

Quality Assurance: Is this the Future?

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Quality assurance is coming of age: what does it look like at present?

- A variety of definitions
- A variety of purposes
- A variety of methods
- A variety of organisational structures
- A variety of outputs
- A variety of outcomes
- A variety of impacts

There is little that is common to all quality assurance systems

- Does that matter?
- Are there any irreducible values or principles, shared by all?
- If there are, does that require a single QA approach?

Irreducible principles

- Quality can only be assured by those who are involved in the teaching/learning activity: everything else is observation, commentary and facilitation
- Quality assurance must not get in the way of effective learning
- Quality needs to be assured for the benefit of students, teachers, higher education institutions, employers and society more generally
- Quality assurance is a means, not an end
- Autonomous higher education institutions are a basic requisite of a modern democracy

Current needs

- A need for information about quality
- A need for public confidence in providers
- A need for reassurance about the value of qualifications
- A need for providers' confidence in what they're doing

All of which suggests a requirement for

- Strong internal quality cultures and associated actions
- External verification of quality
- Up to date information about quality
- Clearly understandable standards for QA

What does this mean for higher education institutions in practical terms?

- Development of awareness of quality in higher education institutions
- Action to embed quality consciousness amongst individual academic faculty
- Encouragement of a strong sense of collegiate responsibility for meeting students' needs
- Recognition of importance of self-knowledge
- An outward-looking philosophy
- A needs-driven quality assurance system

What about external quality assurance?

- Must be clear about what it is trying to achieve
- Should focus on effectiveness of institutional autonomy
- Should do no more than is necessary
- Should be committed to improving quality
- Should beware the sterility of repetition

A natural history of quality assurance in higher education

1. Raise consciousness/develop quality culture (internal/external)
2. Develop quality assurance system (internal)
3. Evaluate programmes (internal)
4. Accredite programmes (external)
5. Accredite institutions (external)
6. Transfer programme accreditation to institutions
7. Reserve external accreditation for internationally competitive subjects on a voluntary basis