

# Quality and Trust: at the heart of what we do

A selection of papers from the  
6<sup>th</sup> European Quality Assurance Forum

17-19 November 2011

Hosted by the University of Antwerp and  
Artesis University College Antwerp, Belgium



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# Foreword and Acknowledgements

The European Quality Assurance Forum has been organised by the E4 Group (ENQA, ESU, EUA, and EURASHE) since 2006. The idea of an annual European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) grew from the observation that the dialogue among quality assurance (QA) agencies, higher education institutions and students was happening at national rather than at European level. Thus, it seemed important to create an annual European event that gathers all actors in order to: discuss matters of quality and quality assurance in the context of the changing higher education landscape, examine European and international QA trends, and improve the articulation between quality culture and external accountability.

The sixth Forum, held at the University of Antwerp and Artesis University College Antwerp, Belgium, was the first time the event was held without funding from the European Commission. Regardless of the full-cost participation fees, the event attracted more than 400 participants, which is in line with the numbers of the previous years. This confirms the organisers' conviction that the event has established its role as the main annual discussion forum for all interested parties in the field of European quality assurance. It continues to attract participants from approximately 50 countries, including academics and administrators responsible for internal quality, students, representatives from QA agencies, national authorities, intergovernmental organisations and researchers in quality development in higher education and research.

During the three days, the purposes and essence of both internal and external QA, and how QA can be further developed to serve these purposes better were explored. Through plenary and various parallel sessions the participants discussed how quality assurance can improve so as to respond better to the increasing expectations towards QA processes, but also how realistic these expectations are. As the demands for transparency and accountability are the focus of attention, various presentations recalled that the primary purpose of both internal and external QA processes remains that of ensuring and enhancing quality and thus promoting trust.

This publication gathers together a representative sample of the contributions to the Forum. It includes some of the keynote presentations as well as a few of the many excellent papers that generated lively discussions in the parallel sessions. The Forum Steering Committee hopes that this publication will inspire those involved in QA in their daily work.

On behalf of the Forum Steering Committee, I wish to thank the following for their support of this activity: the University of Antwerp and Artesis University College Antwerp who hosted the Forum with wonderful organisation and hospitality; those actors in the field of QA who submitted 85 papers and workshop proposals to the Forum; the keynote speakers and Ivana Juraga and Alicja Bochajczuk at EUA, who spearheaded its organisation on behalf of the E4.

The next European Quality Assurance Forum will be held on 22-24 November 2012 at Tallinn University, Estonia. We look forward to welcoming you then.

**Fiona Crozier**  
Chair, Forum Steering Committee

# I. Setting the stage

## European quality assurance in a global perspective: 'Soft power' at work?

Keynote address given at EQAF, Antwerp, 17 November 2011

By Mala Singh<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

My brief for this keynote address was to speak on what the European quality assurance landscape looks like from a global perspective – to provide a view on how quality assurance (QA) developments in Europe relate to the global context as well as on how European QA developments may be perceived from an outside perspective. In thinking about this brief, I also tried to find a connection to the theme of the 2011 European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF): 'Quality and Trust at the heart of QA'. The theme of the Forum was intended to facilitate an exploration of the purposes and essence of internal and external QA, within a general assumption that quality improvement should remain as the essential focus of QA and that it could lead to building trust among different stakeholders. All these issues encompass many complexities and differences of opinion, are more normative than matters of simple description, and involve ongoing political and educational negotiation, often on shifting ground.

In trying to make my brief manageable, I had to take account of issues relating to vantage points and boundaries. In relation to vantage points, I wondered whose perspective counts credibly as a global perspective. Is it a view from multilateral organisations like the OECD or UNESCO or a view from large or powerful countries or regions which are politically or economically dominant on the global stage? Might such a perspective even refer to Europe's own ambitions to internationalise beyond Europe, to play a global role, both in relation to commercial forays of European QA agencies into countries beyond Europe as well as through the European presence and involvement in different regions of the world (for example, through Tuning projects)? In this regard, I chose to avoid the tangles of geopolitics in favour of a less complicated focus on recent QA trends and developments in some non-European countries and regions. I thought that this would be the most instructive vantage point from which to pose some questions about the value and continuing validity of European choices and approaches in QA.

In relation to boundaries, I had to reflect on the question of what counts as European QA. This was obviously not reducible to the work of QA agencies. European QA has many sites and actors. The policies and practices of higher education institutions (and their faculties and departments), of QA agencies, of networks like the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European University Association (EUA) and the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA), the work of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), and even the policy positions and activities of the E4 are all dimensions of European QA. This made me realise how difficult it was to generalise about European QA, about what is happening on the ground in public and private universities across 27 European Union countries and 47 Bologna signatory countries and within more than 40 QA agencies in ENQA. In this regard, I chose to frame some questions around what constituted a common reference point for European QA in its different sites and for its different actors – the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) as conveying a distinctive set of policy choices and philosophical values (ENQA, 2005).

I cover three sections in my presentation. I first make some observations on QA in Europe, especially some of its strengths but also some omissions and ambiguities. I then look at possible paradigm shifts in QA developments beyond Europe, which may be signalling a move from “soft” to “hard power” QA. I conclude by looking ahead to the increasing (sometimes conflicting) demands on QA and reflect on the advantages and challenges of making a choice for continuing consolidation of the ESG until 2015, in light of trends towards stronger compliance regimes in QA.

## Definitions and premises

In this presentation, I make the point that European QA could be seen as representing a form of QA “soft power” in contrast to QA “hard power” approaches which are emerging in higher education systems beyond Europe or in some trends within Europe as well. My perspective on European QA as a form of “soft power” QA draws on the analysis of Joseph Nye who argued that the “soft power” aspects of politics can be as powerful as or even more effective in achieving political goals than military might, political imposition or economic pressure (1991; 2004) and Susan Robertson who raises questions as to whether the Bologna Process is a “soft power” instrument useful to the ambition of the European Union as a new imperial power (2009). It may help to illuminate European approaches to QA through distinguishing between “hard power QA” and “soft power QA”, drawing on the international relations terminology of “soft power” as a form of politics which is persuasive because of its ability to create or project legitimacy for particular ideologies, values, policies and systems. This would require looking at claims for the distinctiveness of European QA, especially its policy architecture (the Bologna Process), its governance model (stakeholder collaboration) as well as the underpinning values of the ESG as a basis for the attractiveness of European QA on the global stage. In this presentation I refer to European QA as “soft power QA” in two dimensions. The first has to do with its norm and agenda setting influence (Hartmann, 2008) as a model for emulation or a source of influence in other regions, the second has to do with a set of values that may well privilege more collegial and collaborative forms of QA over compliance stipulations and assert strong commitments to quality improvement vis à vis a number of other regulatory purposes for QA.

The point has often been made in relation to the politics of higher education governance (of which external QA is a part) that quality assurance is about issues of power, especially in relation to the changing power balances in the relationships which connect the state, the market and academia in the Clark triangle of coordination (Clark, 1983; Neave, 1998; Strathern, 2000; Morley, 2003). I may be romanticising the ESG somewhat in representing it as a form of QA “soft power” in relation to the second dimension mentioned above. Certainly the more accreditation-like deployment of the ESG is a clear part of its usage in European higher education, sharpened more recently in relation to the work of EQAR. However, for the purposes of making my argument, I presume that QA “soft power” reflects the values and approaches which may well have underpinned the ESG at its origins. This includes a commitment to collegiality, respect for a diversity of QA methods and procedures, a strong focus on quality improvement and enhancement, recognition of institutional responsibility and academic autonomy, a focus not only on outputs but also on inputs and processes, and a commitment to stakeholder dialogue and consensus. In contrast, QA “hard power” signals, in my view, a return to more centralised and more coercive forms of state regulation from a position of arms length steering by government; the overt use of QA for regulation; a much weaker discourse of quality improvement and a stronger discourse of compliance and “consumer protection”; an outcomes regime based on institutional performance and stipulations of performance standards; and a shift from qualitative to quantitative information to enhance transparency.

## Looking within European quality assurance

The ESG have been on the agenda of European QA since the 2003 Berlin Communiqué. More formally, they have constituted a key reference point for European QA since their adoption by European education ministers in the 2005 Bergen Communiqué. Although it is clear that national and institutional contexts undoubtedly shape the purposes and applications of the ESG as well their consequences and effects, the ESG nevertheless have become a key policy pillar and identifying characteristic of European QA, even finding expression in national legislation for the governance of higher education institutions and QA agencies. Their implementation and use over the last five years had not been tracked in a systematic fashion. The recent MAP-ESG exercise of the E4 was intended to do precisely that, not only as a comprehensive information gathering exercise but also to make recommendations on the continuing usefulness and applicability of the ESG as well as on the necessity for a revision of the ESG and the possible scope of such a revision. The final report of the MAP-ESG project contains a recommendation by the E4 for the current principles of the ESG to be maintained even though “a careful revision of the ESG in order to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness” (2011, pp. 6) is proposed.

It is not unusual for a QA system that is premised on a particular set of principles and rationales to run into a second cycle of application (albeit with some adjustments or differences in focus), in this case after five years. This gives national and institutional systems a chance to bed down QA procedures and allow for the steady internalisation of external interventions into internal management and academic routines, hopefully to yield much-desired cultures of quality. Such an approach would make even more sense in a context where evenness of regional application is sought. The E4 recommendation for continuing with the ESG is thus not unexpected, especially in its consideration of European countries and institutions which have only recently started to align their QA systems to the ESG. However, it is a position that warrants further discussion, not only in light of far-reaching changes in Europe (as the MAP-ESG Report itself mentions) but also in relation to quite radical changes in QA paradigms in other parts of the world.

QA is now a ubiquitous phenomenon in many countries and regions around the world. Some of the trends in the global spread of QA may very well have been influenced by European QA, especially through the increasing visibility of the ESG in the spread of information about the Bologna Process. Many of the elements of the ESG are now a familiar part of QA in a diversity of regions and systems beyond Europe. Is there anything that is distinctive about European QA, which could be said to constitute a peculiarly European dimension of QA? I agree with the view that the stakeholder model for QA is a strength and a distinguishing feature of European QA. The ethos and operational mode of the E4, the involvement of stakeholders from universities, the QA agencies, student organisations and from institutions which offer professionally-oriented programmes, is an innovative form of QA governance. The inclusion of stakeholders with different interests and different power bases in a partnership model within a common structure allows for continuing dialogue and debate and the reaching of consensual positions on QA matters within the context of an evolving Bologna Process. The power and efficacy of this co-operative model is clear from the ways in which E4 recommendations have found their way into higher education and QA policy at a European level.

Notwithstanding the distinctiveness and attractiveness of this dialogic model of QA governance, there are two issues relating to it which need further reflection. One is the question of whether the model is fully inclusive of all stakeholder interests in QA. On this point, I am not expressing a new concern when I say that academics are not represented as a specific constituency with a particular set of professional interests (although the claim may be made that they are indirectly included through the participation of higher education institutions). The ideological and policy shift to student-centred learning and the discourse of the ‘student as consumer’ has given prominence to the interests of students as a constituency. But this development in itself is not the basis of the problem. The decreasing visibility of the academic constituency is. Could the argument be made that the weakened position of academics in the Clark triangle of coordination, counterbalanced by the growing power of the student constituency and of intermediary bodies like QA agencies, may well be what is reflected in the composition of the E4 pact? Analysts who have written about the downgrading of academics in policy making for higher education argue that academics are now viewed as simply being there to deliver a positive learning experience for students rather than a professional constituency with their own interests and identities (Sabri, 2010). The absence of academics from the E4 governance pact does not bode well for the principle of subsidiarity in QA – the idea that decisions get made involving those who are closest to where a quality goal is to be pursued. This alludes to the possibility that quality may best be negotiated and delivered in the interaction between academics and students in the trenches of teaching and learning, in ways that complex QA architectures and comprehensive QA policies may not be able to achieve.

The second issue has to do with the extent to which the E4 pact is a pact for the governance of quality assurance or for the governance of quality itself. The MAP-ESG process has thrown up concerns about whether the stakeholder model operates consistently and effectively at all levels: whether, for example, it is less in evidence or non-existent at the institutional or programme level. This raises the question of how pacts for QA governance can translate into initiatives which actually improve the quality of provision, and at what level such pacts can in fact influence arrangements for teaching and learning.

I would like to make one last observation about European QA. This pertains to demands for increasing transparency in QA through making publicly available more and detailed information about institutional performance. The argument for transparency is often linked to increasing freedom of choice for different stakeholders – student choice about universities, university choice about national QA agency or about international QA agency (EUA, 2010). It does well to remember that these freedoms are increasingly defined within the parameters of a market democracy. One should take into account that freedom of choice in QA or through QA is only a small part of a larger set of socio-political and intellectual freedoms whose enjoyment may in reality be only partially or ambivalently experienced within the context of European democracy.

## Looking beyond European QA: Paradigm emulation and paradigm shifts

As indicated above, the E4 recommendation on maintaining the current principles in European QA signals a continuation of the values and approaches of the ESG for the next five-year period. In the meantime, what developments are underway in other parts of the world in relation to which European QA could be viewed in a more global context? Here, I provide a brief look at two trends, the first on the African continent which is premised on a view that the Bologna Process, especially its QA dimensions, holds valuable strategic lessons and is therefore worth drawing on; the second which is unfolding rapidly, for example, within Australian higher education and which signals a clear departure from some of the key philosophical underpinnings of European QA.

The African Union (AU) has launched an initiative to harmonise higher education programmes across African higher education institutions in different countries in order to facilitate mobility, improve quality and help regenerate regional growth and socio-economic development (AU, 2007). In a language resonant of Bologna discourses, the AU proposes that:

Harmonization will benefit Africa, since it will allow for greater intra-regional mobility, thereby fostering increased sharing of information, intellectual resources and research ... On a broader level, harmonization has the potential to create a common African higher education and research space (AU, 2007).

The AU uses the word ‘harmonisation’ which is reminiscent of the early terminology of the Bologna Process (Sorbonne Declaration of 1998) but there has been debate about what this means. A report of a meeting on Regional Harmonization of Higher Education for Africa (AAU, 2009) indicates that harmonisation is not about ‘standardisation’ and ‘uniformity’ but acknowledges the need to conceptualise the harmonisation strategy more clearly in order better to ‘synchronise’ higher education in Africa and thereby address the capacity and quality gaps between different higher education systems. The harmonisation strategy includes a number of elements, some of them familiar from the European context – a continental framework for qualifications, a credit accumulation and transfer scheme, common benchmarks for quality, comparable admission requirements and a rating system for African universities (Hoosen et al., 2009).

As in the Bologna Process, there is an emphasis on QA as a means of overcoming differences in national higher education systems and within HEIs, facilitating the production of graduates with the requisite social and economic competencies, and facilitating mobility. The last decade has seen a proliferation of QA agencies in more than a third of African countries (Materu, 2007). This development may not be a direct result of the initiatives of the harmonisation project but indicates the growing expectations of QA in the further development of higher education in Africa. There are, as can be imagined, huge differences in the systems and methodologies, human and financial resources, and the functional effectiveness and impacts of

these emerging QA structures. In many instances, the emphasis has been primarily on the construction of an evaluation architecture (also a point of critique in the Bologna Process) with policy frameworks and systems which use a language of quality outcomes but with little public investment in improving institutional capacity to deliver those outcomes, especially in a context of rapidly escalating enrolments. The harmonisation process is still in its very early stages but there are many concerns about the availability of resourcing for the project as well as sufficiency of political will and managerial capacity to ensure that regional co-ordinating structures can move the project forward in a planned and comprehensive way (AAU, 2009). One clear drawback in relation to the quality-related objectives of the harmonisation project is the absence of a common QA reference point like the ESG has been in European QA. Nevertheless, the perception of the Bologna model as a persuasive change and development paradigm for African higher education, reinforced by initiatives like the Tuning Africa project of the European Commission (2011), is an indication of the power of the geopolitical ambitions of Europe to make its presence felt in Africa through “soft power” strategies of collaboration, exchange, support for development and trust-building (EUA White Paper, 2010).

If the AU harmonisation strategy is about emulation and drawing on what appears to be a valuable approach in European QA, recent developments in other places point in the direction of a radical shift in paradigm. In Australia for instance, the federal government is replacing all existing federal and state level QA and accreditation structures and systems for higher education and vocational education with a centralised regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), which is described as a ‘new generation’ regulator<sup>2</sup>. Among the bodies whose mandates were terminated is the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) which was responsible for quality audits of all Australian universities. The new system would require the registration and evaluation of HEIs against a single standards framework which stipulates standards for providers, qualifications, teaching and learning, research and information. The goal is to ensure greater levels of national consistency in respect of outcomes (linked to the 2011 revision of the Australian Qualifications Framework for the same reason). This appears to be premised on the view that the diversity of QA at state- and federal-level approaches has been inefficient. All HEIs will be subject to risk-based QA which will end regular cyclical audits but allow for a review at any time of any aspect of an institution’s operations to assess its quality levels and judge whether it is meeting set threshold standards. Risk profiles will map an institution’s history and record of compliance with state and federal laws and its potential risk of future non-compliance. The system is still evolving and its full range of implications for re-shaping the parameters of accountability remains unclear. But the discourse of change signals a further loss of power from universities to a centralising state which is invoking the language of compliance and sanctions for non-compliance, a continuing reliance on industry models in higher education in the form of “risk-based regulation” (King, 2011), and the ambivalent use of peer review within what appears to be a more inspectorial model.

There are similar developments in the UK. The 2011 White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System*<sup>3</sup> proposes a new regulatory regime to protect standards and quality, in order to make HEIs more accountable to students on teaching quality. It also invokes the notion of risk-based QA, where risk profiles will be developed for all HEIs, and regular cyclical QA for all institutions will be replaced by targeted inspections within a longer cycle, ostensibly reducing regulation and bureaucracy for universities. The OECD’s Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO)<sup>4</sup> initiative is still evolving. Although the currently available subject knowledge documents are complex and sophisticated, the challenge will lie in producing comparable contextual translations of the proposed competencies into curricula, assessment systems, pedagogic styles and strategies as well as in finding appropriate measures to capture in student surveys institutional performance in delivering on those competencies. The AHELO project, when rolled out after its current trial period, is also likely to put greater pressure on QA systems to move towards the use of more quantitative systems for the measurement of student learning outcomes and institutional performance. The shift in paradigm appears to be moving quality assurance towards stronger measures for performance regulation, monitoring and reporting against set standards. It may in reality be a move away from QA as currently undertaken in many higher education systems. Is it likely that in such a paradigm, the rationale and language of quality improvement may all but vanish? It may also be the case that rendering the relationship of student to higher education institution as one of consumer to supplier may make the notion of quality improvement through dialogic engagement with academic peers and other stakeholders into an approach that is viewed as insufficiently ‘robust’ and therefore inefficient.

<sup>2</sup> [www.teqsa.gov.au](http://www.teqsa.gov.au)

<sup>3</sup> [www.bis.gov.uk](http://www.bis.gov.uk)

<sup>4</sup> [www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo](http://www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo)

## Looking ahead

Changes in QA regimes are usually premised on policy changes in higher education or in broader shifts in social policy and are accompanied by new rationales and purposes for QA. A look at policy discourses on QA over the last two decades reflects the many reconfigurations of higher education policy and the accompanying shifts in the regulatory regimes for higher education accountability. What is clear are the ways in which the purposes of QA keep growing not only in number but also in ideological direction. From a study of 40 universities in 15 countries in 1997, Brennan and Shah identified seven purposes for QA:

to ensure accountability for the use of public funds, to improve the quality of higher education provision, to stimulate competitiveness between institutions, to check the quality of new institutions, to assign institutional status, especially in diversified systems, to transfer authority from the state to institutions, to make international comparisons (1997, pp. 158).

A decade and a half later, the list of purposes has grown, with some additions coming from developments in European higher education and QA. QA is now expected to facilitate mobility; to facilitate regional integration as well regional attractiveness (Bologna agenda) and regional competitiveness (Lisbon agenda); to facilitate market democracy through being a consumer information tool; and to help manage risk and provide protection to the users of higher education, especially students and employers. The ESG stress that quality improvement is only one among multiple purposes for QA. Can it compete in a contestation with a variety of political and economic imperatives whose accountability demands appear to be easier to measure, monitor and regulate? The impact of the current economic crisis may very well be less policy interest in and less money for a more dialogic and developmental approach. Tighter regulation of institutional performance in delivering to consumer markets may become a more compelling option for policy makers.

What are the implications of an emergence of compliance-driven regulatory regimes for European QA? It would be too simplistic to think of QA regimes in a sharply contrasting black and white picture of “soft power” versus “hard power” forms of QA. It could even be argued that the ESG, depending on what emphases are chosen in contextual interpretations and applications of the text, could accommodate both “hard” and “soft power” tendencies. Nevertheless, the indicative trends point to a hardening of QA in the direction of regulation, a move from a regime which at least included the notion of quality improvement based on collegial engagement and recommendations to a regime requiring judgements of compliance against set standards. The move to an outcomes regime measured against stipulated criteria may make QA less about the interpretations and judgements of peers and more about a bureaucratic checking of compliance. It is also not clear that a more tightly regulated outcomes regime in QA will get us any closer to achieving the aspired-for quality in student learning than a “soft power” approach.

The shift to a more centralised and compliance-driven system in QA is a salutary reminder that QA regimes continue to be arenas of struggle over power and values (Brennan and Singh, 2011). What are the implications of such a paradigm shift for the idea of building trust among different stakeholders? In 1996, Martin Trow pointed out that “... accountability is an alternative to trust; and efforts to strengthen it usually involve parallel efforts to weaken trust” (1996, pp. 311). This may well apply to the current situation in the policy move beyond some of the remaining rituals of trust to a further hardening of accountability measures in quality assurance. The institutionalisation of a compliance-based QA approach is difficult to reconcile with a collaborative stakeholder model which is premised on a common commitment to quality improvement. The element of coercion in a more overt regulatory regime is likely to alter the power dynamics in the relationships among collaborating partners. The possibility of building trust within a stakeholder model is more likely to be sustained by an approach that encapsulates the values and rationales of “soft power” QA. It is also the approach which is most likely to appeal to many academics and make them into more willing partners in a pact for quality assurance and quality improvement. A decisive challenge in European QA will be to ensure that ‘next generation’ versions of the ESG do not end up having as one of their foundational principles a position which is often ascribed to Lenin in the saying that “trust is good but control is better.”

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# Implementing quality assurance in doctoral education – a snapshot

By Thomas Ekman Jørgensen<sup>5</sup>

## Introduction: Doctoral education in the EHEA and the ERA

Doctoral education occupies a special place between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA). It was included rather late in the Bologna Process as the third cycle in 2003, and the discussion and implementation of reforms had a slow start. Despite developments in individual countries (such as the Netherlands and Denmark) in the 1990s, the overall findings on doctoral education in the *TRENDS IV* report of 2005 were that implementing the Bologna Process in the first two cycles was so demanding that reforms in doctoral education were not a priority at this time (Reichert & Tach, 2005, pp. 35). This was to change very soon, however. In 2005, ten basic principles for doctoral education, the Salzburg Principles, were agreed upon at a Bologna Seminar in Salzburg, and went on to become the foundation of a rapid reform process across Europe.

The Salzburg Principles first and foremost underline that the “core component of doctoral training is the advancement of knowledge through original research”, and they went on to emphasise the need to embed this training through research in institutional strategies, while taking an institutional responsibility for doctoral education (Bologna, 2005). Though included in the Bologna Process, doctoral education remained closely related to the practice of research.

As part of the strategy of the EU to increase the research capacity of the Union either, as in the Lisbon Strategy, to make Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy”, or in Europe 2020, to create “smart, sustainable, inclusive growth”, doctoral education has been increasingly prominent in the development of the European Research Area. The quality of doctoral training is thus explicitly mentioned as a commitment in the European Commission’s Innovation Union communication (European Commission, 2010, pp. 11).

This double aspect of doctoral education as both education and research has profound consequences for establishing quality assurance systems suitable for enhancing accountability and quality. The notion of quality in doctoral education must encompass research capacity as well as adequate structures to use this capacity for research training.

## The rise of the doctoral school

From the point of view of universities, by definition the providers of doctoral education, reforms have been radical and rapid. Indeed, the *TRENDS V* report from 2007 (only two years after having concluded that implementation of the third cycle stood in the shadow of the first two cycles) concluded that “Even if nothing else were happening in European higher education the speed of change within doctoral education would amount to a mini revolution” (Crosier *et al.*, 2007, pp. 26).

The main feature of this ‘mini revolution’ has been the rise of the doctoral school. Universities have established stand-alone institutional structures, doctoral schools, dedicated to the provision of doctoral education as a means to assume institutional responsibility. In *TRENDS 2010*, 65% of the respondents claimed to have at least one doctoral school (Sursock & Smidt, 2010, pp. 43). The term doctoral school, however, covers a wide range of structures. In some cases, the doctoral school covers one doctoral programme and is mostly concerned with the management of a handful of doctoral candidates. In other instances, doctoral schools are central units that deal with the overall administration of doctoral education for the whole university. Other times again, they are central, but rather exclusive units, where doctoral

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candidates can apply to have access to additional services such as transferable skills training or career advice. However, the unifying feature of the doctoral schools is the task to introduce professional management and transparent structures to an area that has traditionally been governed by personal master-apprentice relationships between professors and doctoral candidates. It is this institutionalisation, or de-personalisation, of doctoral education that is often at the heart of the reforms. It does not mean that there is no longer a close relationship between supervisor and supervisee, but the relationship is increasingly becoming a contractual one that takes place within an institutional structure.

In 2010, the Salzburg II Recommendations were launched as an attempt to gather the experience of the reforms and enhance the original basic principles with concrete recommendations from Europe's universities. These recommendations were articulated through consultations with universities engaged in reforms of doctoral education, and they were confirmed at the Annual Meeting of the EUA Council for Doctoral Education (the largest and most comprehensive European organisation for doctoral education) by 220 participants representing 165 institutions from 36 countries. The document was later unanimously adopted by the EUA Council, consisting of the European national rectors' conferences. These recommendations confirm and emphasise the research base of doctoral education and insist on keeping research as the guiding principle for establishing institutional structures. Hence, concerning quality assurance in doctoral education, Salzburg II recommends that institutions develop

**specific systems for quality assurance in doctoral education ... linked to the institutional research strategy.** For this reason, there is a strong link between the assessment of the research of the institution and the assessment of the research environments that form the basis of doctoral education (EUA, 2010).

The crux of quality assurance in doctoral education is to be able to encompass both research and the institution's ability to translate high-quality research into high-quality research training.

## The ARDE survey – a snapshot of a moving landscape

Despite these reforms, the issue of quality assurance in doctoral education has not been discussed very much in the European context. Some interesting, but disparate, cases were presented at the ENQA Workshop on Quality Assurance and Postgraduate Education in Brasov, Romania, in March 2009 (ENQA, 2010). These examples demonstrated that there have been national and institutional attempts to deal with the issue. However, there was, and is, a noticeable lack of comparisons in the doctoral education context of quality assurance environments and institutional implementation. As quality assurance in a cycle based on original research must use different methodologies than those in the cycles based on teaching, such comparisons seem essential. For this reason, EUA launched the ARDE (Accountable Research Environments for Doctoral Education)<sup>6</sup> project in 2010, a primary aim of which was to conduct a survey in spring 2011 on quality assurance in doctoral education in European universities.

The survey results give an impression of the landscape of European quality assurance in the context of doctoral education; it covers 112 institutions from 32 countries with a bias towards bigger, research intensive universities and a very large UK sample (22 respondents). The results should thus be taken as indicative of what seems to be happening, but not as a complete picture. A blurred snapshot seems to be the most fitting metaphor, as one feature of the results is the high number of institutions engaged in reforming one or more aspects of doctoral education.

The survey contains questions relating to six different areas: admissions, registration, monitoring, involvement of doctoral candidates in governance, awarding the doctorate and supervision. For each of these areas, the question was asked as to whether the institution had concrete intentions to engage in reform. Only 33% of the institutions were not engaged in reforms in any of the areas, and almost 40% of the

<sup>6</sup> The ARDE project is managed by a consortium consisting of EUA, CRASP (Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland), Universities Austria and University College Cork; it is supported by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme.

respondents were engaged in reforming two or more areas. These findings correspond well to the general impression from EUA member institutions, particularly as seen through the work of the Council for Doctoral Education (CDE), that universities remain engaged in very thorough reforms. There is also an indication that new legal frameworks affecting doctoral education in several countries (Spain, Romania, Lithuania) are stimulating further change (although this was not explicitly asked about in the survey).

Answers regarding doctoral education in the national quality assurance frameworks contain two striking features: firstly, about half the respondents answered that their national framework was built on programme accreditation, but only 70% of these responded that programme accreditation also applied to doctoral programmes<sup>7</sup>. It would seem that a sizable minority of systems with external programme accreditation is not concerned with doctoral education. Secondly, 65% responded that their countries had national research assessments that explicitly refer to doctoral programmes, and almost all responded that assessments related to external funding explicitly mentioned doctoral programmes. Consequently, several institutions seem to find themselves with multiple external assessments of their doctoral programmes, reflecting the double nature of doctoral education as education (included in the national QA systems) and research (included in research assessments and competitive funding schemes).

In terms of internal quality assurance, the overall picture was one of rather sophisticated procedures to manage the specific requirements of doctoral education, much in line with the Salzburg II Recommendations. In the six areas mentioned above, only a few institutions had not established procedures that would allow them to take institutional responsibility for areas that until a short time ago were completely governed by the personal master-apprentice relationship.

## Establishing QA procedures

Questions regarding the kind of procedures, if any, that had been established in universities (whether the procedures were fixed, being reformed, or soon to be reformed) were aimed at the institutional level. Universities were asked if they had written rules or guidelines relating to each of the six aforementioned areas and we could therefore get a clear idea how far doctoral candidates were embedded in institutional structures and whether arbitrary decision-making seemed prevalent. The overall impression garnered from the survey results was rather positive and signals a welcome move away from the traditionally weak role of the institution in the master-apprentice system of doctoral education.

Almost all respondents had institutional admissions procedures with written regulations, and institutionalised admissions committees were quite common.

A surprisingly large number of respondents had data collection systems to monitor the number of doctoral candidates (83% registered at admission, and 68% re-registered at regular intervals) – challenging the widespread myth that universities do not know how many doctoral candidates they have.

75% of the respondents had written regulations or guidelines for supervision, making the relationship between supervisor(s) and supervisee more contractual and transparent. Importantly, such rules and guidelines also have the potential to make the relationships, rights and responsibilities, between institution and supervisor and institution and supervisee more transparent.

91% of respondents claimed to monitor the progress of doctoral candidates systematically, mostly through written progress reports and milestones such as handing in papers at specific times.

Doctoral candidates were often part of the institutional governance with 78% responding that they were formally represented with voting rights in decision-making bodies. However, only 59% of institutions claimed to offer doctoral candidates the right to appeal academic decisions, somewhat worrying when considering the gravity of, for instance, failing the thesis. The direct participation of doctoral candidates in establishing procedures was also not optimal at only 50%.

<sup>7</sup> Some uncertainty existed here, as different respondents from the same country gave different answers.

With very few exceptions, the thesis is evaluated by a committee established by the doctoral school or an academic body and contains external members.

Concerning career services, the picture is somewhat mixed. This is a fairly new addition to the provision of doctoral education in many universities. As careers of doctorate holders are becoming increasingly diverse with approximately half of graduates leaving academia, many institutions have established different kinds of career development services, notably transferable skills training, as part of their doctoral programmes within the last 5-10 years. Even though almost 80% claim to have these services, only about half of these claim to monitor the quality systematically. Moreover, a good part of these only monitor the satisfaction of doctoral candidates with, for instance, transferable skills courses, but not their actual added value. Tracking of graduates' careers is also rather underdeveloped with only 12 respondents in total tracking graduates three years after graduation, and thus neglecting the crucial phase after an eventual postdoc.

The overall picture concerning procedures, however, is one of institutions having established – if not fully developed systems – solid foundations for quality assurance of their doctoral education. Even considering that the respondents of the ARDE survey are probably an 'elite' group that are proud to show their progress in this area, it is clear that universities have developed and are developing a range of promising practices concerning the practical implementation of quality assurance procedures for doctoral education.

## Using indicators

The survey also asked about the use of indicators in three different contexts:

1. external evaluations of departments or disciplines,
2. external evaluations of doctoral programmes, and
3. internal evaluations of doctoral programmes.

The comparison between the three types of assessment reveals some interesting similarities and differences.

External evaluations of disciplines and departments use bibliographical indicators (81%)<sup>8</sup> and staff qualifications (63%), which is unsurprising as such evaluations would more often than not have at least a component of research evaluation. However, these evaluations apparently also take into consideration completion rates just as often as they look at scientific publications. This is surprising, as other indicators related to what could be regarded as the more structural qualities of doctoral education such as time to degree (38%), satisfaction of doctoral candidates (27%) and careers of doctoral holders (22%) were not used as often.

External evaluations of doctoral programmes, in many cases programme accreditation, were markedly less concerned with some of the research-related indicators; 69% looked at scientific publications, quite a bit lower than for external evaluations of disciplines or departments as well as for internal programme evaluations. The same applies to the level of competitive funding (31% as opposed to 50% and 47%). Conversely, external evaluations of doctoral programmes were much more consistent in terms of their interest in efficiency-related indicators such as time to degree (63%), completion rates (69%) and satisfaction of doctoral candidates (50%). Generally, the results from these evaluations showed a much more even use of indicators without the big differences found in the other two other types of evaluations, where almost everyone would use one kind of indicator and very few another. One interpretation could be that external programme accreditations are quite different across Europe, and that there is less uniformity in the priorities of the evaluations, giving a less clear-cut picture.

<sup>8</sup> The following percentages are of the number of respondents that stated that indicators were used, not of the total number of respondents. This is because the point made here is about the relative distribution within this group, not about the use of indicators in the whole group.

Internal evaluations show the interesting feature that they use both research-related indicators and efficiency-oriented features very frequently. The use of indicators such as scientific publications, staff qualifications, and competitive funding match the figures for external evaluations of disciplines or programmes, while they are significantly higher for time to degree, completion rate and satisfaction of doctoral candidates (respectively 80%, 77% and 61%). The indicators reputation and impact on society are predictably relatively low, as these are data that would be difficult to gather for individual institutions.

Overall, one preliminary conclusion to be drawn from the use of indicators in different types of evaluations is that institutions themselves seem to be well aware of the need to monitor both the quality of structures and procedures as well as the research capacity behind the doctoral programme. While this double aspect of doctoral education is not absent in the other two types of evaluations, the evaluation of disciplines and departments is (unsurprisingly) more research-oriented; the reason for the unclear profile of the external programme evaluation would be very interesting to know, but cannot be answered from the sample represented in the survey.

## Conclusion and outlook

Even if the survey is a blurred snapshot of what is happening in Europe's universities, it does seem clear that quality assurance procedures are being established on the institutional and national level in Europe as a part of the general reforms of doctoral education, and it would seem that these take the double nature of doctoral education into consideration.

Good practices do exist, but they do not yet have much visibility and so it is challenging to commence a Europe-wide discussion on how to implement procedures. There is also a need to see these reforms in the context of the national quality assurance and research assessment frameworks in order to understand how different systems affect doctoral education.

Particularly in relation to external accreditation of doctoral programmes, the survey indicates a lesser degree of methodological coherence than other forms of assessment. It would be beneficial to use the existing good practices to raise a methodological debate, should this indication be confirmed.

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# Quality assurance in comparison: Austria, Germany, Finland, United Kingdom, the United States of America and Canada

By Andrea Bernhard<sup>9</sup>

## Background<sup>10</sup>

Over the last few decades the higher education sector has undergone rapid changes. Many of them have had a tremendous impact on the quality of teaching, learning and research, as well as on the management of higher education. A quality assurance system should be able to guarantee transparency and reliability of higher education institutions; and consequently, quality assurance agencies have been set up all over the world, often using different approaches. A variety of country reports and comparative research projects on higher education issues has already been carried out, but future scenarios and possible solutions to help establish national quality assurance systems are lacking. This study seeks both to create a new understanding of existing issues and to identify new and emerging issues in the area of quality assurance in higher education. The aim is to investigate past and present higher education reforms concerning quality assurance issues within selected national higher education systems. Therefore, the study applies a multiple holistic case-study design to gain a comprehensive understanding of these changes and transformations in higher education systems (i.e. massification, diversification, privatisation, internationalisation) and considers their implications for the quality of teaching and learning, research and administration at system level (nationally and internationally).

## Research design

The main focus is on the challenges and developments within quality assurance in higher education in the following six countries: Austria, Germany, Finland, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Canada. The selection of these countries was based on a sample of European countries – two German-speaking countries, one Nordic country and the United Kingdom as European leaders in quality in research. These European countries are compared to the forerunner in terms of accreditation, the United States, which sits next to the highly diversified Canadian system. The following research question underlies this PhD study: *What are the further developments of the respective higher education systems and how will quality assurance emerge successfully in an international higher education area?*

The theoretical basis for this research question is the different transformation processes within the higher education sector – massification, diversification, privatisation and internationalisation – that affect the quality of higher education in particular ways. The focus is on quality assurance: the main concepts in terms of a functioning quality assurance system, with critical remarks on and the international dimension of quality assurance in higher education. The framework was based on comprehensive international research and an analysis of prevailing quality assurance mechanisms. The research consisted of traditional literature analysis and internet search as well as practical work with a quality assurance agency and attendance at national and international conferences and workshops on quality assurance issues.

The empirical part investigated the quality assurance policies of six OECD countries to exemplify the ongoing trends and changes through descriptive country reports and expert interviews. The study applied analytical research of higher education literature (desk research) and expert interviews based on a written questionnaire with open questions. The data investigated consists of a huge amount of literature on higher education and quality assurance, in particular, various interviews and statistical data.

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<sup>10</sup> This article is a short summary of the author's PhD thesis which has been published: Bernhard, A., 2012, *Quality Assurance in an International Higher Education Area. A Case Study Approach and Comparative Analysis* (Wiesbaden, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften). A longer summary will be published in The Journal of EAIR "Tertiary Education and Management" in 2012.

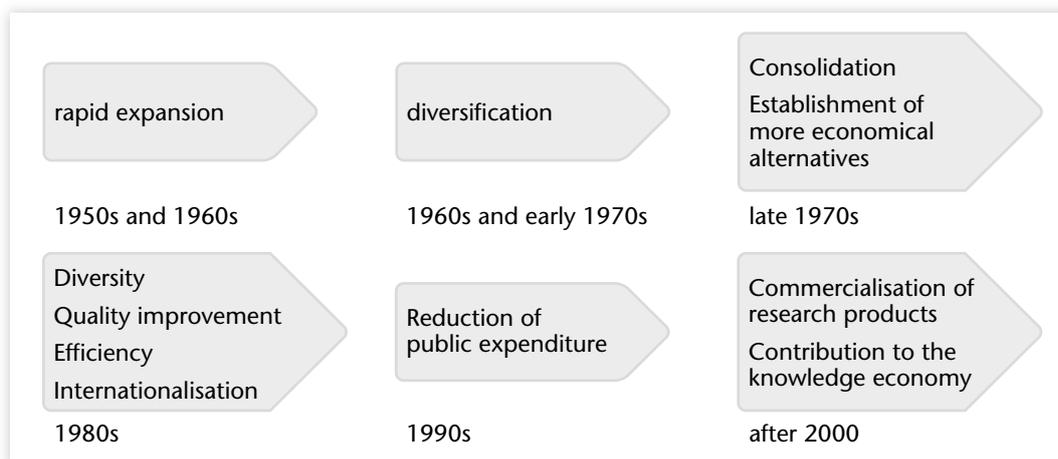
The country reports were compiled on the basis of secondary analysis of the professional literature, reviews of national legislation and policy as well as content analysis of professional discourse in recognised journals and conferences in the field of higher education/quality assurance. These reports were reviewed by national experts and adapted in the light of their comments. To go beyond the country reports, written questionnaires provided a more internal perspective from within each higher education system. The interviewees selected were experts from the different national and international stakeholders in higher education/quality assurance. Their selection was based on their expertise in quality assurance and on their nature of involvement in quality assurance: representatives from ministries, quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions and student unions. Perspectives from international organisations and well-known researchers were gathered alongside national perspectives, to gain a deeper insight in this complex field of research.

Finally, a comparison was based on the country reports and the expert interviews which round off this empirical research. These different approaches produced a broad set of findings, but can only be a snapshot of the reality as higher education is under continuous transformation. Based on these findings useful recommendations have been formulated to support policy makers, higher education staff (administrators and researchers), quality assurance agencies, international organisations as well as other stakeholders who are involved in the field of quality assurance to help them understand different quality assurance systems and approaches and to judge upcoming challenges of the observed countries and beyond their borders.

## Higher education under transformation

Transformation processes in higher education are mainly based on the concepts of massification, diversification, privatisation and internationalisation. These transitions show varying dynamics and affect the quality of higher education in specific ways. The following figure shows the different phases of higher education developments over the last 60 years.

**Figure 1. Phases of higher education developments (Bernhard, 2009, p. 16)**



Diversification and market-type mechanisms are the leading pressures in the move towards a knowledge-based economy. In these times of mass higher education with its enormous growth in student numbers or numbers of higher education providers, the need to assure quality (external examiners, audits, subject reviews, benchmark statements etc.) is obvious but it is not clear if quality assurance leads to the maintenance of quality and standards in such enlarged and diversified higher education systems (Brennan, 2004, pp. 22). Although the concept of quality plays a crucial role in the field of higher education there is no universally valid and generally accepted definition for this term. A heuristic and quite pragmatic framework by Harvey and Green (1993) considers that quality can be seen variously as *excellence*, *transformation*, *fitness for purpose*, *value for money* or as *perfection*. To create a functioning quality assurance system Tremblay (2008, pp. 63-64) recommends some practical arrangements: "Avoid fragmentation of the quality assurance organisational structure; Avoid excessive costs and burdens; Improve quality information base; Improve information dissemination".

Following these suggestions, current quality assurance systems, which vary among countries in their scope and emphasis, can be improved. Above all account should be taken of the often-stated problem that quality assurance seems to imply endless bureaucracy and interferes with the primary activities of the institution (Middlehurst, 2001). However, quality assurance systems have to be developed to allow higher education institutions to adapt to the ongoing transformation processes.

## Comparison of the case studies

The PhD thesis concentrates on examples from selected OECD countries to highlight their individual approach to quality assurance within constantly ongoing changes. Although quality assurance systems around the world are very varied, there is a need (and a willingness) to cooperate between them, while retaining the elements which reflect each country's individuality. Thus, the main interest is on system development in each country, challenges as well as problems. This paper does not concentrate on the different national characteristics but on the comparative perspectives divided into the following three levels:

1. **International Perspectives:** the dimensions of the expert interviews within an international context, providing a macro perspective on the six country cases.
2. **National Key Actors and Elements:** a table with main findings of the descriptive reports of the country cases.
3. **National Perspectives:** the dimensions of the expert interviews with national representatives, emphasising a comparative approach across these six countries.

1. Regarding the **international perspectives**, the experts identified a number of important aspects, e.g. the growing complexity of cross-border education, the increased importance of trust and transparency (*degree mills*), a shift towards institutional approaches, the need to involve all stakeholders (especially students) in quality assurance procedures, the orientation towards learning outcomes, the increased importance of the labour market as well as the need for increased financial resources and a greater cost-effectiveness in quality assurance systems. The experts' plea can be summed up as follows: a path beyond bureaucracy to establish a living quality culture.

2. The six countries observed have each found their individual pathways through various pressures and challenges on their systems, and it is not possible to make a consistent comparison between differences and similarities at system level. It is more appropriate to look at selected indicators to see how each country has solved common problems. A table of main findings illustrates the **national key actors and elements** of the respective quality assurance system based on descriptive country reports (Bernhard, 2012, pp. 235-236).

3. The **national perspectives** out of the expert interviews again highlight the differences and similarities between the observed countries. All countries are facing a number of challenges concerning quality assurance in higher education.

**AUSTRIA.** Austria's chief problem lies in dealing with its diversity of higher education institutions and the different procedures required to assure their quality, as well as the fact that accreditation is not compulsory for public universities. A consultation process for the establishment of a single Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation (in short: AAQA) started in autumn 2009. The currently proposed concept by the federal Ministry responsible is not completely supported by all important stakeholders: e.g. it "is seen as not sufficient to reach the intended improvements of the system" (Austrian Accreditation Council, 2009, pp. 4; my own translation) or it does not include "explicit information on the quality concept of the new organisation of quality assurance" (Fachhochschulrat, 2009, pp. 2; my own translation).

**GERMANY.** The highly diversified German higher education system has quite a long history of evaluation procedures carried out by different agencies across the country. The German quality assurance system has become much more systematic since changing to accreditation. Germany is now moving from a concentration on programme accreditation towards a process in which the quality assurance systems of institutions themselves are accredited, in order to reduce the workload involved. This type of system

accreditation would cover all programmes which have been approved under the institution's own quality assurance system. This shift towards system accreditation is based on the *Criteria for System Accreditation and General Rules for Carrying Out System Accreditation Procedures* and began in 2007, although the difference vis-à-vis programme accreditation is not that clear and there is no "construction plan for a European quality assurance system" (Greisler, 2009; my own translation).

**FINLAND.** Finland shifted towards audit procedures by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC: first audit cycle completed by 2011). This new system will become more international in the future. The new University Act, like the Polytechnic Act, no longer mentions FINHEEC and higher education institutions are free to choose any international organisation to perform a quality assurance external audit. Despite the important assisting role of FINHEEC in developing higher education and quality assurance systems, the primary responsibility for all aspects of quality rests with the higher education institutions themselves (FINHEEC, 2010, pp. 16-17).

**UNITED KINGDOM.** The UK has a rather complex system with differences between England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. While e.g. Scotland is trying to become enhancement-led, to encourage a culture of continual improvement, a consultative document on *The Future Arrangements for Quality Assurance in England and Northern Ireland* (HEFCE, 2009) is at the centre of the debate in those countries. England is also changing to audit and seeks more transparency, flexibility and student-centred information (Brown, 2010). The long-standing *Research Assessment Exercise* (RAE) is also shifting to a newly adapted approach of *Research Excellence Framework* (REF).

**UNITED STATES.** In the U.S. a system of *Accreditation 2.0* was recommended by a Commission appointed by the Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, in 2006 and is characterised by six key elements (Eaton, 2010):

- Community-driven, shared general education outcomes
- Common practices to address transparency
- Robust peer review
- Enhanced efficiency of quality improvement efforts
- Diversification of the ownership of accreditation
- Alternative financing models for accreditation.

The U.S. is facing a "growing demand for increased accountability (...) reduced funding and rising costs and pressures to find more cost-effective solutions in every aspect of higher education (...) changing structure and delivery of higher education (...) new types of educational institutions and the use of distance learning" (Schray, 2006, pp. 1-2). The multiple regional accrediting bodies have to consider these changes (Eaton, 2007, pp. 13) and the need for open standards and processes, consistency and transparency (Schray, 2006, pp. 1-2).

**CANADA.** The Canadian system is also highly complex with different jurisdictions and types of institutions. The need for a more national quality assurance policy (Schuetze, 2008, pp. 115-116) to have "a clear and common understanding of the future directions and top priorities of its post-secondary education (PSE) sector" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009, p. 4) has been under discussion for the last few years and consequently a *Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education* in Canada was issued in 2007. Nonetheless, it "is too early to say, however, whether or not the provinces will respect this policy and adapt their provincial rules and mechanisms accordingly" (Schuetze, 2008, pp. 123). But if "provincial and territorial jurisdictions choose to implement these standards of quality assurance, they will have considerable latitude in designing processes that address their needs" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009, pp. 27).

All countries are challenged by the ongoing reforms. In part these reforms are trying to establish a more comprehensive approach (e.g. Austria, Canada, U.S.); in part to establish a new approach to quality assurance (audit procedures in Austria, Germany, Finland and the UK). In all cases the motor for change lies in the reduction of bureaucracy and of the complexity inherent in the process. Discussions are still going on whether the process is suitable and effective for the individual system – and this applies whether the reforms are complete or only under way. Furthermore, the experts emphasise the importance of internationalisation, and see the growing need for comparability, mobility, cooperation and transparency within and through quality assurance in higher education. Quality assurance is an essential tool to operate at international level, especially because of the growing market-orientation and entrepreneurial attitude of higher education.

## Recommendations for the future

These six case studies have exemplified the ongoing trends within quality assurance systems through descriptive country reports and expert interviews. The results of this study show that the higher education systems observed are undergoing transformation, and that they take great care to place and improve their own quality assurance systems within an international higher education area. This final chapter provides policy-relevant recommendations and guidelines derived from this analysis. The following four recommendations to create a functioning quality assurance system are derived from this research.

### Recommendation 1

Less diversification within a higher education sector at system, institutional and programme level would enhance the establishment of a functioning quality assurance system. Specificities and innovative solutions for a national higher education system should be sustained and supported, though too much complexity within a system can also be a hindering factor. The different country cases with their individual quality assurance systems should find a balance between *over-diversification* and *over-homogenisation* (Teichler, 2007). For all the countries comparability both internally and with other national systems is needed, and common procedures, standards, profiles or results are necessary especially within more decentralised systems.

### Recommendation 2

Higher education should be made more comparable and transparent through “detailed and reliable information on the quality of individual study programmes, faculties and higher education institutions” (ENQA, 2009). Innovative transparency tools (e.g. rankings) should be developed. Higher education institutions are much more involved in rankings, benchmarking and other quality assurance procedures when their funding streams are also highly diversified and derived from different sources (e.g. tuition fees, education contracts, external funding).

### Recommendation 3

Higher education is becoming much more oriented towards the different perspectives of stakeholders. Hence, a continuing engagement of all stakeholders (especially students) in quality assurance matters, an improved awareness of all stakeholders on the expectations from quality assurance mechanisms, a greater orientation towards the impact of quality assurance (e.g. learning outcomes), common projects with different stakeholders and an exchange of know-how would be helpful. Some guiding questions for the exchange of staff and know-how on the implementation of the ESG were formulated by Marlies Leegwater (head of the Benelux 2007-2010 Bologna secretariat):

- how intercultural and international competencies are embedded in the learning outcomes of a programme and how the achieved competencies are assessed;
- how joint programmes are being, or could be, assessed;
- how the information and data on quality assessments are made public.

### Recommendation 4

There is a continuing trend towards quality assurance in an international higher education area. This international dimension within quality assurance should be supported by an exchange of staff and know-how, as well as by different innovative solutions, e.g. through international quality assurance projects. Higher education across borders is a promising path to enhance the quality of higher education and therefore needs common standards on an international level. To increase international comparability of quality assurance common frameworks are needed (good examples: OECD/UNESCO Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education, European Standards and Guidelines, European Quality Assurance Register, international rankings, benchmarking projects).

In that sense a

diverse, stratified, hierarchical (possibly 'joined-up') system of higher education seems the most realistic (and likely) response to the steady globalisation of research and teaching in higher education, and the most likely product of the changing relationship between the state and the market in its delivery (Tapper & Palfreyman, 2004, pp. 4).

Of course, there is no one single approved solution as to which way would be more suitable for all countries. The different national approaches show that all countries are trying to follow their national specificities and international developments at the same time. All countries aim to increase international cooperation in order to attract more students from abroad, and in this way to generate more income, emphasising their respective national approaches on delivering higher education and undertaking scientific research. Thus, quality assurance systems should be better prepared for an international higher education area that is increasingly market-oriented and competitive to generate different sources of income. During a financial crisis the funding of higher education is affected; higher education institutions must secure high quality and an appropriate income to be able to compete with other providers in this increasingly diversified higher education area. Institutions which react more effectively to the pressures induced by a decline in income and by the competition between institutions for the best students will probably have a functioning quality assurance system that is able to face the challenges of the upcoming decades.

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## II. Quality and trust

### Putting quality at the centre of quality assurance – Where is the centre?

Keynote address given at EQAF, Antwerp, 18 November 2011

By Marion Coy<sup>11</sup>

*“In throwing out the bad answers, we have forgotten the good questions. I want to put the good questions back on the table”.*

*(Tony Judt)*

The American poet, Mark Doty wrote, “The making of knowledge is a much larger and more unbalancing thing than the marshaling of mere facts”. In considering the nature of quality assurance, its purposes and the challenges involved, Doty’s words have a particular applicability. Much of the unease about and distrust of quality assurance arises from a misrepresentation of its purpose as bureaucratic measurement of that which is easily measured. The purpose of quality assurance is the making of knowledge, the utilisation of that knowledge to assist our understanding of the purposes of higher education and the improvement of its outcomes.

The challenge then confronting those in higher education is the development of a robust system of knowledge generation which will both examine the merits and failings of current policy and behaviours and provide indications on what change will most assist the attainment of its purposes. However, we are already in contested spaces. The first dilemma is establishing purpose – whose purpose? Inevitably, a robust examination of purpose and behaviour will identify some failings and weaknesses. On another occasion, Doty wrote, “I grew up with the sense that to name a problem was to invite mighty trouble”. There will be rueful acknowledgement by many in higher education that “naming a problem” does indeed cause trouble. Reputational damage is a serious and costly issue in a competitive environment. How does one acknowledge failings in an environment where “blame and shame” are often the only response to legitimate attempts at robust self-analysis? Set against this is the disposition in some academic environments to reject any questioning by others of purpose or practice, an unwillingness to acknowledge any shortcomings, a defensive complacency about all aspects of performance and a conviction that external scrutiny has no place in higher education.

If we seek the centre of quality, we need to examine how the term is most widely used, understood and applied in the context of higher education. There are two widely prevailing approaches and it is often difficult to establish which view is being used in the discussions of quality assurance. One conceptualisation associates “quality” with that which is the distinctive characteristic, property or attribute of an entity. The other uses the term to refer to the relative superiority of an entity. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), while acknowledging the importance of the former, often show a distinct adherence to the latter in their behaviour. So we get mixed messages about the importance of diversity and evidence of institutional proclivity to imitate perceived models of success.

The global economic crisis has increased the level of distrust of institutions and higher education has not escaped. There is much scepticism about the robustness of self-regulation and scepticism about the efficacy of “light-touch” regulation. As HEIs favour both, there is likely to be continuing pressure for more transparency and accountability in relation to quality assurance, risk management and governance processes in higher education. Those who call for greater external evaluation do so because they are sceptical about

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the robustness of internal self-scrutiny. It is worth considering why this is so. In the first instance, there is difficulty in getting comprehensive information from HEIs and there is also unease about the absence of a framework of metrics against which to judge performance.

Quality assurance, as a process, is concerned with expectations and perceptions. There are immediate reasons to expect confusion when there is often an absence of clarity about the basis for both the expectations and the perceptions. Nor is it possible to conduct quality assurance simply on the basis of hard facts. Subjective responses to data are inevitably influenced by one's prior expectations and perception of level of congruence between expectation and perceptions. In the absence of comprehensive information, it is inevitable that subjective bias will distort the process of quality assurance. Those most sceptical about the value of quality assurance in higher education often feel that this disconnect between reality and perception is most evident in those from "outside" the system. The terminology reinforces the view that higher education in some way sits apart from its environment and raises the question of legitimate stakeholder oversight. Which stakeholders have legitimacy in relation to the conduct of quality assurance? To whom are HEIs accountable? Those who fear external oversight are concerned about issues such as autonomy, academic freedom, and the mission and purpose of higher education. The funders of national higher education systems are also concerned about the return on their investment and inevitable tension arises in relation to the development of mutually acceptable goals and the development of metrics against which to measure outcomes. David Watson summed up this debate succinctly when he wrote, "When VCs [Vice-Chancellors] are asked whether their institutions are in the public or private sector, the correct answer is yes!"

The debate about legitimate stakeholder oversight has its roots in two very different views on the purpose of quality assurance. On the one hand, there are those who believe that its purpose is to examine the alignment between an institution's self-selected goals and the processes developed to achieve these goals. This approach is predicated on a strong attachment to autonomy and in some instances, a rejection of the right of funders to influence goal selection. Those who question this approach are concerned about "fitness for purpose". The alternative position is now most evident in the development of a range of externally developed standards and metrics against which all institutions in a system are measured. The complex nature of 'standard' development inevitably leads to fears that such an approach will incentivise behaviour which will dilute the complexity of higher education's purposes. There are fears also that such an approach will drive homogenisation, discourage innovation and risk-taking and, regardless of intent, create spurious league tables.

If HEIs are to deal with the problems of misperception and unrealistic or invalid expectations, then more attention needs to be paid to the quality of information provided by institutions and to hearing the views of external stakeholders. In the recent past, two major considerations of the future of higher education have been conducted in Ireland. The first led to the publication of *A National Strategy for Higher Education in Ireland to 2030* and the second has made recommendations to the Irish government on the *Prioritisation of Research Spending*. The chairs of the two groups had a business/industry background and the composition of each group had a majority of members external to the higher education system. It is certainly worth considering why this was the preferred model adopted by government. Having served as a member of both groups, I spent a great deal of time trying to answer questions which inevitably began with the phrases such as, "What does this mean? How can we find out? Why is there no current information?" And most crucially, "Where is the evidence?" Over a period of three years many of the same concerns and misgivings surfaced. They were bewildered by what seemed to them to be archaic practices in relation to governance, human resource management, and the utilisation of information technology as a management and information tool. They were concerned about the lack of responsiveness of the system to the potential of the web and social media in teaching and learning. They repeatedly emphasised how difficult it is for business, industry and the community to interact with HEIs. They found deficits in the quality and timeliness of information provided by the institutions and were unimpressed by the lack of an evidence base for many assertions. The National Strategy Taskforce met groups of students and was troubled by the contradictions between what they had been told and what the students described. They were also concerned that, when students raised issues or problems, there was no consistent approach to dealing with the issues or to keeping the students informed about the actions taken to resolve problems.

The "external" stakeholders showed a strong disposition towards supporting equity, a commitment to developing a diverse, differentiated system, an interest in creating mechanisms to encourage innovation

and risk-taking, a strong sense of realism about the costs of higher education, a desire to enhance the performance of the system and a conviction about the importance of maintaining and improving academic standards. Both task forces wanted to see much stronger evidence-based assurance systems and both felt that there were enormous opportunities for improved interaction between HEIs and their external stakeholders. In neither task force did I see any reductionist approach to the mission and purpose of higher education. A sense of their thinking on a vision for higher education can be seen in the following statements from *The National Strategy*. Higher education in the future will “still be about people and ideas”, “it is a force for individual growth, societal progress and cultural development” “.... through education we find our place in the world”. The framers of the Strategy hoped that the experience of higher education will result in the “fostering of a spirit of enquiry and a strong sense of the value of learning”.

The issues raised by external stakeholders deserve a response. In some instances their questions arose from a lack of knowledge of the changes that have taken place in higher education over the last twenty years. Their views had been shaped by their own experiences and some of the more pervasive public commentary – much of it negative. An opportunity exists for HEIs and quality assurance agencies to address this knowledge and information deficit. But many of their concerns have legitimacy and need to be addressed. As public service organisations, HEIs cannot count on continuing public support if they fail to provide good answers to questions about purpose, process and outcomes.

In relation to enhancing quality assurance systems, my experience has led me to conclude that there is a major step to be taken in the evolution of quality assurance. To date we have been too focused on an internal perspective and there is much to be learned from regarding HEIs as one among a range of service-oriented institutions. We need to hear more of what is the experience of those who seek to interact with us. We need to provide students with an opportunity to be meaningful participants in decision-making. There are also opportunities for external stakeholders to see HEIs as a more integrated component of social and economic systems. This is evident in the EU publication on “The Transformative Power of Services Innovation”. The strategy outlined in this document indicates that, at policy level, HEIs are not always sufficiently considered as agents of change and catalysts for economic and social and personal development. In considering the EU 2020 targets in relation to employment, poverty, wealth generation, standards of educational attainment and the role of research and development, the thrust of this document is to see change and development as occurring outside higher education. There are wide-ranging opportunities for quality assurance to steer institutions and systems towards closer integration.

If we are intent on putting quality at the centre of quality assurance, we need to review the “bad answers” and frame the “good questions”. Improved engagement with external stakeholders will assist both. In addition, we need to improve the quality of information that is made available to assist assurance. Much of the unease about the value of quality assurance arises from a lack of clarity about its purpose and a perception that little changes as a result of its endeavours. HEIs have the capacity to deal with these issues but they may need some encouragement to believe that their efforts will yield worthwhile results.

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# Perceptions of quality: NOKUT's 'quality barometers for higher education' – 2010 and 2011

By Jon Haakstad<sup>12</sup>

## Introduction

Whereas Norwegian students and candidates have been regularly asked in national surveys about their experience of the quality of higher education, there has been no corresponding survey of the views of those who actually teach higher education classes: the academic staff. NOKUT's *Scientific Employees' Educational Quality Barometer 2010* was a first attempt to fill this gap. The barometer, that offers a profile of how teaching academics assess various quality and quality-determining aspects, gave rise to a storm of student comment as the survey seemed to show that teachers generally identified the abilities and efforts of the students, rather than the quality of their own teaching, as the main obstacles to high quality.

It was therefore decided to follow up the 2010 barometer with another survey in 2011, taking in a representative sample of students as well. In the 2011 version the format was slightly modified and the student survey was designed so as to 'mirror' the one for academics as closely as possible with the purpose of comparison in mind. The teachers' survey contained more questions, though, as students would have insufficient background for answering some of the questions about how institutional policies and priorities affect educational quality.

The barometers are based on answers received from around 700 teachers in accredited higher education institutions (2010 and 2011; different samples) and a corresponding number of students (2011) in electronic surveys. The size and distribution of the samples should make them reasonably representative of the whole statistical populations in terms of institutional category, academic title (academic staff), discipline area and degree level. A relatively weak return of answers from students, however (ca. 400), threatens the statistical significance of some findings in the students' barometer. The surveys were conducted in March 2010 and April/May 2011.

## The academic employees' quality barometer 2010

### Questions concerning the 'quality effect' of recent trends and reforms in Norwegian higher education

The first part of the survey contained seven questions that relate to topical issues/recent reforms in the sector, most of them part of the national 'Quality Reform' package of 2002<sup>13</sup>. The main objective of this reform, in addition to aligning the sector with the aims of the Bologna Process, was to stimulate quality development through the creation of a more dynamic sector, driven by the strategies and profiles of more autonomous and competitive institutions. The academics were asked if, or to what extent, they thought that the following changes/developments had – or would have – a beneficial effect on the general quality of higher education:

1. The introduction of *mandatory internal quality assurance systems* in the institutions as from 2004.
2. A tendency for many institutions, actively stimulated by the Ministry since 2009<sup>14</sup>, to seek *mergers or collaboration agreements* in order to strengthen discipline communities and strategic capacities.

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<sup>13</sup> The Universities and Colleges Act (2002; later revised in 2006)

<sup>14</sup> The Ministry's 'Initiative for collaboration, division of tasks and concentration of discipline resources' following the Stjernø Report (2008) that highlighted Norway's many small and vulnerable discipline communities.

3. The new opening for institutions to qualify for a higher category through *institutional accreditation*, e.g. for university colleges to become universities, with wider powers.
4. The adoption of the new *National Qualifications Framework* in 2009.

They were also asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

5. "Students' course evaluations (mandatory since 2004) provide the most reliable indication of educational quality."
6. "The state should steer the dimensioning and structuring of the higher education landscape more actively."
7. "Norwegian higher education is too weakly oriented towards the needs of occupational life."

The responses reveal widespread scepticism among teaching academics concerning the effects of these new developments. A fairly clear majority *disagreed* with the view that institutional accreditations, or institutional mergers, will act as stimulants for improved quality, thereby indicating a distance from institutional leaders who are actively looking for mergers and strategic partners. But even more interesting – and intriguing, perhaps – was the academics' lack of belief in the effects of internal quality assurance systems, one of the hubs of the Quality Reform (41-36% negative majority, with 23 neutral). Finally, there was a rather overwhelming rejection of the statement that the students' course evaluations are the best source of information about educational quality. These answer profiles clearly indicate a scepticism – or 'conservatism' – among teaching faculty towards current dynamic developments in Norwegian higher education.

The new reforms, while increasing the institutions' autonomy, also create greater 'unrest' and unpredictability. Against the background of the academics' sceptical attitudes to these changes, it may seem slightly paradoxical that an overwhelming majority rejected the suggestion that the state should steer the sector more firmly.

Two of the questions received less assured answers than the rest. More than one third of the respondents answered 'no clear opinion' when asked about the usefulness of the qualifications framework and the occupational relevance of Norwegian higher education. Still, among those who did take sides, there were noticeable majorities *against* the qualifications framework having a positive effect and *for* the view that Norwegian higher education, on the whole, is sufficiently oriented towards occupational needs. Uncertainty in the case of the qualifications framework may be due to the fact that this reform was still far from fully implemented when the survey was taken.

### Questions concerning the quality of one's 'own' provision

The second part of the questionnaire was directed towards detailed aspects of higher education provision. Rather than asking for the respondents' general assessments of the sector as a whole, which, it was feared, would produce answers which were too vague, they were asked to select a course/programme where they themselves were, or recently had been, active as teachers and to assess the quality of various aspects of this well-known provision. Taken together, their answers would present an image of the academics' 'self-evaluation' of educational quality. The respondents were given the following answering options: 'very good', 'satisfactory', 'not quite satisfactory', 'weak' and 'uncertain/do not know'. The aspects/factors to be assessed were:

1. The extent of course-relevant R&D activity among the course/programme teachers.  
(This was a descriptive question, with different, 'quantitative' answering options.)
2. Course-relevant R&D activity among the course/programme teachers
3. The correspondence between learning aims and learning processes
4. The correspondence between learning aims and the assessment of students
5. The attention paid to the students' acquisition of generic skills in the programme
6. The relevance of learning aims to occupational life.

Finally, the respondents were asked to:

7. choose three factors from a given range of nine where they believed improvement measures were most wanted in order to improve overall quality in their selected course/programme. The nine factors were: intake quality; programme design; the volume of teaching; the students' work effort; the teachers' discipline competence; the teachers' didactic competence; the assessment of students; physical infrastructure; administrative infrastructure/student services.

The answers to questions 2-6 indicate a high degree of satisfaction with the quality of their 'own' courses/programmes. Programme-relevant R&D received the highest satisfaction score with over 80% answering 'good' or 'satisfactory', which made possible some interesting comparisons with the 'factual' answers to question 1, where considerable variations were revealed! All the other aspects also came out clearly on the positive side (around 70%). It is a bit surprising, perhaps, that 'attention to generic skills' received the same positive response, considering well-known differences between disciplines and the very recent introduction of the qualifications framework. Even the question of occupational relevance, where there was much uncertainty when Norwegian higher education as a whole was assessed (see above), returned very positive answers when the teachers assessed their 'own' courses (74% 'good' or 'satisfactory'). For all these questions only very tiny percentages returned the answer "weak".

In question 7, where the academics were asked to pick three priority aspects/areas for improvement measures, three of the options stand out as being selected by far more respondents than the other six. These are (in this order): the students' work effort, the general intake quality of new students and the volume of teaching, ticked by between 70% and 45% of the respondents. By comparison, the teachers' academic and didactic competence, programme design and the assessment of students were ticked by between 33% and 23% of the sample, whereas the physical and administrative infrastructure was mentioned by under 10%. According to the majority of respondents, then, it is in such factors that lie outside the teachers' own direct influence that improvements and strengthening are most wanted: better prepared and more hard-working students and more resources. This may give an impression of academic complacency – and of shifting the responsibility elsewhere. It certainly does not signal an overwhelming concern with didactic issues. But it may also be read as a message of dissatisfaction with certain conditions under which academic teachers now have to operate: with too meagre resources for teaching, in an era of a widely expanded and more heterogeneous student population, both in terms of starting levels and work dedication. These attitudes were underlined by frequent free text comments to the effect that too much time had to be spent on internal administration and reporting and that institutional steering goes a long way towards stifling academic autonomy and initiative.

## The 2011 Quality Barometer

### Teaching staff's responses in the 2011 survey

The 2011 version had a slightly changed format, applying a consistent system of scores throughout. Respondents were asked to assess 19 different quality aspects in – or affecting – 'their' provision on a 7-grade scale, where 1-3 are degrees of 'weak/unsatisfactory', 4 is 'neutral/satisfactory' and 5-7 degrees of 'good/excellent'. Average scores were as follows, ordered from highest to lowest:

**Table 1. Teachers' appreciation of quality aspects in – or related to – 'own' provision**

Rank	Aspect	Score
1	Correspondence learning aims – degree level – curriculum	5.28
2	Teachers' average discipline and research competence	5.26
3	Description of intended learning outcomes	5.13
4	Teachers' average didactic competence	5.00
5	How student assessment covers intended learning outcomes	4.97
6	Physical learning environment, equipment, etc.	4.94
7	Academic counselling of students	4.90
8	Attention to generic skills and competences in provision	4.90
9	Cooperation among teaching group	4.73
10	Students' opportunity to learn about and be involved in R&D work	4.58
11	Administration of studies, including information to students	4.42
12	Long-term predictability in the assignment of teaching tasks	4.37
13	Academic leadership of teaching activities	4.23
14	Students' entrance skills and knowledge (intake quality)	4.21
15	Students' work effort	4.19
16	Time resources for teaching and academic counselling	4.18
17	The importance of the quality assurance system for ensuring and enhancing quality	4.15
18	The institution's stimulation of pedagogical training for teaching staff	4.07
19	Institution's stimulation of R&D work through resource allocation to teaching staff	3.96

Average scores for large numbers of respondents always tend to create a picture of only modest deviations from the middle value, which is also the case here. Still, some interesting features emerge: first of all, the general appreciation is clearly (if modestly) positive, with only one aspect scoring below the 'neutral' value. Not surprisingly, this is the question of resources for R&D work. Secondly, all the 10 highest ranked aspects can be attributed to the discipline community's own contribution. By contrast, the remaining (and lowest ranked) 9 aspects all have to do with either the institution's contribution or the students' abilities or efforts. It is also worth noticing that the survey reveals very little enthusiasm about the value of quality assurance systems.

### The students' responses in the 2011 survey

Students were asked to respond to 11 questions, applying the same scale as the teachers. Although the questions were designed so as to permit comparison with the teachers' responses, some of them had to be formulated slightly differently. The students assessed the different aspects as follows:

**Table 2. Students’ assessment of quality aspects in – or related to – ‘own’ provision**

Rank	Aspect	Score
1	Own entrance level in relation to what the course demands	5.40
2	Occupational relevance	5.15
3	Social learning environment	5.10
4	Correspondence learning aims – degree level – curriculum	4.92
5	Training/experience from R&D-like activities in course/programme	4.73
6	Training in generic skills	4.69
7	The volume of teaching	4.66
8	The average quality of teaching	4.65
9	Physical learning environment; information and administrative services	4.60
10	How tests and exams cover intended learning outcome	4.33
11	Academic counselling of students	4.32

Like their teachers, the students present a modestly positive overall picture of higher education quality, with no scores below the ‘neutral’ value and a fairly narrow gap between highest and lowest scores. It may be worth noticing that students have on average optimistic views about the occupational relevance of their chosen programme and the way it is designed. Surprising, perhaps, is the relatively high rating they give aspects like R&D-like work and training in generic skills, which makes one wonder how they understand these terms.

The format of this paper does not allow a discussion of how student satisfaction also varies with discipline area and institutional type. However, the overall figures conceal that student satisfaction varies particularly with discipline and more dramatically so than the teaching staff’s self-assessments of their provision (see below).

## Comparisons

### Teachers’ responses 2010 and 2011 compared

Comparisons between the 2010 and 2011 teacher surveys show a fairly strong consistency. Teachers in the 2011 sample, like the ones the year before, continue to rate their ‘own’ programme design, their discipline and didactic competence, their assessment of students and their academic counselling of students highest, while an area of recently increased attention like the emphasis on generic skills also gets a score in the better half. At the other end of the scale, lowest scores are given to resources for R&D, the usefulness of the internal quality assurance system, resources for teaching (affecting teaching volume), the students’ work effort and the students’ general preparedness for their chosen courses/programmes. The role played by academic leadership in relation to the quality of provision also receives a low score. The teaching staff’s inclination to ‘put the blame elsewhere’, prominent in the 2010 survey, is confirmed in 2011.

## Teachers' and students' responses (2011) compared

**Table 3. Teachers' and students' ranking of quality aspects compared**

Teachers			Students		
Aspect	Score	Rank	Aspect	Score	Rank
Correspondence aims – degree level – curriculum	5.28	1	Correspondence aims – degree level – curriculum	4.92	2
Teachers' academic and pedagogical competence (Average of two questions; ranked 2 and 4 above)	5.14	2	Quality of teaching	4.65	6
How tests and exams cover intended learning outcomes	4.97	3	How tests and exams cover intended learning outcomes	4.33	8
Academic counselling of students	4.90	4	Academic counselling of students	4.32	9
Attention to generic skills and competences	4.90	4	Attention to generic skills and competences	4.69	4
Physical learning environment, administration and services (Average of two questions, ranked 6 and 11 above)	4.68	6	Physical learning environment, administration and services	4.60	7
Students' opportunity to learn about and be involved in R&D work	4.58	7	Students' opportunity to learn about and be involved in R&D work	4.73	3
Students' skills and knowledge when entering course/programme (intake quality)	4.21	8	Students' (perception of own) skills and knowledge when entering course/programme (intake quality)	5.40	1
Resources for teaching and academic counselling (teaching volume)	4.18	9	Resources for teaching and academic counselling (teaching volume)	4.66	5

Teachers' attitudes, as shown in the 2010 survey, aroused sharp comments from students. And since the 2011 survey largely presents an unchanged picture one expects clear differences between the students' and the teachers' views. This also turns out to be the case: of the nine quality areas where more or less direct comparisons are possible, the four areas ranked highest by the teachers are ranked as 2, 6, 8 and 9 by the students. The quality of teaching is near the top in the teachers' assessments (ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>) and in the lower half with the students (ranked 6<sup>th</sup>). The greatest difference is found in the perception of students' general preparedness for the course/programme, which is ranked as no. 8, second lowest, by the teachers and as no. 1 (!) by the students, with the highest score in the entire survey. Students also have a much lower appreciation of the fitness of test/exams and of academic counselling (nos. 8 and 9, i.e. lowest) than the teachers (nos. 3 and 4). The generally positive attitude of teachers towards the quality of their own contribution is not mirrored by a similar satisfaction among the students.

## Attitudes to quality: different 'cultures'?

In both years' teacher surveys comparisons can be made between sub-categories of the sample, as divided by discipline area, type of institution or academic title. Observable differences are not dramatic but some fairly consistent patterns emerge.

There is a marked tendency for teachers in the 'old, traditional' university disciplines – humanities, mathematics/science, social sciences and medicine – to express scepticism towards the reforms most clearly (2010 survey). The same discipline areas, minus medicine, also show a relatively high degree of satisfaction with one's own provision, although the most markedly positive self-appreciation appears in business management and administration (not supported by their students!). Most reform-oriented, most 'self-critical' and seemingly most didactically-oriented, are teachers in medicine and health disciplines, followed by other professionally-oriented or 'applied' disciplines like pedagogics and teacher education, law, media and artistic disciplines. Fairly consistently, these latter disciplines also score reasonably well with the students – and particularly the provision in medical and health disciplines.

Not surprisingly, comparisons by institutional type reveal university teachers as the most 'conservative' and sceptical to reforms, while university (state) college teachers are also markedly more sceptical than their counterparts in private colleges. The latter group, on the other hand, expresses most satisfaction with their own provision, in some cases to such an extent that one must question the realism of their perception. This later feature, however, is less clear in the 2011 than in the 2010 survey.

In the 2010 survey, more consistently than in the 2011 one, a pattern also emerges following the academics' titles: reform scepticism, scepticism concerning the value of quality assurance, satisfaction with one's own provision and a tendency to select external factors as problem areas increase systematically from college teachers to assistant professors, and then to associate professors and finally full professors. Does academic 'conservatism' increase with age and position? Of course there is a considerable overlap in registered attitudes between the markers 'university', 'traditional academic disciplines' and 'associate or full professors', so it is hard to assess the role of each of them as opinion drivers.

Anyway, a picture of 'two cultures' is vaguely discernible; in this case not between humanities and science but between 'established' and 'new'; between 'pure' and 'applied'; between 'state' and 'private'. The surveys indicate that the clearest splits may run between discipline area rather than institutional type or academic title.

## Lessons for quality assurance?

The surveys confirm earlier observations<sup>15</sup> that there is widespread scepticism towards formal quality assurance systems among rank and file academic staff. This, of course, is a feature that seems to be shared throughout the European higher education area, as highlighted in Lee Harvey's paper "Twenty Years of Trying to Make Sense of Quality Assurance" (Harvey, 2011) at the previous EQAF in Lyon. What the surveys add to already established assumptions is the indication that this scepticism may not *only* be a rational protest against systems that are unfit for their purpose but *also* due to an element of withdrawal and convenience on the part of academic staff. They also demonstrate how teachers and students often have quite different perceptions of quality when assessing the provision they are engaged in and how the attitude to academic and didactic improvement may vary, albeit not dramatically, with discipline and institutional cultures.

As the qualification framework turns the quality issue more in the direction of *learning outcomes*, this implies that quality work/quality assurance must be closely related to the actual learning process, where learning outcome is 'produced'. The institutions' internal QA systems must be concerned with the way learning outcome is reached by students and identified, understood and assessed by teachers, focusing on the relationships between input factors and outcomes. As learning outcome is largely an academic, didactic and a 'local' concern, teaching faculty must be given a role as key players in the assurance and enhancement-

oriented processes. The same goes for academic leaders, for whom quality assurance at this level presents an excellent arena for practicing leadership that is truly ‘academic’, rather than ‘administrative’ or ‘strategic’. And the students, on their part, could be freed from the narrow customer satisfaction perspective that is so often reflected in questionnaires at the end of courses. By being drawn into these processes, their influence might become more interactive or ‘dynamic’ – and less purely responsive.

Not only in Norway one may observe a tendency for institutional QA systems to grow large and detailed, and to cover ever wider areas of the institutions’ total activities. Also, we see how the systems become monitoring tools for the institutions’ achievement of strategic, quantitative goals that are rather ‘external’ to the question of quality. Although all the information that the systems thus assemble may be useful and even necessary for the institutions, there are also drawbacks: for one thing, the systems may become too heavy and burdensome and, more importantly, there is a danger of losing focus. Keeping in mind the fact that the Bologna initiative in the field of quality assurance actually concerns the quality of higher *education* – and that the qualification frameworks underline just this – there may be a case now for rolling back the scope of quality assurance somewhat in order to focus on what was originally intended: *educational quality*. Of course, institutions should not be discouraged from assembling information that they need for a wide variety of purposes; rather, it is a question of highlighting and separating systematic work with educational quality from other monitoring activities that institutions must undertake.

A good thing about narrowing the focus of QA in this way is that it could make QA processes both simpler and more analytical at the same time. On the other hand, it also poses a couple of challenges: will institutions be willing to modify and focus their systems along these lines? And – most crucially – can we expect teaching academics to take a more constructive part in QA if QA processes become more didactic, i.e. more ‘academic’ and ‘closer to home’, thus disproving the seemingly reserved attitudes to didactic and quality assurance issues that the surveys may indicate?

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# Experiences gained from the implementation of quality management processes at a Greek higher education institution

## Cultural, organisational and stakeholder issues

By P. Ipsilantis<sup>16</sup>, N. Batis, D. Kantas, I. Papadopoulos, P. Trivellas<sup>17</sup>

### Introduction

The changes that affected higher education in the last decade resulted in two main European policies: the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy, setting the Modernisation Agenda for Universities. These policies have had a tremendous impact on national policies regarding the role of HEIs, the sizing of institutions and the whole HE sector, institutional differentiation, public funding, autonomy, and, in principle, the quality in teaching and research. The latter becomes a corner stone for individual institutions as it is essential for their long-term sustainability and growth in modern society (Bercovitz & Feldman, 2006). Thus, universities are in the process of devising strategies to cope with increased rates of student enrolment in HE, internationalisation of HE, the growing importance of knowledge-led economies and increased competition which extends beyond the borders of Europe.

The rate of adoption and implementation of relative reforms varies not only between countries but also between institutions due to differences in the regional socio-cultural environment, and it depends, among others, on effective and determined leadership, appropriate actions at operational level, and commitment of resources. In this aspect it may be considered as a social process, affecting all stakeholders; thus a wider acceptance by the academic community is crucial to success.

HE in Greece lagged behind this change process, which was especially revolutionary in other European countries, following the Bologna Declaration in 1999. The government tried to reduce the gap by intensive legislative measures, introduced in the years 2005-2007, but lacked adequate preparation and support. Thus, it is not surprising that the overall progress in meeting the Bologna goals is much slower than one would deduce by reading the official reports (Rauhvargers, 2007).

This paper reports on the experiences of introducing quality assurance processes at the Technological Education Institute of Larissa, Greece, in the years 2008-2010 when HEIs were bound to introduce quality assurance systems.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: the next section provides a brief description of the higher education setting in Greece focusing mainly on the governance of HEIs, the main problems and recent developments regarding quality in HE, while section 3 provides some background about the institute under study. The sections that follow describe the authors' experiences and lessons learnt regarding the process of introducing quality measures including specific actions, and issues related to stakeholders' expectations and the way they were managed. Finally the last section contains conclusions and issues for further discussion.

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## Higher education in Greece

Higher education in Greece is provided by 38 HEIs through a binary system – as in some other European countries – of universities (22) and technological education institutes (16) all of which are state entities operating under a regulation framework put in place in the early eighties. Institutional autonomy of the Greek HEIs is limited mainly to educational and research activities as shown in Table 1 based on the 6 criteria describing institutional autonomy as defined by OECD (Santiago, 2008)<sup>18</sup>.

**Table 1. Institutional autonomy of Greek higher education institutions (HEIs)**

Bold letters indicate areas of autonomy in HEIs, Italics denote areas controlled by the state or non-existent in the Greek HE					
INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE	STAFF	STUDENTS	FINANCE	EDUCATION	RESEARCH
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Legal Status</i></li> <li>• <i>Own infrastructure</i></li> <li>• <i>Commercialisation of activities</i></li> <li>• <b>Parameters for internal decision – making</b> <i>including freedom to set up internal governance structure</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Selection, appointment and dismissal of academic staff</b></li> <li>• <i>Academic career structure</i></li> <li>• <b>Career advancement</b></li> <li>• <i>Working conditions (e.g. salaries)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Selection of students</i></li> <li>• <i>Number of students enrolling</i><sup>a</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Set and differentiate tuition fees</i><sup>b</sup></li> <li>• <i>Borrow funds on capital markets</i></li> <li>• <i>Allocate funds as the institution sees fit</i><sup>c</sup></li> <li>• <i>Income generating activities</i></li> <li>• <i>Right to build up a portfolio of assets and to accumulate financial capital</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Supply of Programmes, including their accreditation</b></li> <li>• <b>Design curriculum</b></li> <li>• <b>Contents of courses</b></li> <li>• <i>Modes of instruction and delivery</i><sup>d</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Design research</b></li> <li>• <b>Decide the priorities of research</b></li> </ul>
<sup>a</sup> Institutions propose. Final decision made by the Ministry of Education (MoED)					
<sup>b</sup> Only for postgraduate studies					
<sup>c</sup> Requires approval by the Ministry of Education					
<sup>d</sup> No part-time studies or non-degree studies. Open & Distance Learning offered only by the Open University					

A tremendous expansion of higher education, both in terms of institutions and number of students, emerged between 1999 and 2004 leading to a 40% increase in student intake and a twofold increase in the number of academic departments (1998: 238 departments/56,000 annual student intake, 2010: 488/80,000), making Greece the top OECD country in terms of increases in higher education expenditure as well as number of students, and among the top three countries (Spain, Turkey and Greece) in terms of increases in public spending per student (OECD, 2007). However this expansion was not guided by quality as most decisions regarding expansion of specific institutions were taken under the pressure of local and regional politics (viewed as income transfer to boost growth in regional economies), without any formal accreditation procedures in place, and mainly without a corresponding increase in academic staff.

<sup>18</sup> This paper was written before a new law for HE approved by the parliament in September 2011. According to the new law, the provisions of which will not be fully implemented before the 2012-2013 academic year, more autonomy is granted to HEIs.

Furthermore, current issues, such as internationalisation, flexibility in curricula, institutional diversity, were not addressed, thus leading to a situation where most HEIs lack any strategic planning and cannot exploit market opportunities while a significant number of students show a low interest in their studies as is evidenced by the fact that the number of students who do not complete their studies on time (required years +1) consist of more than 50% of the total student population in universities (EL. STAT., 2008).

Several reforms were attempted in the regulatory framework for HEIs, addressing mainly peripheral and minor issues. Significant improvements that were introduced later (2006 and after) were either not welcomed by the academic community (i.e. introduction of QA – currently implemented at 50% of all academic units), or not applied because of the economic crisis (i.e. Government-HEI contracts on four-year operational plans) or have not taken effect yet (i.e. limiting the maximum time required to complete degree requirements – to take effect in 2012).

The establishment, in 2006, of the Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (HQAA, 2009), an independent agency governed by a board of academics, nominated by the rectors and presidents of HEIs, marks the formal introduction of quality assurance in Greek HEIs. The role of the HQAA is to oversee and co-ordinate the QA process and external evaluation of HEIs, inform and advise the government on issues related to quality in HE and promote public awareness, thus introducing accountability at departmental, institutional and government level, increasing transparency, and improving the quality of education and learning.

In 2007, the first internal and external reviews of academic departments at Greek HEIs started. The number of departments engaged, which was limited during 2007, increased significantly during 2008 and about 10% of all university departments in Greece had submitted their self-assessment reports by the middle of 2009, reaching 50% at the end of 2010. However, the newly established HQAA, suffering from important organisation, staff and financial support problems, failed to keep up with its original target of completing about 100 external reviews per year (HQAA, 2009).

## The case of the Technological Education Institute of Larissa

The Technological Education Institute of Larissa (TEI/L) is the largest HEI in Central Greece. Established in 1983, it comprises five faculties (Business and Economics; Agricultural & Food Technology; Engineering; Health Studies; and Forestry & Wood/Furniture Technologies) offering nineteen undergraduate and nine postgraduate programmes of study in applied sciences to a student population exceeding 17,000.

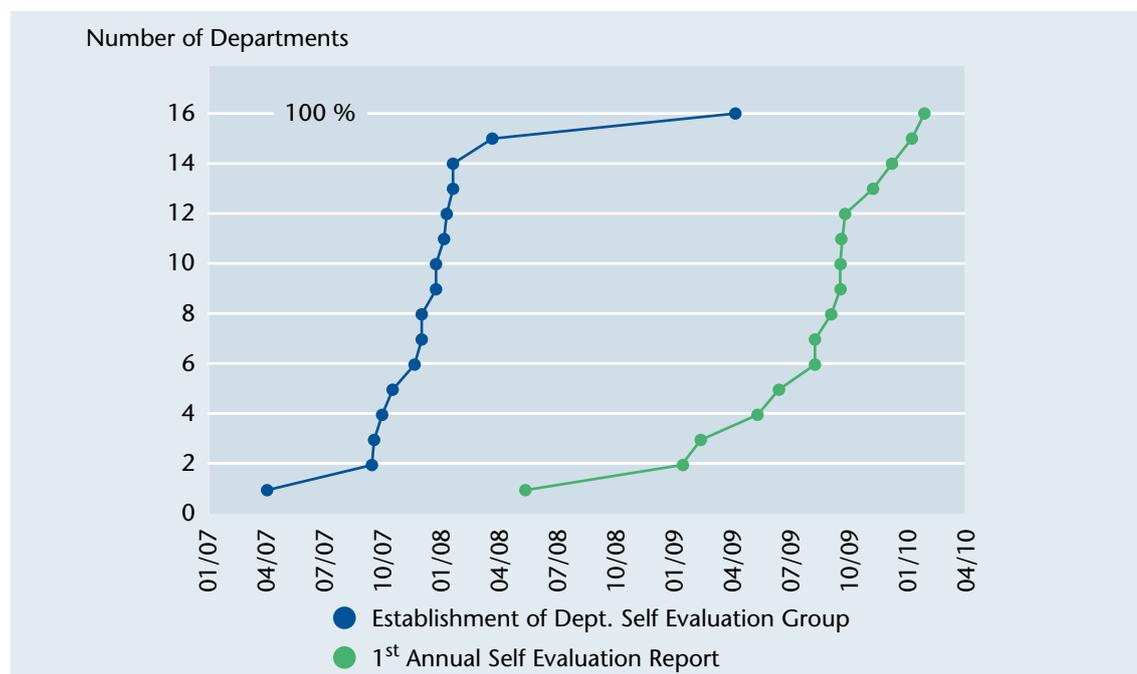
The institution had identified the need to introduce QA procedures long before QA became mandatory for HE Institutions.

In 2002, when a funding opportunity became available within the framework of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Community Support Framework<sup>19</sup>, TEI/L choose to invest in introducing quality processes through the implementation of a pilot project. Several of the faculties/departments and TEI/L as a whole performed self-evaluation reviews, for the first time followed by external reviews.

As of 2007, when the QA procedures pertaining to higher education institutions became obligatory, TEI/L was one of the first HEIs in the country to introduce the QA procedures, as shown in Figure 1, where all of its departments (four departments that had not completed five years of operation were excluded) managed to deliver their first self-evaluation report by the end of 2009, as compared to a national average of about 15% of all academic departments at that time.

<sup>19</sup> Community Support Framework (CSF) is a set of programmes funded jointly by the European and National governments of member states in different sectors (i.e. education, transportation, environment etc.) to achieve economic and social cohesion in Europe.

**Figure 1. Time taken to compile the first self-assessment report**



As is shown in Figure 1, the average time from the establishment of the departmental self-evaluation team to publishing the self-evaluation report is a year and a half.

### Establishment of relevant units/committees within the institution

TEI/L developed the necessary organisational structure to establish QA processes in accordance with ENQA guidelines (ENQA, 2005):

Each university should formulate a policy and procedures for the quality assurance in their programmes and commit themselves to the development of a quality culture. To this end, a strategy should be devised with a role for students and other stakeholders.

In particular, the following bodies were devised to plan, introduce and implement QA policies and procedures:

1. Institutional Quality Assurance Unit (QAU), headed by the Vice-President of Academic Affairs, four academic staff members nominated by the General Assembly of the institution, one member of the administrative/technical staff, one representative of the undergraduate students, and one of the postgraduate students. The QAU is supported by a team of four administrative persons.
2. Departmental Self Evaluation Groups (SEG), a three to five member committee of academic staff, nominated by the Assembly of Academic Staff of the corresponding department, the main task of which is to organise the QA processes within the department, the issuance of the annual departmental reviews, the release of the Internal Assessment Report (self-evaluation review) every four years. However, in many departments there is little or no administrative support for SEGs.

## Implementation of quality assurance processes at TEI/L

The following processes were designed and implemented by the Quality Assurance Unit of TEI/L:

### Defining areas of evaluation. Establishment of metrics

HQAA provided all HEIs with a framework of evaluation criteria which mainly address the programme of studies, the teaching and learning process, interaction and cooperation with industry-society, internationalisation, and research. The list of criteria was adapted to the specific institutional environment of TEI/L, and the sources and processes of data collection were identified, including the development of focused questionnaires addressed to students, academic and administrative staff. Data collected was then processed to meaningful information through the derivation of a series of performance/assessment metrics defined by the QAU with the consensus of the academic departments. In addition, a set of metrics was established for the evaluation of the performance of institutional-wide student related services such as ICT, library, registration and administration facilities, athletic facilities, dormitories, and student restaurant/cafeteria.

Metrics were defined in such a way to qualify the following characteristics:

- To ensure systematic and uninterrupted collection of data so that time series are produced
- To provide the ability to aggregate from course level to institutional level where appropriate
- To produce comparisons within each department but also across faculties and departments possible, and finally
- To maintain compatibility with the national metrics defined by HQAA.

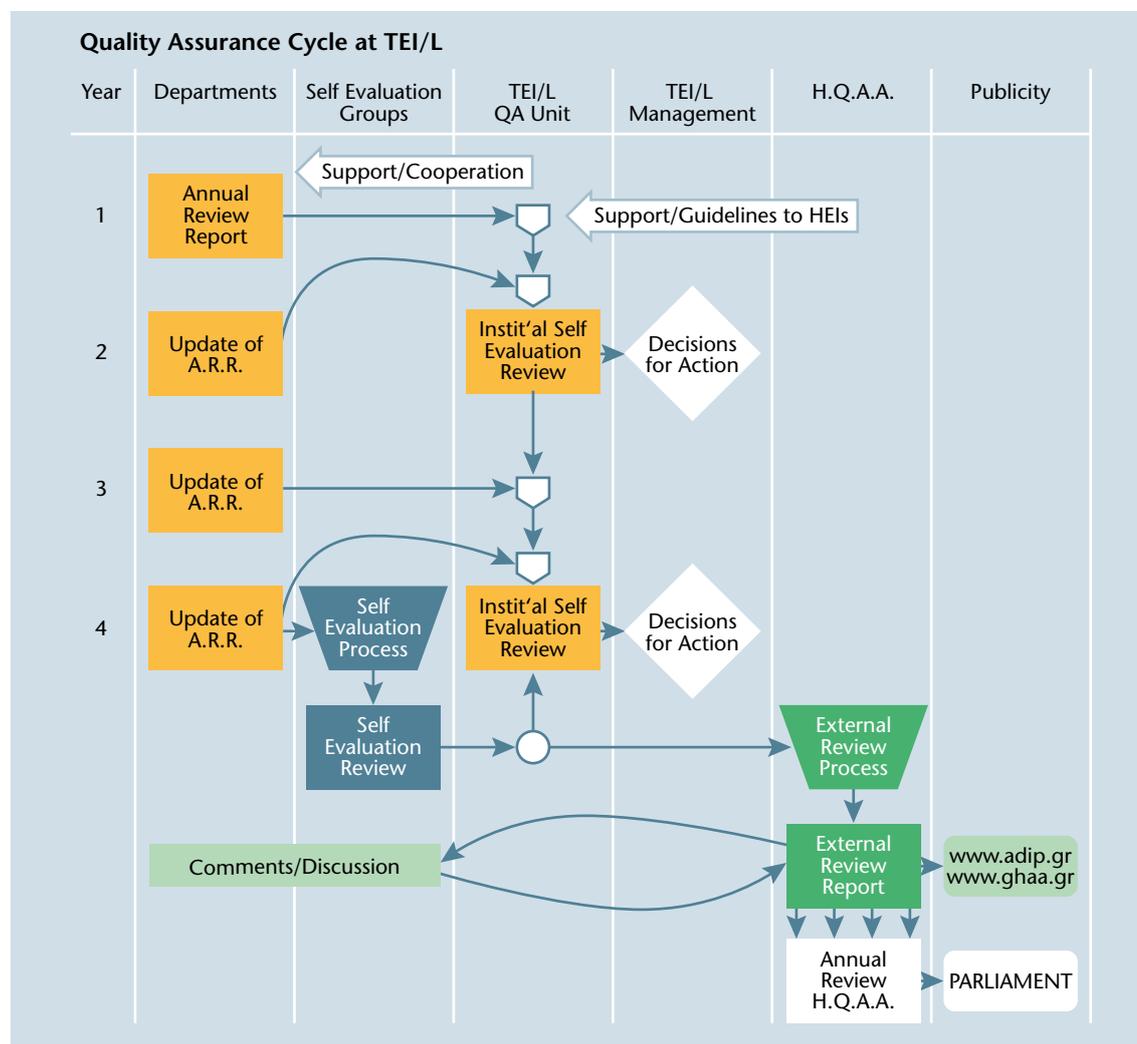
### Internal and external evaluation processes

Following the general guidelines of HQAA, QA processes at TEI/L follow a four-year cycle, as it is illustrated in Figure 2. The internal processes result in the compilation of the self-evaluation reports, while the HQAA controls the external review process (i.e. establishing register of reviewers, setting up the review teams, compiling the external review reports).

The QAU prepared proper templates for the academic departments and organised a series of workshops to train the members of the departmental Self-Evaluation Groups.

As shown in Figure 1, the process of compiling the first self-assessment report was rather a long one (on average one and a half years) requiring laborious involvement of all academic staff, and especially those who staffed the self-evaluation team due to lack of administrative personnel. The fact that historical data were not readily available, and had to be collected from different sources and checked for validity, along with the requirement to build a five-year retrospective view of the main metrics, so that trends can be identified, account for the most part of the effort required in the first implementation of QA processes at departmental level. The provisions of Management Information System support for the next rounds (section 4.4) will expedite and simplify this process to a large extent.

Figure 2. Internal and external evaluation and review processes



## Communications

Since the academic year 2008-09 the QAU has been organising a series of half-day workshops (one per semester) where departmental SEGs, department heads but also all academia of TEI/L are most welcome to participate. The main purpose is to keep open active channels of communication between the QAU and the academic community. Discussion of issues regarding the implementation of QA procedures at different departments, sharing of best practices, analysis of lessons learned from external reviews, presentation of results of various surveys, future planning of QAU activities are the main topics of those workshops. The result is the building of mutual trust between academics and the QAU, the result of which has been an increasing rate of adoption of QA processes in the various departments as evidenced by the rate of the Self Evaluation Report filings (Figure 1) which has the typical characteristic shape (S-curve) of successful innovation adoption (Berry, 1994).

## MIS support

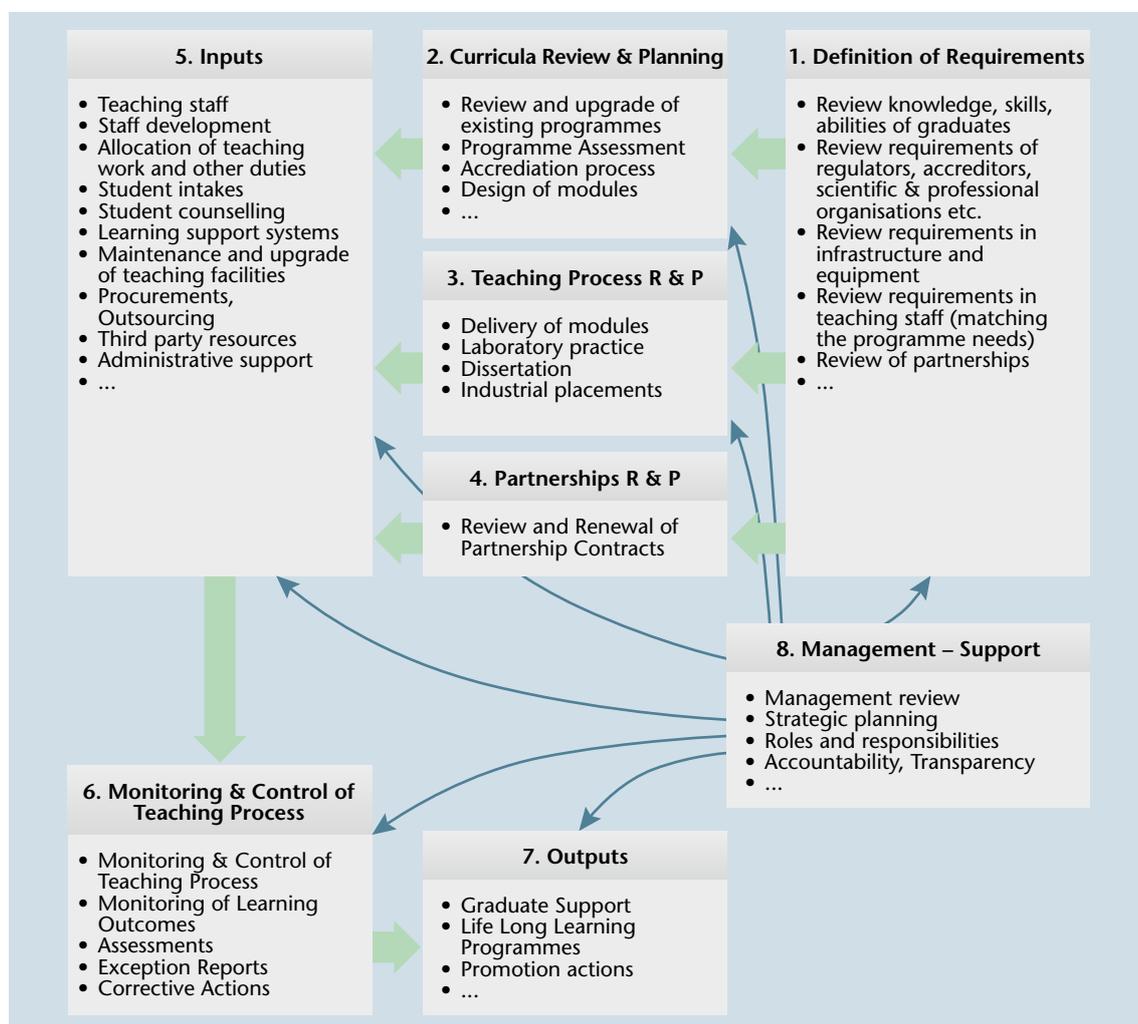
Many pieces of information and data, values of indices, etc. required for the compilation of the self-evaluation reports, reside in various information systems or may not even be collected in electronic databases on a regular basis. To remove the laborious effort for data collection and processing and facilitate the compilation of the self-evaluation reports the QAU developed proper interfaces with the institutional information systems for data extraction and processing and also for processing questionnaire data including basic statistical analysis and providing results to departmental SEGs. Besides the reduction in manual effort the information provided to the departments is more accurate and consistent and at the same time it may be retrieved by data-warehouses at institutional level.

## Development of a Quality Management System (QMS)

From the interaction of the QAU with the academic departments a new need emerged. The need to standardise and improve procedures related to the basic operations involved in the teaching and learning processes. The topic was discussed openly in the regular meetings the QAU held with the academic staff, seeking a level of acceptance by the academic departments since no such formal authority lies within the QAU scope of activities. Given that several departments responded positively to this idea, and were committed to contribute, the QAU initiated a project aimed at developing the core of a Quality Management System (QMS), which then can be adapted and tailored to specific department needs of each academic unit.

The QMS which is currently under development addresses eight groups of processes which can be potentially mapped into ISO 9001 processes as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. ISO compatible Quality Management System



## First experiences of quality odyssey

Introducing a QA system into an organisation is a difficult task in itself since it affects the “business as usual” status and introduces an additional burden to personnel, especially in an academic environment where most of the necessary processes are seen as non-academic, taking away valuable staff time from research and other academic activities. Establishing a quality assurance system in a period where the vast majority of the HE community is against formal QA processes (e.g. by the middle of 2009, one and a half years after the release of the HQAA guidelines, only 10% of all academic departments of Greek HEIs had submitted a self-evaluation report) makes the implementation of such a project even more difficult.

As many stakeholders have had different attitudes, interests, and concerns regarding the implementation of QA at TEI/L, the task of recognising and managing stakeholders’ interest becomes vital for the success of the project. Within TEI/L, stakeholders are categorised into four groups: institution’s top management, institution’s middle management, academics and students. The list that follows identifies the interests for each group of stakeholders and the associated actions as seen appropriate by the QAU.

### Institution’s top management (institutional level)

Interests	Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote excellence at institution-wide level</li> <li>Increase funding opportunities since non-conformance with QA requirements may lead to reduction in funding</li> <li>Become more competitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make quality a strategic issue for the institution. Mention it in the mission statement</li> <li>Introduce institution-wide policies (e.g. QMS) across all departments. Link results to allocation of funds</li> <li>Commit resources to support QA process</li> <li>Extend QA to administrative processes</li> <li>Introduce QA in research</li> </ul>

### Institution’s middle management (departmental level)

Interests/Attitudes	Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acceptance: A “chance” to reform curricula and teaching</li> <li>Opportunity: Identify weaknesses and areas of improvement with fewer internal conflicts, since “we are obliged to do it”</li> <li>Rejection: Problems lie with the institution not with the department</li> <li>Necessary evil: Will do it because otherwise could lose funds. Exploit the system.</li> <li>Reluctance: Bureaucratic burden on academic staff must be minimised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support, diffuse and promote best practices</li> <li>Diffusion of knowledge from departments that do it successfully in regular meetings (one per semester)</li> <li>Build information systems to support the processes and reduce burden on staff</li> <li>Even those who do it just due to their obligations will realise some benefits</li> <li>Encouragement of efforts</li> </ul>

### Academic Staff

Interests/Attitudes	Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunity: a “chance” to address/provide input/become involved/discuss issues at departmental level</li> <li>Fears: concerns for low ratings by students, and/or low research output. Increased insecurity</li> <li>Doubts: QA added value questionable</li> <li>Reliability of student assessments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase awareness for low performance</li> <li>Provide relative assessment reports (compared to department median and quartiles) to all staff, while protecting privacy</li> <li>Discussions of annual report at departmental meetings with the presence of students</li> <li>Private meetings with Dept. Head for exceptional cases. Plan corrective action</li> <li>Take student assessment into account in contract renewal of part-time staff</li> </ul>

## Students

Interests/Attitudes	Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enthusiasm: It is our turn to evaluate you</li> <li>• Expectations: Improvements to the teaching/ learning process Better infrastructures</li> <li>• Eagerness: No real changes happen. Too many surveys, no results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep students informed. Discuss departmental self-assessment review results in the presence of all students</li> <li>• Make results of external reviews known to students</li> <li>• Assign responsibilities. Make clear to them that some may participate in the external review</li> <li>• Publicise results</li> <li>• Utilise input from student evaluation forms in module reviews</li> </ul>

Many of the actions listed above have been implemented and well accepted by academia and students or are currently under development. A major one is the QMS (section 4.5), the development of which is currently supported by seven academic departments.

On the other hand, several actions, especially those that require commitment of additional resources are difficult to implement in a period of economic crisis where funding and personnel of HEIs is reduced dramatically.

Finally the newly introduced law for reforms in HE (September 2011) is expected to have a positive impact in putting quality issues for consideration at strategy level, since it brings major organisational changes (puts the QAU directly under the university rector, requires each HEI to establish a formal QA system, provides for external accreditation and links funding to QA results).

## Conclusions and discussion questions

Introducing QA systems at HEIs under circumstances where a significant part of the academic, technical and administrative personnel lacks understanding of quality principles and resists change is a major project. Therefore the management of the QA unit at the institutional level must ensure the full support of the top management and the promotion of quality as a top strategic issue. Quality cannot be achieved without any cost; the introduction of QA processes implies a certain administrative burden thus commitment of appropriate human resources is necessary. Otherwise, the extra burden on academics may become an obstacle in the development of QA processes. At the same time, special care and emphasis should be given to identifying the interests of the various stakeholders, devising actions and strategies to manage their expectations so that the widest possible acceptance by the academic community is achieved. A proper communications plan with an effective flow of information from the QA unit to the academic departments, discussion of best practices among all stakeholders, presentation of intermediate results and updates on future plans and actions lead to better comprehension of quality principles and practices by the academic staff and everybody else involved in related activities and leads to a bonding of the QAU role with that of the academic departments.

The experience gained so far has given rise to very important issues that are worth discussing:

- What is the role of the QAU in relation to top management? The QA unit currently stands “half-way” between the top management of the institution and its academic units. While both care about quality their views regarding funding, availability of resources, establishment of procedures etc. are very often different. If the QA unit is seen as part of top management it will “lose” good faith in its interaction with the academic units. On the other hand, if the recommendations of the QAU are not embedded into institutional-wide policies and guidelines, the effectiveness of the QA system will be questionable.

- Since QA must be embedded in every aspect of academic activities, the implications on additional resources and costs are obvious. Justifications that link the necessity of QA to national or EU policies or relating it to funding lead to a nominal acceptance and degeneration into a pure bureaucratic exercise. A cost-benefit analysis could provide a real justification of the value of QA.
- Is one quality management system appropriate for all academic units within the institution? Should the academic units be allowed to adapt a prototype system to their own needs? How much room for adaptation should be given? Are the additional resources and administrative burden to do so justified?
- Long-term results are not visible to students, especially those over half way through their studies, who are the ones that have a better view of things that need improvement, support the QA processes and expect results. This may turn into a serious problem of managing “expectations vs. perceived satisfaction”.

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# To understand and successfully utilise the learning outcome in higher education, must we first destroy it?

By Ian Scott<sup>20</sup> and Julian Martin<sup>21</sup>

## Introduction

In theory, learning outcomes are the ultimate in student-centred education and have benefits for a wide variety of agencies in higher education. In this article we argue that the learning outcome is a false god, to whom too much attention is paid and probably by the wrong people. It is important to highlight that we are not the first to make this case, but do so in the hope of raising a greater level of critical discourse on what has become a hegemony within higher education, particularly in the UK but increasingly across Europe particularly as the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area is put into action.

## The learning outcome, purpose and origin

The learning outcome in higher education in the UK can be seen as a development from outcome-based education within the vocational sector (e.g. National Vocational Qualifications in the UK). In the vocational sector learning outcomes based on competencies are used to underpin the assessment of job-related skills. As this became embedded, it tied in with notions of accounting for all kinds of learning and its adoption was therefore a relatively simple exercise. As James (2005) notes, the learning outcome is a seductively simple concept, it seems to say exactly what it does. However, is this really so?

It is possible to trace the growth of the learning outcome in UK HE to the formation of UK-wide quality assurance bodies that needed models against which the standards of degree programmes could be compared and affirmed and the spending of tax payers' money justified. Thus we see learning outcomes feature within documentation emanating from the Council for National Academic Awards and, subsequently, the UK's Quality Assurance Agency. Hussey and Smith (2002) argue that the rise of the learning outcome is a response to the state's need for universities to be seen as more accountable but also represents part of the growing commoditisation of education and indeed its globalisation (Naido & Jamieson, 2005; Allais, 2010).

The pedagogic purposes of learning outcomes are clear in that they are designed to give a clear indication of the learning destiny that the learning opportunity provider intends the learner to reach. In doing so they give power to the learners, who, armed with this knowledge can chart their own journey to its destination. It is this potential for empowerment which allows the proponents of outcomes-based education to claim that it is 'student-centred' and in contrast to previous models where often the destination was perceived to be hidden, based largely on what teachers taught (see Fry *et al.*, 2009). The drive for student-centred learning may have its origins in Rogers' (1951) personality theory. Rogers (1951) noted that tutors can only in reality facilitate the learning of others. Gibbs's (1992) definition of student-centred learning, suggests that in student-centred learning, students have autonomy and control over choice of subject matter, learning methods and pace of study, although Gibbs qualified this with the word 'greater'.

Curriculum models that use learning outcomes, logic dictates, try to ensure that assessments test whether students have reached the destination described by the learning outcomes and, by providing this steer, help students to avoid paths leading in unintended directions. They can be used to define academic level (Davis, 2000) and, sometimes, even the level of the individual session, unit or course. A further development to this is seen in the constructive alignment model of Biggs (1996). In this model the totality of the curriculum and assessment is aligned with learning outcomes. Indeed it is Biggs's model that underpins much of the UK's quality assurance system.

Learning outcomes, in theory, can encapsulate a wide range of knowledge, skills and behaviours. We can have learning outcomes that describe particular skills such as operating a microscope, ways of thinking such as analysing or synthesising, ways of behaving such as respecting clients, the possession (de novo) of declarative knowledge and in some cases articulating particular values. The approach therefore is one seemingly useful to all. To potential learners, the learning outcomes describe what will be learnt, to potential employers what should have been learnt, to quality agents a measure for audit and for funders and HE providers a means for resource accountability.

## Difficulties with learning outcomes

### What are they again?

For an apparently simple concept learning outcomes seem remarkably difficult to define. James and Brown (2005) produced a 3 x 7 matrix of learning outcome types; based around Sfards's (1998) acquisition and participation metaphors of learning and seven categories of outcome located by the Learning Outcomes Thematic Group of the UK-wide Teaching and Learning Research Project (TLRP). Using this matrix, James (2005) found that 16 differing conceptions of learning outcomes could be produced, essentially one for each site of their study. This difference probably stems from difference in definitions of learning, the relative importance placed on different forms of learning and an understanding of what that learning is for and how it is achieved. In other words, learning outcomes are socially constructed by a varied community and thus, despite the fact that learning outcomes exist to dictate what is important to know and what is not (James, 2004), common understanding across the entire sector (UK FE) that James studied was absent.

### Are learning outcomes really student-centred?

For teaching to be student-centred the student voice should be at the heart of both what is learnt and how it is learnt; there should be a shift of power towards the students and away from the tutor. But can this be achieved if the 'authority' pre-determines learning outcomes and objectives and the assessment methods? The original empowering feature of the learning outcome approach is that they provide transparency of the destination and that learners should then be free to plot their own course to their arrival point. To do this students would need to be able to choose their own learning opportunities, resources and time required to achieve their learning outcomes and tutors would need to appreciate that they are 'side-kicks' in the overall learning process; factors which paradoxically seem difficult to achieve in a massified system of education.

In reality, the use of learning outcomes takes power from students. It does this by failing to recognise that for many students the learning outcomes that emerge are not the ones that were intended by the designer (Megginson, 1994). Given that learning is inherently relational at the individual level this is no surprise. What Tim takes from a learning event will be different from what Katie takes, precisely because they relate to it through an individual prism of differing abilities, motivations and experiences. Thus to some extent the whole notion of pre-defined learning outcomes becomes spurious and the best that learning outcomes can hope for is to be loose notions of the tutor's intentions.

It could be argued that programmes preparing people for professional practice having pre-defined learning outcomes is axiomatic. However there is no evidence that those professional qualifications that have become incorporated into higher education have become more clearly defined. Furthermore the NVQ system used in the UK to qualify people for a wide range of roles, using outcomes to define those roles, has been widely criticised (see for example Eraut, 1989; Field, 1991; Callender, 1992). The case of professional learning outcomes may demonstrate that, just because there is a desire to define something does not mean that it is meaningfully definable.

An extension and perhaps wider element to this is the issue of construct validity and assessment raised by Daugherty *et al.* (2007). Assessment theory would suggest that if a phenomenon does not have construct validity then it is difficult to assess. In Daugherty *et al.*'s study of the relationship between curriculum design and assessment in five contexts in the UK and mainland Europe they found for example that "none of their

participants ... was confident that ‘business studies’ had been adequately defined” (Daugherty *et al.*, 2007, pp. 247). Clearly if you can’t agree on what something is, specifying an assessable destination is tricky at best.

### Words fail me (and our students)

The argument that learning outcomes form an integral part of student-centred learning assumes shared understanding between staff and students. By way of example, take a relatively simple learning outcome from a hypothetical competency-based carpentry course:

*After the period of learning the student will be able to bang a nail into a plank of wood without splitting the wood.*

At first glance, this seems straightforward. However, the carpenter might well ask, “which type of wood” or “which type of nail”. So we would need to moderate the outcome thus:

*After the period of learning the student will be able to bang the appropriate nail into a plank from a range of commonly used timbers without splitting the wood.*

Of course, after speaking again with the carpenter, she thinks that accuracy and safety are of at least equal importance. Moreover, we are confronted by the carpenter from the shipyard, who notes that what is a common wood for some is not common for him. The only defence from the carpenters’ demands is to either write with more and more specificity or with greater generality.

The problem with the former is that increased specificity starts to exclude many practices and as Yorke (2003, pp. 210) suggests leads to “the entangling and disorientating jungle of details as was experienced by those faced with the system of NVQs ...”.

Writing very broad and general learning outcomes however, means that either no one is clear what the learning outcome is about or that you can work it out only if you have sufficient prior knowledge and understanding of the subject and the context – it therefore becomes somewhat redundant. Hussey and Smith (2002, pp. 225) suggest that in order to explicate a phenomenon a learning outcome must “parasitise” that which it is meant to be explaining.

The issue of context is a significant confounding issue. This is because the meaning of particular words varies depending on the academic subject in question. A word such as analyse means something quite different depending on whether your subject is English, Chemistry or Biology. What this means of course, is that the only way the meaning of a learning outcome can be truly understood is through ‘experiencing the subject’ – thereby making the utility of a learning outcome to the ‘outsider’ (albeit a prospective student, employer or external scrutiniser) limited. Even when learning outcomes use very precise terms then, they are in fact always quite hazy (Knight and Yorke, 2003).

### Assessment and level

The academic level of a course or programme of study is often set by its learning outcomes and a number of quality processes use these as starting points. Subject review (part of the UK’s QAA system), for example, typically requires confirmation that the appropriate words are used at the appropriate level. Below are two learning outcomes/objectives from two differing subject areas. Can you locate what level of study they are from?

*“describe the strengths and weaknesses of a range of available models and select the most appropriate”*

*“analyse how texts are shaped by audiences’ preferences and opinions”*

If you had noted that they were from Key Stage 3<sup>22</sup> of the UK National Curriculum<sup>23</sup> then you would be correct. Yet, they would look at home in module outlines of many universities. Here again, we have the issue of language in context. If you worked in a secondary school, you might have an idea of what level of learning these learning outcomes were referring to, but the same language placed in the context of HE would, one might hope, mean a different level altogether. So it would seem that in terms of level, learning outcomes can be seen only to have meaning in the context of their subject and in the educational context at which they are applied. If you do not understand the context, the learning outcome becomes somewhat meaningless.

Similar problems also occur when learning outcomes are too closely linked to assessments. If we accept that to understand what is meant by the language and context of a learning outcome demonstrates detailed knowledge of the subject then, whilst this may be possible for some students, many modular schemes require students to gain meaning from these outcomes before they have been apprenticed into their areas of study. This leads tutors to give more and more detailed information about what is 'required' to pass the assessment which, in turn, results in 'surface' engagement (Marton and Säljö, 1976; Gibbs, 2010). Gibbs and Simpson (2004) suggest that for students to succeed on assessments they must indeed internalise what is required, but that this is best achieved is through rehearsal and feedback on performance.

The issue of whether or not the learning outcomes are those that must be achieved and therefore assessed or whether they are intended learning outcomes only is also significant. If they are fixed learning outcomes then if a student assesses as a genius against 80% of a module's learning outcomes but does not achieve the others then they must be given a fail overall. Given the intractability of defining learning outcomes (described above) we need to determine whether such a position is justifiable. A related issue was described by Biggs (1996) who discussed the importance of assessing unintended learning outcomes with the following metaphor thus:

*Teacher: How many diamonds have you got?*

*Student: I don't have any diamonds*

*Teacher: Then you fail!*

*Student: But you didn't ask me about my jade!*

*Conclusion: Learners amass treasure not just diamond. (Biggs, J. 1996, pp. 352).*

From this metaphor it is possible to see how the use of learning outcomes as a basis for assessment drives us to adopt processes that ignore substantive learning simply because our system makes it not liable to assessment. Furthermore, once students realise that only the learning described by learning outcomes is to be assessed they understandably focus on demonstrating this learning, often at a surface level (Torrance, 2007). Thus rather than encouraging learning, learning outcomes can end up subverting it.

## The way forward

It is obviously a good idea for students and tutors to have a common understanding of what they are trying to achieve and learning outcomes are a reasonable starting point as a means to achieve this. Learning outcomes also form a good departure point when considering how to formulate learning opportunities and develop resources. As soon, however, as we start to believe that learning can be precisely defined and articulated and that these articulations should form the basis of the design, development, definition and assessment of courses then we are divorcing ourselves from the process and outcomes of real learning. It is this lack of authenticity that Hussey and Smith (2002) claim leads to the widespread derision in which the 'learning outcomes culture' is held by many academics. Just as students may do with assessments, academics have learnt to mirror what is required and revel in their conspiracy at the cappuccino bar.

We should not therefore seek to define our programmes and measure their quality through such a simplistic and ill-defined concept as the learning outcome, but instead seek to encapsulate the richness of the learning experience. Intended learning outcomes, at best, should be seen as a broad notion of where the learners and tutor think they may be going, as if they were a proposed destination for an exploratory

<sup>22</sup> Key Stage 3 (commonly abbreviated as KS3) is the legal term for the three years of schooling in schools in England and Wales normally known as Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9, when pupils are aged between 11 and 14.

<sup>23</sup> <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk>

sailing trip. Although the skipper may have some idea of how to get to the intended destination, the actual route and eventual destination will depend on many factors, such as the weather and abilities of the crew.

Much of this critique stems from the argument that learning outcomes only have meaning if the context and prior knowledge they are built on is shared and understood. But how do students grasp this context and knowledge? In reality students learn what is required by becoming part of the communities in which they are learning. This is the case whether the learning concerns becoming a plumber or becoming a philosopher. Students learn the ways and language of their disciplines by participation and being part of the discipline, or profession. This picture is in many ways similar to the idea of 'communities of practice' as described by Lave and Wenger (1991), with new students standing on the edges of the community and eventually becoming 'experts' themselves (indeed this process is often seen in metaphor at UK degree ceremonies, where new graduates' 'full' membership of academic community is acknowledged by granting them permission to join the exit procession). Embracing this idea, the learning outcome becomes only a single factor in understanding what it is to be a member of the community; students can then strive to gain the relevant attributes defined in terms which are more recognisable to the outside world.

Following this line of thinking, learning outcomes could be seen as tools that might facilitate a student's journey into a community. Indeed, Wenger (1998) further elaborated on the community of practice model, distinguishing between the practice elements and those that are structural; programme documentation could be seen as part of this 'structural' aspect of the community. It is important to note however that understanding of the ways of the community only emerges through active participation, thus without rehearsal and engagement a student will never be able to discover the true meaning of a specific community language.

Hussey and Smith (2010) remind us that it is important that we focus on the learning that emerges from experiences rather than that which was intended. The challenge for institutions of education then, if we really do want to embrace student-centred learning and utilise the learning outcome in a way more beneficial to all, is to allow students to negotiate and define their own learning outcomes and to provide opportunities to revisit and adapt these outcomes throughout their learning journey. Such an idea is at the heart of the Personal Development Movement and the thrust behind many work-based learning programmes (Boud and Solomon, 2001); the potential is there to make such practice widespread.

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# Building trust

## Keynote address given at EQAF, Antwerp, 18 November 2011

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### Introduction

“Trust” is a word that pops up frequently in our everyday conversations. It is a basis for interpersonal relations since you cannot engage with someone in meaningful ways unless you trust the person. Family members must be able to have faith in each other and friends will remain friends only if mutual trust is maintained. When we decide to buy something, it is on the assumption that the store to which we go can be trusted to deliver goods of adequate quality at a reasonable price and many commercial disputes arise from breach of trust.

Trust is also a key objective of public policies and political opponents to the party in power often use lack of trust as a frequent criticism. In campaigns, parties and politicians seek to develop trust in their own character and abilities and show doubts about whether opponents can be trusted. US Presidential campaigns offer a couple of telling examples. In the 1960 campaign, the Democrats published a poster with an unflattering photo of the Republican candidate, Richard M. Nixon, complete with his well-developed “5 o’clock shadow”, and with a simple caption: “Would you buy a used car from this man?” In the 1964 campaign, in which there was some discussion about whether a nuclear bomb should be used against North Vietnam, a simple slogan was enough to cause severe damage to the Republican candidate Barry Goldwater: “In your heart you know he might”, i.e. drop the bomb.

### Towards a common understanding

Trust, then, may be seen as reliance on the character, ability, strength or truth of someone or something. Confidence and reliability can be synonymous with trust, which we may see as a justified belief that commitments will be honoured – and perhaps also as an indication that it is important the commitments be honoured. If I have an appointment with someone at 5 and the person turns up half an hour late or calls to cancel, that will not necessarily undermine my trust in the person. It could, however, if the appointment were important – for example if it were for an exam or to finalise the sale of my house. It could also contribute to undermining trust if showing up late or cancelling without notice were a habit in the person concerned or the phone call repeatedly promised for next week is never received.

Trust may also be an expression of hope or aspiration, or even a reminder or an order, as in “I trust you will deliver your paper on time”. We may perhaps add that for a hope or an aspiration to be an expression of trust, it needs to be realistic. Winning big in the lottery may be a hope or an aspiration but not necessarily realistic.

### Building and maintaining trust

If an image says more than a thousand words, I can imagine no better current illustration of the concept of trust than a photo of the Euro. It only has value if people trust it will maintain its value, adjusted for more or less reasonable inflation. As we know only too well, that assumption was put to the test in 2011 and at the end of the year both political and financial authorities were struggling to re-establish the trust needed to maintain the Euro as a credible currency.

The Euro illustrates a fundamental aspect of trust: it cannot just be declared or decreed; it must first be developed and then maintained. Developing trust can be a long slow process, while losing it can be a matter of minutes. This is important to keep in mind also for higher education. Trust is built on reputation and building reputation can be a drawn out process that requires conscious efforts over a period of time. It can easily be lost if the efforts are relaxed or abandoned.

This also illustrates another paradox: the more public discourse emphasises the need for trust, the more safely we may assume that trust is absent. If trust is established, there is generally no need to talk about it in great detail. In this sense, trust is like the proverbial sign saying “do not walk on the grass”. If you see several such signs around a lawn, you may assume that is exactly what people do. Otherwise, there would be no need for the sign.

## If we trust higher education, what do we trust?

Higher education may look like an obvious enough reference but what do we actually trust if we trust higher education? Trust in higher education may indicate we have confidence in a specific diploma. This would indicate we trust the institution that delivered the diploma, or maybe we trust only the specific programme in which the qualification was earned rather than the institution as such? Maybe we also have general confidence in the system to which the programme or institution belongs. There is likely to be some correlation between these elements, as we are unlikely to value very highly just one specific programme if we generally trust neither the institution nor the system to which it belongs. However, we could well imagine that a specific programme has a reputation that is far better than the general reputation of the institution or the education system or, vice versa, that a specific programme at a well reputed institution in a well reputed system can be perceived as problematic.

Without in any way pretending to provide a complete list, trust in higher education may imply trust in one or more of the following:

- an education system
- a higher education institution
- a study or research programme
- a given qualification
- the academic community of scholars and students
- an individual teacher, researcher, graduate or student.

For the purposes of this article, we will focus on trust in systems and institutions. Before considering this, however, there is one more issue of trust we need to consider briefly.

## Is trust the same as quality?

At one level, the answer to this question is obvious: we will be hard put to find a dictionary that provides “quality” as a synonym for “trust”. At least in the context of higher education, however, I would argue that trust builds on a perception of quality. It is difficult to see how academics would trust colleagues who are not seen as delivering teaching and research of sufficient quality or how students would flock to lectures given by a teacher who repeatedly was proven wrong on basic issues of his or her discipline. It is also difficult to see how public authorities or the general public would trust an institution perceived as lacking in quality.

Therefore, the question as phrased above is perhaps not the most relevant. Rather than considering whether trust and quality are the same, the more relevant issue is whether trust in higher education is based on a perception of quality. Phrased in this way, the link between quality and trust seems clear. That, however, brings us back to the question of what we trust if we trust higher education, since considerations of quality and trust may not be the same according to whether we refer to trust in a system or trust in a specific institution.

## A trustworthy system

A good and trustworthy higher education system is perhaps made up of good and trustworthy institutions but even if that is a necessary condition for trusting a system, it is doubtful whether it is a sufficient condition. A system is more than the sum of its parts: it adds something by organising the parts and making them into a coherent whole.

It is not very meaningful to talk about quality without considering the purposes according to which quality should be assessed. Even if public discourse in Europe today could lead one to believe that education has the single purpose of contributing to economic development, this is only one of several major purposes of higher education. The Council of Europe has identified four main purposes:

- preparation for sustainable employment
- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies
- personal development
- the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base (Bergan, 2005; Council of Europe, 2007).

These purposes are of equal importance and they are complementary rather than separate: many of the qualities and competences that make graduates employable also help them be active citizens and further their personal development.

An institution or a programme may choose to focus on one or two of the purposes of higher education and emphasise one or two of the main missions, commonly defined as research, teaching and community service. Some institutions or programmes may in particular prepare students for citizenship while others may emphasise preparation for the labour market. Some institutions may emphasise their teaching mission, some may aim to be research institutions and some may emphasise their role in serving their local or regional community. These are legitimate choices for individual institutions but higher education systems need to fulfil all major purposes and ensure that all missions of higher education are carried out. A trustworthy system needs to allow for different institutional profiles but it needs to ensure that, within the overall system, all purposes and missions are fulfilled.

A trustworthy system needs to justify why it should be considered trustworthy and hence needs a credible quality assurance system. In Europe today, this means the system must have an independent quality assurance agency that operates according to the European Standards and Guidelines (ENQA, 2009) – and that is recognised as such. Membership of ENQA and inclusion in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) are two ways of demonstrating compliance with the ESG but an agency may of course comply with the ESG without ENQA or EQAR membership. This is a relatively new requirement. Quality assurance was mentioned in the Bologna Declaration but did not become a key policy area until somewhat later. It is also worth keeping in mind that as late as 1997, when the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention (Council of Europe/UNESCO, 1997) was adopted, there was still debate about whether formalised external quality assurance should be a requirement or not.

Being open about one's strengths and weaknesses also builds trust, at least as long as one's strengths clearly outweigh one's weaknesses. Perfection is a rare commodity and public authorities that were to admit no weaknesses in their higher education system might find it no easier to establish credibility than someone going into the confessional to proclaim that he or she has never sinned. In general, praise from others is more credible than praise of oneself.

Another important factor in deciding whether to trust a higher education system is whether quality is fairly uniform and extends to all. A system with a few excellent institutions, by whatever definition, and many of insufficient quality would not be a good and trustworthy system.

Sometimes it could seem as if good higher education institutions are those that turn down many applicants. I am not convinced that exclusion is a sign of quality in higher education institutions but I am absolutely certain that it is not a sign of quality in systems. A good and trustworthy education system has to cater to all learners. In terms of higher education, this means the system must provide opportunities for all to develop their abilities and aspirations.

The Council of Europe is currently working on a policy recommendation on the right to quality education. This recommendation will span the whole education system and not just higher education, and it has not yet been adopted. It will be submitted to the Steering Committee for Educational Policy and Practice in March 2012 and will later be submitted to the Committee of Ministers. It is therefore too early to treat this as an authoritative text but it may nevertheless be of interest to consider the understanding of quality education as it is described in the current draft. Here, “quality education” is understood as education which:

- a. gives access to learning to all pupils and students, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, adapted to their needs as appropriate
- b. provides a secure learning environment in which the rights of all are respected
- c. develops each pupil’s and student’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential and encourages them to complete the education programmes in which they enrol
- d. promotes democracy and respect for human rights and social justice in a learning environment which recognises the learning and social needs of everyone
- e. equips pupils and students with the competences and self-confidence appropriate both to be responsible citizens and for their employability
- f. passes on global and local cultural values to pupils and students while equipping them also to make their own decisions
- g. certifies outcomes of learning in a transparent way based on fair assessment enabling the learning to be recognised for further study, employment and other purposes
- h. relies on qualified teachers committed to continuous professional development
- i. is free of corruption (Council of Europe, 2011).

## A trustworthy institution

Since quality needs to be related to purpose, a trustworthy institution needs to define its missions and then make sure these missions are carried out. It is perfectly legitimate for an institution not to aim at being a top research institution and if it defines its missions as teaching and community service, it should not be assessed as if it were a research institution. It should be judged on how well it carries out its teaching and community service mission.

In the same way that trust takes time to develop and can easily be lost, an institution that were to try to rest on its laurels would find it difficult to remain trustworthy. Where quality assurance is an important criterion for education systems to remain credible, quality development is equally important to the credibility of institutions. So is external quality assurance: the credibility of an institution increases if it successfully undergoes periodic and credible external quality assurance.

Continuous quality development is needed for the institution to remain trustworthy also in providing its graduates with the competences stipulated in its programmes, which also implies that the institution needs to develop, describe, implement and assess learning outcomes for its study programmes. On this basis, it can grant qualifications and issue diplomas that are trusted.

Quality development as well as quality assurance should not only leave room for but encourage creativity. No research is possible without creativity: research, after all, is not about searching for accepted and well tested solutions to new problems. Creativity is equally important in teaching, and service to society and higher education must evolve as our societies evolve. Even more, higher education should seek to influence the development of our societies, to help them evolve in accordance with sound values and foster the ability to weigh long-term against short-term consequences.

What was said for systems about being open about one’s strengths and weaknesses is equally true for institutions. Attracting students is important but the information provided to prospective students and their parents needs to be both correct and complete. A personal example may illustrate the point. My youngest daughter wanted to enrol in a study programme in information and communication. She found an institution that looked promising but a closer check revealed that it promised its graduates a qualification that is well considered in the labour market. There is no reason to doubt the truth of this claim. The problem

is that the claim was incomplete. The institution is based in France, and in the French system, one needs to look for terms like “diploma recognised by the state” or “French diploma”. With a past in the recognition field and experience of higher education policy, I had an inkling of what to look for and I had the contacts to verify my suspicions, which turned out to be true. The institution in question is not recognised as a part of the French higher education system, which does not necessarily mean that it is bad and its qualifications may well be valued in the part of the French labour market dealing with information and communication. The problems occur when someone with this kind of qualification wants to change his or her line of work or enrol in a higher education programme to study further. Specialised knowledge of higher education policy should not be required to be spared the kind of surprise my daughter would have been in for had my alarm bells not started ringing.

## Conclusion

Trust in higher education is of fundamental importance to society as well as to the higher education community. Trust must be built and maintained and it is important at all levels, ranging from the individual members of the academic community to the education system. Trust cannot be built without quality and quality measures must be neither moody nor poor. They must be sufficiently standard to provide a common reference and sufficiently flexible to allow each institution and system to develop its strengths and draw on – but not be stuck in – its traditions. Quality measures must be reasonable: they must be efficient and not unduly burdensome and they must not pretend to say more than they actually do or given reason to be understood to say more than they do. That is one of the many issues related to rankings.

My image of trustworthy higher education is that of a tower, but not an ivory tower, which I do not believe has ever been an accurate image of universities. Had it been, universities would not have survived for centuries. Rather, my image is that of a lighthouse. Higher education should guide the societies of which it is a part and it should cast its light broad and wide. Light cannot be preserved for the select few.

Higher education should educate and not only train. It should provide subject specific as well as transversal competences. I believe European higher education is doing an excellent job of providing highly skilled subject specialists. However, higher education also needs to do what I fear it does less well: educate intellectuals. By intellectuals I mean those who are able to apply their subject specific competences more broadly and put them into proper context, ask critical questions and find answers to those questions.

Trustworthy higher education needs to consider its students and staff as members of the academic community and not as consumers and providers of higher education services. Consumers have no interest in the provider of the services and if they do not find the services they want, they move on to the next provider. Members of the community have an interest in the development of their community and work to improve it. It is only when all hope fails that they emigrate. It is of critical importance to the future of European higher education that students and staff are seen as – and see themselves as – members of the academic community rather than as consumers and providers.

Only then can we continue to develop trustworthy higher education in Europe, a higher education that helps develop the kind of society in which we would like to live.

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## Analysis

First, a simple overview of word frequency was created. Overall, there are 29 abstracts, 24 of these for papers and 5 for workshops. Together they contain 5080 words (*tokens*), of which 1288 are *different* words (*types*). As is always the case, function words such as ‘the’, ‘of’, ‘and’, ‘in’ and ‘to’ top the list by a wide margin; these words may appear negligible but they do contain interesting information and I will come back to one of them (‘on’) in the last section. To begin with, however, we turn our attention to the content words. The most frequent by a wide margin is ‘quality’ in position 6 on the frequency list with 121 occurrences (written as 6/121), followed by ‘education’ (9/60), ‘assurance’ (10/56), ‘higher’ (15/45), and ‘students’ (17/37). In the comparison between ‘teaching’ (65/11) and ‘learning’ (39/18) the latter clearly wins out creating the impression that the shift from an input to an output perspective in higher education is well under way, with all that entails for the academic community (cf. PoD 2). The abstracts mention nearly five times as many ‘problems’ and ‘challenges’ (9) as ‘solutions’ (2); remarkably, both mentions of ‘solutions’ occur in student contributions.

**Table 1. Frequencies for selected semantic groups in EQAF 2011 abstracts**

Students	52	55
Graduates	3	
Universities	40	74
Institutions	34	
Teaching		11
Learning		18
Problem(s)	5	9
Challenges	4	
Solutions		2

The first impression looking at the frequency list would suggest that ‘students’ and ‘education’ are high on the agenda. Caution has to be exercised, however, as the frequent occurrence of ‘higher’ indicates it is the sector of ‘higher education’ rather than the concept of education itself that receives most of the attention. Similarly, when all occurrences of ‘student’, ‘students’ and ‘graduates’ are added up they get 55 mentions, while the words ‘university’ and ‘institution’ (with their respective plural forms) make up 74 occurrences. Thus, the institutional perspective numerically outweighs student concerns by nearly three to two.

### Point of Discussion 1

There is a strong emphasis on the institutional perspective.  
Is there a case to make for the strengthening of inter-institutional approaches?

Case studies are the most prevalent approach in quality-related research and at conferences, sometimes creating the impression of re-inventing the wheel.  
Are there ways of combining them, thereby creating a meta-level of reflection?

The Forum title *Quality and Trust: at the heart of what we do* delivers the cue for the next step in the analysis. It puts the words ‘quality’, ‘trust’ and ‘we’ centre-stage and the focus of attention will be on each of them in turn.

It is one of the fundamental principles of text linguistics that words (expressions, grammatical features etc.) can never be looked at in isolation as it is their context and the situation that invests them with their meaning. Therefore we will try to get to know the term ‘quality’ by the company it keeps.

In the EQAF 2011 abstracts the word ‘quality’ is combined with ‘assurance’ 55 times. All other combinations are much less frequent; they are with ‘management’ (7); ‘enhancement’, ‘process(es)’, ‘system(s)’ (4 each), and with ‘evaluation’ (3). Two absences need to be noted: neither ‘quality improvement’ (although there is one occurrence of ‘improvement of quality’) nor ‘quality culture’ feature in the abstracts. Taking into consideration that in the conference announcement a direct connection was made between ‘improvement’ and ‘trust’ the absence of the compound ‘quality improvement’ seems to contain a story.

Figure 2. Concordance with “quality of” in EQAF 2011 abstracts (WordSmith)

**N Concordance**  
 1 University in the enhancement of the quality of education. 13. The Quality  
 2 into the sphere of responsibility for the quality of services provided and their  
 3 the course syllabus to document the quality of teaching and identifying its  
 4 both research capacity as well as the quality of institutional structures. 23.  
 5 in documenting and increasing the quality of course planning according to  
 6 efforts of the students, rather than the quality of their own teaching, as the  
 7 surveys about their experience of the quality of higher education, there has  
 8 by measuring it? Monitoring of the quality of a higher education institution's  
 9 of extensive reforms the question of the quality of implemented changes at the  
 10 has to be the improvement of the quality of the experience for the students

Staying with ‘quality’ but changing the perspective, the next question asked of the abstracts was: the quality of *what*? There are ten combinations of ‘quality of’. Four of them are single instances of ‘services’, ‘structures’, ‘student experience’ and ‘implemented changes’. The other six can be grouped under the heading of ‘education’ (including ‘teaching’ and ‘course planning’), confirming the close connection between education and quality. Taken together with the change of emphasis from ‘teaching’ to ‘learning’, from subject-specific knowledge to transferable skills, from directed to autonomous learning, a tendency emerges that has consequences both for the role of academics and students. In the discussions at the Forum the possibility of a devaluation of the teaching role was mentioned. The change to a learning focus gives the students a proactive role in the learning process, but how can their role in relation to education be described without reverting to the passive voice?

**Point of Discussion 2**

The role of teachers and students is easily formulated in the traditional model: teachers teach and students learn.

The role of educators seems simple to formulate, but what is the activity students are expected to engage in?  
 Educators educate and students ... ?

Next under the linguistic microscope is the term ‘trust’. There are 25 occurrences of the word in all the abstracts, all of them as nouns (as in ‘the trust’, as opposed to ‘we trust’), and with a very uneven distribution. ‘Trust’ appears in only four of the 24 papers (with nine mentions in one paper), whereas it is used in three of the five analysed workshop abstracts. This indicates perhaps not surprisingly, that the workshops are more closely related to the Forum title than the papers. However, it is not only how often but in what way the term ‘trust’ is used that has some revelatory power. It has to do with the presence or absence of trust.

Table 2. Uses of the noun ‘trust’ in EQAF 2011 contributions

positive	negative		
trust is there and has to be fostered	Trust is not there and has to be established	Trust was there but has been lost	Opposite
<i>strengthen, assure, foster, contribute to</i>	<i>achieve, create, build (2), establish</i>	<i>reinstate, re-establish, regain; loss of trust</i>	<i>distrust, mistrust; suspiciousness</i>
4	5	4	3

There is a relatively restricted number of words (predominantly verbs) the noun ‘trust’ can be combined with. The words combined with ‘trust’ in the abstracts can be divided into four subgroups. One group has to do with the fostering of existing trust (*strengthen, assure, foster, contribute to*), another with the creation of trust where it was not previously present (*achieve, create, build, establish*). All of these verbs can also be easily combined with the term ‘quality’ and have frequently been used in this way. There are two more groups, however, used in combination with ‘trust’ that have to do with loss of trust (*reinstate, re-establish, regain; loss*) and an outright opposite or antonym (*distrust, mistrust; suspiciousness*). It is my contention that one would be hard pressed to find examples for instances speaking about the *regaining of quality* in any of the many institutional or other reports that have been published. Where antonyms are concerned, they can often be helpful in clarifying issues (for example clarifying the meaning of ‘old’ by supplying one of its antonyms ‘new’, ‘young’, or ‘modern’). Hence the next PoD:

**Point of Discussion 3**

*Trust* has a clear antonym: *distrust* or *mistrust*.

How would it change the discussion if terms reflecting quality and its opposite in higher education were introduced (one could, for example, contemplate the introduction of terms such as *bonity* and *maladity*)?

The pronoun ‘we’, beside ‘trust’ and ‘heart’, is responsible for creating the feeling of warmth and harmony in the Forum title. When interrogated, it (and its alter egos us and our) reveals a more differentiated picture.

In general, the pronoun ‘we’ can be used in many different ways; in the context of the Forum abstracts it appears in the following forms:

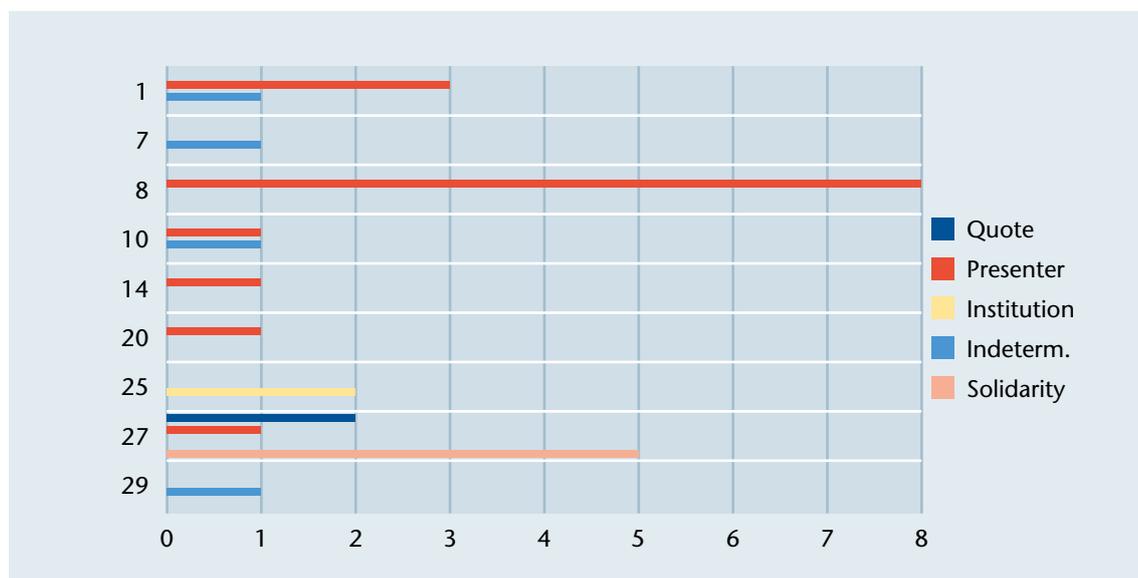
**Table 3. Use of pronoun 1<sup>st</sup> person, plural (*we, us, our*)**

Designation	Examples from the abstracts	Function
quote	<i>when formulating ‘at the heart of what we do’</i>	referring to the Forum title
solidarity	<i>our impressively wide range of QA tools</i>	referring to common ground, similar to the use in the Forum title
presenter	<i>we will address the assessment process</i>	referring to the author/speaker
institution	<i>changes in our institutions</i>	referring to institution of author/speaker
indeterminate	<i>must we destroy learning outcomes?</i>	referring to larger context (similar to impersonal ‘one’ or ‘you’) <sup>26</sup>

Forms of ‘we’ contained in Table 3 above are used in six of the 24 papers. Their use is restricted to only two of the designations, namely the ‘presenter-we’ (14 occurrences, eight of which are in concentrated in one abstract only) and the ‘indeterminate we’ (3 instances). Three of the five analysed workshop abstracts contain a total of 11 mentions of ‘we’ (5 instances of the solidarity-we, all of them in one abstract, 2 each of quoted and institution-we, 1 each of indeterminate and presenter-we).

<sup>26</sup>The interchangeability of “we” and “you” becomes obvious in one of the abstracts that asks in the headline “Do we improve quality by measuring it?” and answers the question in the last sentence: “You do not automatically improve quality in an institution by continually measuring it”.

Figure 3. Use of 'we' ('us', 'our') in EQAF 2011 abstracts



The relative paucity of the first person reference is surprising when seen in conjunction with the conference theme, which could have been read as an encouragement to use the 'solidarity-we'. However, as a general rule language in academic contexts makes sparing use of such forms. There is an alternative form of self-reference that is used in eight presentations at the Forum: institutions and agencies refer to themselves by their name. It is here that the abstracts hold a surprise: a strong correlation becomes apparent between self-reference by name and the offering of *lessons, methods, recommendations* and no less than six *models* for the other participants' benefit.

**Point of Discussion 4**

There is a great appetite for giving advice by providing *frameworks, recommendations* and *models*.

Is there a matching readiness for taking advice?

Are there examples of unsuccessful *frameworks, recommendations* and *models* and lessons learnt from them?

Next, lest the impression be formed that analysing texts is just a matter of analysing words and their companions, other words, I am going to proceed to an analysis of rhetorical moves as they appear in the Forum abstracts. The analysis is restricted to two of such moves: one has to do with a special use of the copula verb *to be* and the other is the use of questions in the Forum abstracts.

There are many ways of steering the reader's or listener's attention; one of them is the unobtrusive but effective device used in opening the current sentence: 'there are' (and its singular counterpart 'there is') is variously called an expletive or pleonastic expression, or 'presentative syntagma'. It is of interest in the present context because grammarians know that it is used as a way of "introducing something new" (Collins Cobuild, 1990, pp. 415); it adds focus and it announces some information with a novelty value.

**Table 4. Presentative syntagma ('there is/are') in EQAF 2011 abstracts**

Abstr. No.	2	9	10	17	18	23	25	
There is		<b>the need</b>	<b>the need</b>		<b>a need</b>	<b>not one body (1) no clear hierarchy (2)</b>	<b>a need</b>	<b>6</b>
[compl]		for action	to take a step		to enhance students involvement		to view T&L as collective responsibility	
There are	<b>solutions</b>					<b>obstacles (1) different bodies (2)</b>		<b>3</b>
There has been				<b>much debate</b>				<b>1</b>
There seems to be					<b>commitment to increase student involvement</b>			<b>1</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>

In the Forum abstracts this device is used in 11 instances (6 singular, 3 plural; 2 others carry additional grammatical and semantic information; one is used in the present perfect form 'there has been', the other in combination with 'seem', 'there seems to be'). It needs to be noted that of the nine simple uses of 'there is/are' four occur in one abstract and have to do with institutional diversity as a challenge in relation to the introduction of a quality model, only one of them refers to *solutions*, and the remaining examples *all* introduce the *need* to either 'view' things differently or to 'take active steps'. Contemplating the deep semantic reach of the term 'need' brings about the next PoD, made more poignant by the experience that the issue of funding was widely discussed in the plenary sessions and other occasions throughout the Forum.

**Point of Discussion 5**

Needs are in the first place, if one believes Abraham Maslow, material needs. In the HE sector they are necessary for the survival of institutions and agencies.

Why is there near complete silence around the economic and financial, and by extension, social and political context in the Forum abstracts?

I would venture the guess that most writers using the presentative syntagma ('there is/are') are not aware of its rhetorical force. Employing questions in written texts, however, is a different matter. They are well-known stylistic means to arouse or increase the readers' interest and given the function that conference abstracts have it is no surprise that questions feature in the abstracts. A total of 12 questions appear in 10 of the contributions. Of these 5 are contained in the titles and 7 in the body of text.

Questions allow, amongst other things, an insight into what assumptions the writers make about their readers' existing knowledge, opinions and attitudes. Since responding to a written text usually is not a viable option, questions are not used in order to elicit an answer but to indicate what the writer expects of the reader. Simplifying matters somewhat one can make a distinction between decision questions (i.e. questions asking for a 'yes' or 'no' answer, or a decision between alternatives offered) and information questions (i.e. questions that need to be answered by supplying specific information, usually introduced by

a question-word such as *who, when, how* etc.). In a further simplification it can be said that posing decision-questions (such as ‘Do we improve quality by measuring it?’) assumes that the addressees have enough information to make a decision one way or the other, or that they have unspecific information gaps that make it difficult for them to take a stand, while information questions make the readers expect an answer and assume a specific information gap that the writer or speaker is willing to fill.

**Table 5. The use of questions in the EQAF 2011 abstracts**

**Questions in body of abstract**

Y/N	Inform.
Do we have the knowledge, the structures and the understanding to perform these changes in our institutions? [A 25]	How to ensure quality assurance in the framework of learning outcome and student-centred learning? [A 25]
... dare we say it? [the word <i>suspiciousness</i> ] [A 27]	Who is <i>we</i> in “at the heart of what we do”? [A 27]
Does the calibration of external QA matter for contributing to trust in higher education? [A 28]	How does the process assure salient stakeholders influence on program management decisions? [A 20]
	How is such trust achieved? [A 17]
	What are the reasons? (for results of QA being behind expectations) [A 6]

In the abstract titles decision questions outweigh information questions by four to one, in the body of the abstracts the balance is three to five in favour of the information questions. Within the information questions the majority are introduced by the question word ‘how’ (e.g. ‘How does the process assure adequate stakeholder influence?’) thus indicating an emphasis on procedural and processual matters.

**Point of Discussion 6**

There seems to be an emphasis on questions of process and procedure in the Forum abstracts.

Is it necessary to encourage more questioning regarding the participants (who?), beneficiaries (for whom?), timing (when?), the content (what?) and the reasons and purposes (why?) in Higher Education?

Despite the, in the main, factual tone of the Forum abstracts, they contain a good number of metaphors in the traditional Aristotelian sense, such as the designation of learning outcomes as ‘false gods’, talking about a ‘storm of student comments’ or of the intent to ‘dig deep into the trust relations’ and any of these would merit some analysis. I will, however, concentrate my remarks on *conceptual metaphors* which are not so much a rhetoric device as “a pervasive, indispensable structure of human understanding by means of which we figuratively comprehend our world” (Johnson, 1989, pp. xx). Metaphors in this sense are anchored in the bodily experience of the world around us and of our spatial orientation in the world, often expressed through prepositions such as ‘up’ or ‘down’ where the physical meaning is frequently (metaphorically) transferred to other conceptual areas when, for example, ‘up’ stands for ‘happy’ and ‘down’ stands for ‘sad’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 14ff.). Such conceptual metaphors are omnipresent, rarely noticed but telling in the way they are used.

Keeping this in mind I looked, amongst others, at the use of the preposition ‘on’ and found that of the 54 times it is mentioned in the abstracts it is used 14 times in connection with ‘emphasis’ and ‘focus’ (and the variations of *focused, focusing*) on something<sup>27</sup>. As such it indicates a shift and might give an indication of what it is that is seen to be at “the heart of what we do”.

<sup>27</sup> Typing errors were silently corrected.

Figure 4. Extract of the concordance with 'on' in EQAF 2011 abstracts (WordSmith)

N	Concordance
21	One view is to reduce the <b>emphasis on audit</b> and increase the level of
22	accreditation. This will put <b>emphasis on the</b> universities internal quality
23	or the program level, and <b>emphasise on direct</b> or indirect control. 29. Building
24	of external QA models, with <b>emphasise on the</b> institutional level or the program
25	by teachers and students, and <b>focus on both</b> parts' responsibility in teaching
26	ambition to be user centred and <b>focus on dialogue</b> . Evaluation methods must
27	mechanisms but it should also <b>focus on enabling</b> students to shape their own
28	government). In this paper, we will <b>focus on some</b> of the trust relations between
29	of higher-education quality with a <b>focus on the</b> major stakeholders. The
30	education institutions, but mostly <b>focus on the</b> important issues related to
31	teaching. Many institutions have <b>focused on improving</b> the teaching practice.
32	education system has been <b>focused on quality</b> enhancement since the
33	system has the ambition of <b>focussing on development</b> , not on control
34	provision. Whilst <b>focussing on external</b> quality assurance its

The instances observed in the abstracts indicate a shift from 'control' and 'audit' to 'enhancement' and 'development' on the one hand, and from dissociated efforts to 'mutuality', 'interactivity' and 'dialogue' between the various stakeholders. It remains to be seen whether shifts promoted in words are translated into deeds, but the last Point of Discussion is intended to inquire about the wider implications of shifts like the ones observed here.

#### Point of Discussion 7

There are indications of *shift*, *change of focus*, etc. in the Forum abstracts.

What is it that triggers such shifts and changes?

When and how do such changes develop into a *movement*?

When and how is a change completed and results in a new state of affairs?

## Conclusion

It has been the aim of this analysis and interpretation of the conference abstracts to create an overview of the European Quality Assurance Forum 2011 and to enable contributors to the Forum and other interested groups and individuals to survey and map the areas of interest, but also the lesser explored areas, in quality. The analysis has yielded a set of questions that will hopefully advance discussions in the future and will contribute to the development of a quality culture in higher education in Europe and further afield.

Although by no means exhaustive, the analysis is indicative of the potential that the application of a linguistic approach can have in the framework of discussions about quality in higher education and, indeed, elsewhere. Treating the conference abstracts as a valuable resource, it can act both as a mirror, enabling self-reflection, and as a window, enabling views from the inside out, and from the outside into the world of quality in higher education.

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