation unit	**Member of evaluation unit**	**Rectors**	**Administrative-general directors**
GOVERNANCE Insufficient internal operational support for evaluation units 3.67	GOVERNANCE Indifference of university governments bodies towards evaluation 3.86	CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS Evaluators and evaluated subjects belonging to the same environment and ensuing over- familiarity 4.40	GOVERNANCE Indifference of university government bodies towards evaluation 3.97
TECHNICAL ASPECTS Insufficient and not very methodical definition of evaluation procedures and practices 3.48	GOVERNANCE Insufficient communication and interaction between the different subjects involved in the evaluation activities 3.37	CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS Conflicts of interests and lack of independence between universities being evaluated and evaluators 4.20	TECHNICAL ASPECT Insufficient and not very methodical definition of evaluation procedures and practices 3.91
GOVERNANCE Indifference of university government bodies towards evaluation 3.38	TECHNICAL ASPECTS Insufficient and not very methodical definition of evaluation procedures and practices 3.37	CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS Involvement of evaluators in terests systems and alliances dominated by evaluated institutions 4.15	CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS Evaluators and evaluated subjects belonging to the same environment and ensuing over-familiarity 3.84

Table 2. Responses to section B of the questionnaire: the three most critical factors affecting the efficiency of evaluation and quality assurance practices in Italian universities for each category of respondents.

These responses show the climate of mistrust surrounding evaluation activities. This is also endorsed by the administrative directors whose opinions come somewhere in between the rectors and presidents of evaluation units and give high ratings to problems of governance and conflicts of interest. A situation of unease and mutual mistrust affecting the relationship between the main characters involved thus emerges. This fact may partly explain and partly be the consequence of the difficulty in using the enormous amount of information that is now available through completely different channels from the past and which constitute the undoubted success of evaluation in university decision making, funding and as an impetus for improvement.

Conclusions and proposals

To conclude, evaluation has set in motion a learning process in universities that has not yet had the time or way of putting important decisions into effect and even less of significantly altering the balance of power in university governance. This does not mean that the bases are lacking for this to happen in the future as a more mature consequence of the cultural development triggered by learning processes which, at their best, led to the adoption of evaluation methodologies that were aligned with the best European ones. The establishment of ANVUR fits into this picture and is a good opportunity for reflecting on the evaluation system.
Improving the evaluation of university activities in Italy is possible but great changes have to be made. The phase that is coming to an end has been anything but useless in the learning process: it has given the opportunity to try out new methods, awakened interest in the issue and spread the culture of evaluation. The experience gained can be a basis for facing up to unresolved problems such as funding or the transformation of the power system. Below are some lines of action that could be valid in this new phase.

Improving evaluation methodologies by their use
A fully developed evaluation system, as the more advanced European experiences show, requires the combined use of different methodologies with enough room for personalised solutions in the field of self-assessment. Evaluation is not a technique but a set of different elements that take shape by using the evaluation reports. After evaluation has been introduced, there is the problem of how to actually use its results and support the process. If the biggest hurdle is the structure of governance, action must be taken in that particular area but the issue could even be partly faced by overturning it. If governance is weak, what steps can the evaluation system take to supply evaluation output that can really be used?
Facing the question of the use of evaluation results, however, may serve to raise the problem of governance. There is a risk that when governance is disinclined or unable to take a stand this will produce a deadlock where evaluation is unable to acquire real importance because it is not supported by university government. On the contrary, there is the risk that if evaluation tries to substitute weak university government, it is overwhelmed by the weight of the questions it raises.

Developing integrated professional expertise
The wealth of expertise, professionalism and experiences available in universities has meant that evaluation is in the hands of people who are recognised as having expertise in a field that is in some way connected with evaluation. Thus, evaluation units are made up of a large number of statisticians, experts in management control, engineers with experience in industrial quality systems and experts in pedagogy. Although this solution was probably the only one possible in the early stages, its limits are now obvious because it takes the most widespread methods as a reference point and not the evaluation process as a whole, which would be more correct. As a result, many evaluators tend to prefer particular techniques that are more in keeping with their own professional expertise and often lack a systematic outlook that takes the use and effects of evaluation into consideration. Nowadays, evaluators are required to have training and interdisciplinary sensitivity as well as enthusiasm for an activity that continually entails facing uncertainties, cultural diversity and even ambiguity and conflicts. This kind of professional development is fundamental for giving a

professional identity to evaluators which brings them closer to university management and weakens their links with specific disciplinary areas. This would naturally have positive effects on curbing the conflicts of interests that currently worry rectors.

Coordinating the work of national and local systems

So far there has been no precise or productive correlation between local and national evaluation practices. The standards and guidelines for quality assurance issued by the ENQA propose a different course of action from the one so far tried and tested in Italy. There are to be local autonomous evaluation systems that are consistent with the strategies and nature of each university and aimed at the spread of an internal culture of quality which will prompt improvement. There is also to be a national system for periodic evaluation that will check on university evaluation systems and verify certain prefixed elements of quality.

In this setting, improvement rather than compliance is the fundamental value for quality policies. This is the essential assumption that characterises the standards and guidelines laid down and shared by European experts. Improvement is achieved when the universities take the question in hand and face it internally. On the contrary, passive acceptance of standards or goals imposed from the top only produces bureaucracy, paperwork, and the search for formal justifications which bring about a lowering of quality. In this context external quality assurance acts as a stimulus for internal quality assurance policies and is not a means for resolving and exhausting the question. Improvement needs stimuli and external evaluation processes can greatly contribute to setting them in motion.

Promoting and sharing a dialectical concept of quality

In short, the real contribution of widespread evaluation is one of cultural growth which is reached by promoting greater awareness of the contents of the different university activities. In this context quality is not only complex but is, above all, controversial, contested and ridden with conflict. This fact should not be ignored: the use of mechanical evaluation procedures is to be limited. The two poles - accountability and improvement - are insuppressible components of a challenging concept. A pragmatic approach that balances these two poles is useful whereas infinite conceptual discussions on quality are less so. Real quality is dialectical and is achieved by balancing the conflicting motivations and contrasting inclinations of the different subjects: national control bodies and university government, lecturers and students, academic and administrative staff, etc. Facing this dialectic and balancing the use of objective-quantitative and subjective-qualitative evaluation methods bring about improvement. Even the behaviour of the actors is important: enthusiasm and scepticism, consolidated experience and initial experimentation, rationality and creativity can all play a role in enhancing evaluation practices.

International review of the Portuguese quality assurance system

Alberto Amaral[1] and Maria João Rosa[2]

In the blacksmith's house wooden spits are used (Portuguese proverb)

Introduction

The establishment of a European quality assurance system for higher education was raised right at the initial steps of the implementation of the Bologna Process. At the 2005 Bergen Conference of European ministers responsible for higher education, the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance (ESG) proposed by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) were adopted. Under those standards, European quality assurance agencies should conduct or be submitted to an external review of its processes and activities at intervals of no more than five years. The review report should state the extent to which the agency complied with those ESG, a positive review leading to its inclusion in the European Register of QA Agencies. In February 2006, the European Parliament and Council passed Recommendation 2006/143/EC suggesting that Member States should allow higher education institutions (HEIs) to use any agency listed in the European Register.

Therefore, we may expect an increasing reviewing activity of national quality agencies, not only because member states agreed to do so, but also to enable those agencies to operate across national borders.

The ESG propose that those "agencies established and officially recognised as national agencies by a Bologna signatory state should normally be reviewed on a national basis, thus respecting the subsidiarity principle – even if they also operate beyond national borders" (ENQA, 2005, p. 29), or they may opt for reviews organised by ENQA.

However, it will be necessary to define standards and guidelines for the reviews of quality assurance agencies. As recognised by the Nordic quality agencies "…more precise threshold values regarding the different standards are required if the European agencies are to be reviewed and assessed in a consistent manner (ENQA, 2006b, p. 15).

In 2005 the Portuguese government decided to ask for international reviews of the higher education system and its institutions, including a review of the national accreditation and quality assurance practices and of the Portuguese National Council for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CNAVES), which was commissioned to ENQA. ENQA was also asked to provide recommendations for the establishment of a national accreditation system complying with the ESG. Here, we critically analyse this ENQA review to determine its weak and strong points, aiming at finding standards of good practice to be met by the future periodic reviews of quality assurance agencies.

The Portuguese quality assurance system

In Portugal, the first quality assurance activities were an initiative of the Portuguese Council of Rectors (CRUP) that organised a pilot experiment in 1993 following the Dutch methodology. When the Ministry produced a draft of the Law on the Assessment of Higher Education, the CRUP was able to make a counter-proposal based on this pilot experiment. The Quality Assessment Act, Law 38/94, of 21 November 1994, finally passed by the Parliament followed closely the CRUP's proposal. The Foundation of Portuguese Universities, similar to the Dutch VSNU, became responsible for the assessment of public universities after being recognised by the Ministry.

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The first round of assessments was completed in 1999 and included only the public universities and the Catholic University. The public polytechnics and the private higher education institutions have taken some time to join this process. This was the result of the government's decision to define the global coordination of the quality assurance system and to establish the requisites for the recognition of new agencies. This was a lengthy process that had to wait for the publication of the Decree-Law 205/98 of 11 July, which created an overall coordination council (CNAVES). The new agencies were recognised in 1998 for the public polytechnics (ADISPOR) and in 1999 for the private sector (APESP). The second assessment cycle began in 2000 and included all institutions, while CNAVES became responsible for ensuring the "harmony, cohesion and credibility" of the overall system and to carry out the meta-evaluation of the system, if necessary using foreign experts (Amaral and Rosa, 2004).

The inclusion of the private sector created a new interest in the results of the reviews, as there were doubts about the quality of this sector. However, the external reports were in general carefully drafted so that the public in general and the media in particular could not easily draw up league tables and very seldom offered a basis for ministerial decisions leading to the cancellation of study programmes.

In 2002, a new Minister publicly complained that the conclusions of the external reports were obscure, and decided to change the quality system. Law 1/2003 was passed by Parliament on 6 January, clarifying the consequences of the results of the assessment and determining the rating of the evaluated programmes. Law 1/2003 also introduced the concept of academic accreditation, which was included in the remit of the agencies already responsible for the quality assurance system. The Minister, by forcing the quality agency to produce an accreditation-type conclusion – a yes or no answer –, was aiming at having a sounder basis for acting. However, the Minister did not stay long in office, the law was never regulated and accreditation was quickly forgotten.

From 2003 onwards, the review panels were asked to include a rating in fourteen "fields of appraisal" using a five-point scale from A (excellent) to E (negative). However, the reports remained inconclusive and did not make recommendations to the Minister. At last, in 2005, a new government commissioned from ENQA a review of the Portuguese quality assurance system.

The ENQA review process

The terms of reference committed ENQA to advise CNAVES and the Ministry on academic and management structures for implementing adequate quality assurance and accreditation practices and to provide a final report including recommendations for improvement and for complying with the ESG. CNAVES was asked to make the final report public and to organise its debate.

During the review process, the government announced that the present quality assurance system would be dismantled and replaced by a new accreditation system in early 2007. However, the ENQA panel did not consider this "to imply any changes to the already agreed terms of reference for the review" (ENQA, 2006a, p. 14).

The review was based on a self-evaluation report prepared by CNAVES and its evaluation councils, accounts produced by professional associations and site visits by the ENQA panel. The site visits were confined to Lisbon and included some 18.5 hours with the government and its agencies, 14 hours with CNAVES and its evaluation councils and bodies representing the HEIs, and representatives from four Lisbon HEIs (one for each combination of public and private, universities and polytechnics). The visit was organised through direct contacts between the Ministry and ENQA.

The panel produced a draft report that was mailed to CNAVES asking for comments. CNAVES' comments were very critical and did not accept the views of the ENQA panel on the terms of reference of the exercise:

> … a change in the terms of reference was accepted by the panel in the middle of the process, as a consequence of the formal decision of the government to extinguish the quality assurance system under assessment without waiting for the results of the review. The nature of the exercise became unavoidably much different. (CNAVES, 2006)

Other areas of refutation by CNAVES were the use as main reference of the ESG while ignoring the constraints resulting from the Portuguese legal framework, and what CNAVES called "misinterpretations", which included the negative comments of the reviewers on the independence and transparency of the system, its low level of internationalisation, the low involvement of students and the lack of effective results (not a single study programme has been closed due to its low quality). The comments were e-mailed to the ENQA panel on 16 October. On 17 October the ENQA panel suggested that the meeting scheduled for 23 October to discuss those comments should be cancelled: "The fact that the comments are very clear and detailed raise the question whether there will be an added-value of having the meeting Monday". This was not accepted by CNAVES, and in the final report the panel registers that on the "23 October 2006 the panel chair and the review secretary met in Lisbon with representatives of CNAVES and the Councils whose statements were discussed in an open and frank atmosphere". (ENQA, 2006a, p. 15)

The final report was mailed to the Ministry but not to CNAVES, although that was one of the conditions of the contract. The Press cabinet of the Ministry released the report to the Press while its public presentation was scheduled for 22 November. Meanwhile CNAVES received the report from a journalist on 20 November!

On 21 November the ENQA panel e-mailed a copy of the report to CNAVES (the report was mailed to the Ministry the previous week) that replied: "CNAVES has received a copy yesterday afternoon from a friend journalist. I am sure this will be remembered in the future as the only case in the World in which an assessed institution has received the review report by courtesy of the press!" and also made reference to the fact that "an important newspaper, in its on-line edition, has already advanced some of your conclusions, but in a completely distorted way!" And CNAVES decided not to be present at the report's public presentation ceremony.

The major conclusions of the ENQA report

Despite the strong refutation from CNAVES, the final report viewed from a distance is, in general, fair and adequate. If there were not successive blunders in the process, culminating with the inadmissible final episode of not mailing the report to the assessed institution before its release to the press, it is possible that the negative reactions would have been attenuated and a more dispassionate appreciation would have been possible.

In the report, the ENQA panel praised the excellent quality of the CNAVES self-evaluation report, providing a satisfactory level of critical self-reflection and recognised "many of the critical observations made by the ENQA panel in this report may also be identified in the CNAVES self-evaluation report itself" (ENQA, 2006a, p. 16).

CNAVES complained that the panel used the ESG as the basis for the review process while ignoring the constraints to the operation of CNAVES imposed by the national legal context. The panel, however, defended that "the review would suffer from a serious lack of transparency and comparability if the

standards were not applied as the frame of reference for the review" (ENQA, 2006a, p. 16) while appropriately recognising that CNAVES "cannot in all fairness be expected to have developed its organisation and processes according to those standards".

The ENQA panel also recognised that, despite some weaknesses (when set against the ESG), the Portuguese model was fit for purpose at the time of its establishment and "accumulated a number of positive experiences that should be considered carried over into a new quality assurance system" (ENQA, 2006a, p. 6).

The major strengths of the Portuguese quality assurance system as identified by the panel were its contribution to the establishment of a self-evaluation culture, its methodological model, which is in principle appropriate and in many respects in compliance with ESG and practice, and its comprehensiveness as it includes all HEIs.

The major weaknesses were its apparently limited independence (like the former Dutch system, there was strong intervention of the HEIs), the lack of sufficient operational efficiency and consistency (limited staff numbers, no efficient training of the reviewers, inconsistencies in reporting, etc.), low internationalisation, and, above all, a serious lack of consequences. The position of the panel is fair, noting that CNAVES had planned a third evaluation cycle where major deficiencies were corrected and stated:

> The passiveness on the part of the Government is a major part of the explanation as is the lack of commitment from higher education institutions. But CNAVES's lack of activity does also bear part of the responsibility… the fact that the reports have often been formulated in a vague manner, without clear conclusions and recommendations, has further constrained the possibility for follow-up. (ENQA, 2006a, p. 8).

The major problems of the exercise

The ENQA panel based its exercise on the ESG that were too recent to have been taken into account by CNAVES. The deficiencies of the Portuguese quality assessment system were analysed whilst paying no regard to the responsibilities of successive governments and the constraints imposed by the legal framework. Therefore, CNAVES apparently emerged as the main target of criticism, which was seen as rather unfair. This question was raised by the Nordic agencies:

> "…due to e.g. national legislation specific operations and circumstances of minor importance can make compliance with certain standards questionable. This should be taken into consideration, e.g. by a Register Committee assessing the inclusion of agencies into the planned European register" (ENQA, 2006b, p.8).

It is therefore interesting to register that ENQA has recently supported this view:

> Full or substantial compliance may be impossible for some agencies, owing to restrictions placed on them by the very nature of their work and/or legislation in place in their country(ies) of operation. When considering such cases, the ENQA Board will take mitigating circumstances such as these into account (ENQA, 2006c, p. 6).

The ENQA panel did not appropriately recognise the climate under which the exercise was taking place or the change in the terms of reference resulting from the government decision to close CNAVES before the evaluation was completed.

As the visit of the panel was negotiated between the government and the ENQA panel after the decision to close CNAVES, this might be interpreted as a movement of the government to validate its decision by carefully choosing the interviewees. Actually, the panel spent more time with the government and its agencies than with CNAVES and the higher education institutions. To an independent observer these facts indicate an apparent lack of independence of the review.

And finally, the final report was disclosed to the press without previously making the report available to the evaluated agency, the CNAVES.

Other problems were the clumsy attempt of the ENQA panel not to discuss with CNAVES the comments to the draft report as previously agreed, and the restriction of the panel's visits to Lisbon, not taking into account the diversity of institutions across the country.

The Portuguese quality assurance system, like the Dutch and the Flemish systems were implemented in an environment of trust between institutions and the government. Universities in Portugal and Flanders anticipated the government initiatives in quality by starting a quality exercise in collaboration with the Dutch VSNU. In both countries the ownership of the quality system was entrusted to bodies 'representative of HEIs', similar to the Dutch VSNU (Amaral and Rosa, 2004; Amaral, 2007).

Both in Flanders and in Portugal there was public criticism of the vagueness of the visit reports and the lack of a clear overall conclusion (Van Damme, 2004; Amaral and Rosa, 2004; Amaral, 2007). In all three countries the quality agencies "owned" by the institutions were replaced by accreditation agencies complying to different degrees with the ESG. This was the result of different factors, including the loss of trust in institutions associated with New Public Management and massification, the idea that the former agencies did not produce results and the wish to comply with the ESG. So the final result of the ENQA review of the Portuguese system was not unexpected.

Conclusions and recommendations

The ENQA review of the Portuguese quality assurance system was one of the first exercises of international review of quality agencies. Apparently ENQA, which is partly responsible for proposing the ESG, was not able to conduct an exemplary review. Our analysis intends to identify the deficiencies of the process thus eliminating problems that will become acute once the accreditation of agencies comes increasingly into operation.

The major problem will be ensuring the independence of the reviews, namely from governments. This is a standard that ENQA formulated for the national agencies and this must, therefore, also be followed when agencies are being reviewed.

The recommendation that "reviews – regardless of whether they are initiated at a national, agency or ENQA level – must always explicitly consider the extent to which the agency conforms with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies" (ENQA, 2005, p. 30) may induce compliance, create a rigid system and inhibit innovation. The final report should explicitly take into account the national legal frameworks under which the agency operates and recommend its adaptation if appropriate.

An additional good practice would be including the possible response of the evaluated agency in the final report when it is made public.

It is ironic that, while the ESG demand independence of the accreditation agencies, which would exclude from the European Register the Dutch VSNU, the Portuguese CNAVES and the Flemish VLIR – as agencies linked to HEIs – it is now proposed that:

> …full membership of ENQA, for which the entry criterion is also compliance with the ESG, attested through an independent review, would normally constitute prima facie evidence for inclusion in the Register (ENQA, 2007, p. 16).

Therefore, a process under the control of ENQA – i.e. the decisions on the membership of ENQA – an association of accreditation agencies, would provide the evidence for deciding on the inclusion of its members in the European register. We wonder if this fulfils the recommendation of the London Communiqué on the independence of the reviews.

In London, the Ministers decided that "inclusion on the register should be evaluated on the basis of substantial compliance with the ESG" (European Ministers of Education, 2007), accepting the ENQA proposal (ENQA, 2007: 6) and differs from the initial ENQA proposal "that agencies should comply with all standards if they are to be included in the desirable sections of the planned register" (ENQA, 2006b: 8). However, this lack of definition raises problems of clarity and comparability much "en vogue" today.

To conclude, we hope good sense will prevail and episodes similar to the review of the Portuguese quality system will never again be repeated.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Using the *European Standards and Guidelines*: Some concluding remarks

Lee Harvey[1]

Introduction: clarifying terms

In discussions of quality and standards there is often confusion over the use of the terms. Quality is not the same as quality assurance, nor are standards and quality the same. Furthermore, quality and standards are both distinct from quality standards.

The simplest way of conceptualising the difference is to see quality as about process, and standards a means of evaluating the outcomes. The quality of higher education is evaluated, for example, by examining the process through which the student learns. The standard of higher education would be evaluated by examining what the student has learned, the outcome of the learning process.

Quality assurance is a mechanism for ensuring an appropriate learning process; be it a degree of control over what is permitted as a higher education experience, ensuring that the institution complies with basic requirements, or is accountable to its stakeholders, including funders and students, or has processes in place to enhance the learning process.[2]

Quality standards are sets of norms that, within the quality assurance process, specify the *expectations* on providers and, indeed, the quality assurers themselves. The *European Standards and Guidelines* are, therefore, a set of quality standards but they judge neither the quality nor the standards of higher education provision.

A golf analogy may help clarify this further. Quality is equivalent to the way the game is played, the rhythm of the golf swing and accuracy of the shot. The standard would be the score achieved by the golfer. The quality standard would be the 'par' score: the expected number of strokes a good player should take to complete the course. Quality assurance would be equivalent to the match referee.

The situation is slightly more complicated by there being a variety of definitions of quality in higher education: quality as excellence, consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation (Harvey and Green, 1993; Harvey, 2006). Further, standards apply to academic outcomes, standards of competence, the standard of service provided to students and to standards applied to its own functioning by the institution (Harvey, 1995; 2006). This creates a five-by-four matrix of the interrelationship between quality and standards (Diagram 1) and, thus, the *European Standards and Guidelines* relate to one element in the matrix; they provide a set of norms for the fitness-for-purpose of organisational standards.

1 Higher Education Academy, UK, and member of the European Quality Assurance Forum organising committee.

2 Note that the same approach could be applied to the research process and outputs but this chapter focuses only on the student learning experience.

Standards / Norms by which to judge the FFP of organisational standards / Quality	academic	competence	service	organisational
excellence				
perfection				
fitness for purpose				**ESG**
value for money				
transformation				

Diagram 1. Quality and standards and the ESG as quality standard

The European Standards and Guidelines for internal and external quality assurance

The discussion sessions at the Forum addressed, *inter alia*, the success factors, the obstacles and the consequences of using and implementing the *European Standards and Guidelines (*ESG): specifically, applying them to quality processes internal to institutions.

Views were varied, not least because, in some countries, internal processes of quality assurance had been in place for some time prior to the production of the ESG. In such places it was thought that the ESG were not a major contributor to quality assurance. As a result, some delegates were of the view that the main role was to explore how well internal processes mapped to the guidelines.

Others, who had only recently embarked on systematic internal quality assurance or were in a process of transition, thought the ESG were useful. However, there was some thought that the ESG might be precipitating change rather than simply a useful tool, and uncertainty as to whether this was positive, given that the ESG, despite being written in general terms, could be seen as an imposition of a European process on participating countries.

There was some general agreement that, as of 2007, the ESG were much more likely to be used at level 2 and 3 (external evaluation or evaluation of the agency) than level 1 (internal to the institution).

Obstacles

In some settings, there were clear problems engaging teachers in the development of internal quality procedures, although this was not necessarily exacerbated by having a set of European guidelines. If anything, the existence of European guidelines was likely to encourage rather than discourage engagement. However, an alternative view suggested that there is a danger of compliance and stultification, when using the ESG internally, by claiming that quality assurance was a European requirement.

The main obstacles to implementation are that traditions are hard to change and that academics are often resistant, not least where the terminology of quality assurance is alien. Unless academics are convinced of the value of quality processes, they are likely to subvert or ignore them (Newton, 2000). Furthermore, there is a clash between the discipline-focus of the academic and the institutional focus at the heart of most quality processes (Becher and Trowler, 2001). However, it is not always academics; managers and students also provide obstacles to developing quality procedures, through inertia or conservatism. They do not always want to engage with improvement processes that require significant change.

Another issue that came to the fore is that of language. The ESG are written in English and there are various non-official translations into other languages for local consumption, in some cases, such as Russian, rather too many translations. Terms have different connotations in different languages (when translated); for example, 'guideline' in German is more of a requirement than is intended in English. There is an illusion of common language when English terms used but they still have different local cultural meanings. It is important to ensure that translations reflect the culture in different settings and avoid any form of cultural imperialism.

Positive consequences

The discussion identified a range of positive consequences by using the ESG. They provided a framework that could be endorsed top down and implemented bottom up.
They were generally not seen as prescriptive (although a lack of definition in places was a problem for some people).

The ESG provided a good basis for new start-ups in the quality process and facilitated transparency. Generally, they were viewed as not difficult to implement and as supporting creativity (although some demurred) and institutional profile. The ESG were seen as flexible and as leaving room for interpretation: although this may lead to the possibility of bad implementation. The ESG reinforce the principle that institutions are responsible for their own quality and show that institutions have to develop their own quality assurance procedures and not rely on the agency or government.

It was thought that the ESG would aid comparability, lead to better European integration and be a potential basis for international co-operation (for example, small countries operating together).

There was a view that the ESG will help to control degree mills and also lead to a better global standing for European higher education.

However, there was a strong feeling that there is a need for concrete details, particularly best practice examples. It was felt that this would be a good area for workshops and also the development of official interpretations of the material. It was hoped that countries at different levels of implementation would share practices and obstacles. There was also a concern about exactly how the ESG fitted into the Bologna process and that it was time for a coherent debate about the adequacy and value of the ESG and their underlying philosophy.

Not surprisingly, there was a strong feeling that it is necessary to engage all stakeholders in their implementation and interpretation and that, in some cases, the flexibility of the ESG may clash with existing national contexts or structures.

Negative consequences of ESG

There were concerns that having guidelines might make institutions focus only on the ESG and ignore 'good' traditional quality assurance practices. An overemphasis on compliance with the standards, rather than treating the ESG as advisory, may lead to a tick-box mentality, with institutions becoming 'slaves to the ESG' instead of being creative in their development of quality assurance.

There were also concerns that, although the ESG appear to oblige institutions to install mechanisms, they are not helpful in providing information or examples of how this might be done. It was thought that the

European Quality Assurance Forum might be an appropriate vehicle to aid implementation. The Forum also needs to communicate the thoughts of delegates back to policy makers.

Other issues that were raised were the lack of evaluation of research in the ESG, that knowledge transfer is missing and that guidance on the relationship between research and teaching is also lacking.

Purposes of quality assurance and role of the ESG

Quality assurance processes have four broad purposes: accountability, compliance, control and improvement. The delegates discussed the main purposes in their settings and examined whether the ESG provide the basis for an approach that would improve the way quality assurance is carried out.

It was clear that, within Europe, external quality processes are used for all four purposes and that, within countries, there is often a shift in emphasis over time. Accountability (transparency) and improvement (enhancement) were purposes frequently espoused and most countries seem to struggle with a mixture of the two. However, the perceived incompatibility of accountability and enhancement approaches is not resolved by the ESG. A popular solution to the improvement-accountability dilemma, although not easy to implement, is externally-addressed accountability through internally-organised enhancement: the notion that improvement is its own accountability.

However, cross-cutting these are clear control purposes in some countries, not least maintaining control of a burgeoning private sector. In other countries, quality assurance is constructed to ensure compliance to governmental or agency requirements, not least compliance with Bologna-inspired protocols. The ESG provide a framework that hints at improvement but also enables other purposes. Perhaps the weakness of the ESG is the lack of a single clear purpose.

There were some views that quality assurance should also enable international comparisons through benchmarking (of at least minimum threshold standards). It was also suggested that a European perspective on quality assurance should be developed. There was equivocation as to whether the ESG would be useful in either regard.

It was thought that the ESG provided a driver for change in agencies and in institutions (although not a slavish adherence). Nonetheless, the conference abounded with comments about whether institutions and agencies complied with the ESG.

Does the ESG improve how quality assurance is undertaken?

Delegates thought that the ESG provide a common language of quality and promote discussion about procedures. It was argued that the ESG encourage risk management and have even helped improved governance in some settings.

The ESG are not a blueprint and there is room for adapting to local contexts. Delegates were pleased that the ESG flag up the resourcing issue for institutions and agencies. It was also noted, with approval, that the ESG apply to agencies as well as institutions. Overall, the joint ownership of quality assurance, which is explicit in the ESG, was noted with approval.

Conclusions of the discussions

If the ESG are ultimately about improvement, how do you persuade institutions they want to improve? Currently, the ESG tend to be used top down, externally rather than internally, and this, it was argued, is the wrong way round.

Quality is still perceived as a burden in many areas, rather than as a normal part of the process of improving the learning experience. This is probably due to the accountability and compliance purposes that predominate in national external quality assurance procedures rather than integrating quality assurance into enhancement approaches. It was noted that, with few exceptions such as Scotland and Finland, when quality assurance starts with an improvement focus, as in Sweden, political pressure forces an accountability orientation into the system.

There were suggestions that quality processes, especially if tied to improvement, need to be more discipline specific. This may significantly improve academic engagement as well as help develop a creative approach to improving student learning.

Some delegates had the idea that a focus on learning outcomes would solve all the quality-related issues. The behaviourist approach to learning espoused in the discussion is, on the evidence of countries like the UK (which is far advanced in the development of learning outcomes), somewhat naïve as the learning outcome approach is just one element of a broader learning infrastructure.

Enshrining quality assurance requirements in national legislation was seen, in some countries, as important. Where the ESG are included in national legislation, in essence, in part or in their entirety, this is to ensure they are taken seriously. In other cultural contexts, a close link between the legal framework and the ESG would not be feasible.

Without doubt, there needs to be more thought and effort placed on the integration of external and internal quality assurance processes. This is not just a matter of internal processes mirroring external processes. Agencies have a responsibility to ensure that they develop processes that take forward institutional initiatives and not impose an external framework that is burdensome and alien. There is a fundamental issue to be resolved at national level and this is the purpose of quality assurance. It may be that external assurance has a different purpose to internal assurance and these do not necessarily need to be aligned as long as the different purposes are transparent and procedures reflect the purpose.

There was ambiguity about the role and, indeed, continuing engagement in quality assurance. As one respondent put it: 'The concept of quality assurance is sometimes perceived as old-fashioned, although in some cases it is less threatening than quality management or quality culture.'

There were concerns about what exactly quality culture is and whether it is a pre-requisite for quality assurance or a result of quality assurance; or perhaps this is an iterative process. Key features of quality culture are:

- academic ownership and engagement
- recognition of the need for a quality system (but not one driven by bureaucracy)
- a focus on changing people's behaviour rather than the mechanics of a system of reporting and review
- clarity of purpose
- centrality of students: both the student learning experience as the focus of quality of education and the involvement of students in evaluative processes as credible evidence providers and peers in evaluation teams

- encouragement of partnership and co-operation
- focusing less on individual performance and enabling community engagement and team working
- a leadership style that inspires rather than dictates
- welcoming of external critical evaluation
- an integrated and continuous process of self-reflection
- providing the context to take the initiative to improve, even where it is risky.

In a recent analysis of quality culture (Harvey and Stensaker, 2008) two dimensions of quality culture were posited; whether individual behaviour is group-controlled and whether individual behaviour is prescribed by external rules and regulations. Dichotomising each of these led to four 'ideal-type' quality cultures in higher education, which are briefly reprised.

Responsive quality culture: led by external demands, is opportunistic, combining accountability and improvement. However, sometimes there is a lack of ownership and control.

Reactive quality culture: is reward or sanction led and task-oriented. It has doubts about the potential of improvement, tends to be compliant and is often reluctant. It sees quality as a 'beast to be fed' (Newton, 2000).

Regenerative quality culture: is internally-oriented with strong belief in staff and existing procedures. It is embedded in the department and indeed widespread across the institution. It is experimental and risk taking. However, it is not always adaptive to external demands and developments.

Reproductive quality culture: wants to minimise the impact of external factors. It focuses on sub-units, is characterised by a lack of transparency throughout the institution and emphasises the expertise of the individual.

Arguably, one needs to be explicit about the purposes of quality assurance and ensure that appropriate quality cultures are enabled. It should also be noted that quality assurance purposes and quality culture are not fixed for all time: a flexible approach is vital.

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