Defining Quality

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Introduction

Quality is a slippery term, not least because it is in part practical, in part philosophical and (almost) always relative. Yet it underpins higher education provision and is central to policy debate and regulatory approaches across the UK. So how do we define quality? An understanding of the different mechanisms at play can provide context to the debate.

At the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), we hold diverse roles in the regulatory, advisory, policy and voluntary spheres across the UK.[1] At the heart of all we do, we recognise the primary responsibility for maintaining quality and standards sits with providers themselves. Providers with degree-awarding powers have particular responsibility for the academic standards of the qualifications they award. For us, academic quality is a comprehensive term referring to how, and how well, higher education providers manage teaching and learning opportunities to help students progress and succeed, while meeting the legitimate expectations of students, employers, government and society in general. It is, of course, where we introduce expectations – particularly of such diverse audiences – that relativity begins to come significantly into play, and we open ourselves to the risk of ambiguity or confusion.

So, for us, academic quality is underpinned by reference points – designed, developed, agreed and adhered to by the sector to provide some commonality across the many faces of higher education provision. They are, thus, benchmarks of quality. Across higher education provision, we refer commonly to threshold standards – by which we mean the minimum acceptable level of achievement a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national qualifications frameworks (in England now adopted into the Regulatory Framework as sector-recognised standards) and in subject benchmark statements. Degree-awarding bodies set the academic standards expected for their courses (modules and awards). These may exceed the threshold academic standards and are more akin to output measures than benchmarks. They will typically be identified through internal mechanisms such as institutional policies, course documentation and marking criteria.

Already we can see that no definition is straightforward, and in fact what is meant by quality or standards will be very much dependent on the context, and perspective, of the speaker. So, in this provocation, I am going to outline in very general high-level terms what those words mean in contexts other than higher education, and then focus incrementally on what they mean in higher education generally and, finally, as used by QAA specifically.

While it is challenging to define terms in common usage, it is certainly not impossible. Quality can be considered on a spectrum, ranging (in order of sophistication of approach) from quality

control, through quality assurance and into quality enhancement – the whole underpinned by quality benchmarks, or reference points.

In many sectors, the notion of **quality control** is straightforward. Quality control tests a sample of the output against a specification. The required standard is set by identifying measures for outputs, and then testing everything else against those measures. In this way, it is easy to demonstrate how quality requirements are being fulfilled (typically within an acceptable tolerance).

No matter the sector, quality control is only part of the picture. To be really efficient, one needs to provide confidence in the cycle of production; to reassure that there are systems and processes in place to ensure that the output consistently meets, if not exceeds, the quality benchmarks that have been set. This is where **quality assurance** comes in. Quality assurance acts prospectively to provide confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled. Assurance relates to how a process is performed or a product is made. Control is the retrospective, post-production inspection aspect of quality – it focuses on the product or output itself. Arguably, without the underpinning processes, outcomes cannot be guaranteed – they are achieved (or not) by luck. In our sector, assurance gives us the confidence that a provider understands (and self-reviews) how it is producing its outcomes.

But in higher education, we are not simply producing identical products for customers. QAA's definition of academic quality refers to both how and how well higher education providers support students to succeed through learning, teaching and assessment. This is because higher education is not a product, as classically defined. It is an intrinsically co-creative, experiential process. Students and teachers collaborate to progress and reach their potential and, ideally, the learning from that collaboration is mutual as we constantly rethink what we thought we knew. That is why there is an additional dimension to higher education quality. It is not just about checking we are still doing the same thing effectively, it is also about **quality enhancement** – that drive continuously to improve the processes, both incrementally and transformationally.

The quality continuum in higher education

Quality assurance has a clearly-defined meaning in industry; the International Organisation for Standardisation describes it as 'part of quality management focused on providing confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled'.[2] In higher education, by contrast, its meaning – perhaps because of the experiential, collaborative nature of the beast – is more multi-dimensional.

In 1993, Lee Harvey and Diana Green noted that quality has two dimensions of relativism and three applications.[3] These have borne the passage of time, and so it may be useful to remind ourselves of them here.

The first dimension of relativism is about the context and speaker – it is deeply personal. So we need always to hold in mind whose quality we are concerned with. Higher education has many stakeholders, each with a particular perspective on each of the elements of quality we explore below. Students' views will differ from those of employers, from validating bodies, from academics, regulators, Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) and so on. The second relativist dimension is about benchmarks and there are three subsets of benchmark relativism. The first is an ideal – perfection or bust – and by its nature is unattainable. The second benchmark subset is a series of absolute thresholds which must be exceeded. The extent to which they are exceeded can give rise to a rating in some cases. And the third benchmark subset is achieved not by thresholds, but by processes which lead to desired outcomes. In this instance, acceptable quality is achieved if the thing meets the claims that were made for it, irrespective of its relationship with thresholds.

As for the three principal applications of quality, the first takes as axiomatic that quality is something exceptional; the second that it is something consistent; and the third that it is fit for purpose.

Exceptionalism sees quality as an ideal which, by its nature, cannot be assessed; there is simply no measure by which to do so. A more accessible version of this posits quality as a measure of excellence. Here, there are components of quality which are identifiable but very difficult to attain – this allows quality to retain something of the elitism of the idealistic view. Expectations can be set at both the input and output stage – if you can recruit the best students, the best academics and equip them with the best facilities, then you can produce the best outcomes. The most practical view of quality as exceptional comes via minimum standards. In this manifestation, quality is achieved via the fulfilment of minimum standards set by absolute thresholds. Anything above them is excellent.

The second application of quality is to see it as something consistent. This shifts the focus from inputs and outputs to process. Quality becomes not at all elitist, but something everyone can have provided processes are conformed with. Here, quality conforms to a specification and relies on prevention rather than inspection, focusing on ensuring that each stage is flawless, rather than waiting until final inspection to identify defects. The specification is not a standard, nor is quality assessed against any standards. But conformance to specification takes the place of meeting (external) benchmark standards. This emphasis on process certainly has some relevance to higher education but is not consistent with the focus on inputs and outputs in current discourse.

The third application equates quality to the fitness for purpose of its outcomes. This is quite remote from the idea of quality as a measure of distinctiveness or elitism, and so is a more functional definition than an exceptional one. But it does beg questions about whose purpose and how fitness is assessed. In higher education, you might argue that the students' requirements are key. A student specifies in advance what they require and judges quality by the extent to which their requirements are fulfilled. But a student cannot typically know, at the beginning of their transformational journey, what their requirements will be. And given the multiple stakeholders in the co-creation of an education, would the student's view even be paramount? So perhaps we should look at fitness for purpose from the provider's perspective? In this case, quality could be defined in terms of the provider meeting its own objectives or mission. Here, quality assurance ensures there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality, however it is measured, is achieved.

So it is clear that different cultures and policies drive different approaches to quality. But even in higher education, quality control tends to focus on accountability – also difficult to define in the context of higher education. One view is that quality control provides accountability for governmental higher education expenditure by whatever mechanism that has been delivered. A recent example of this approach was when Universities Minister Michelle Donelan MP wrote on the Conservative Home website:

> *For the first time, we will be setting tough minimum requirements [for quality] … enforced by fines, and ultimately, withdrawal of student finance.*[4]

To further complicate the picture, at different times in different governmental policy initiatives, control and assurance have danced around each other in providing accountability for standards to funders, regulators and policymakers.

In part, the roots of the separation between these approaches to quality may come back to differences between perceptions of different stakeholders. In particular, the tension is between government, which tends to focus more on accountability (or quality control) in a fit-for-purpose

model of quality, and providers, who tend to be more interested in quality improvement.[5] As the QAA celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2022 with a series of conversations about quality, exploring this tension may provide a useful lens for thinking about the future.

There is another view of quality – one that is transformational. This is enhancement, a view of quality that moves it away from being rooted in a product or in fitness for purpose, and sees it instead as a process of changes (or enhancements) for participants. It allows for the collaborative, co-creational nature of higher education, embracing the idea that both students and academics may be changed by the process. It includes notions of value-added, where educational experience enhances the knowledge, skills and abilities of students; it introduces the notion of empowerment; and it assumes participants engage in and influence their own transformation.[6] Enhancement is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, the cultural / psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitments towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural / managerial element with defined processes that drive improved quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts.

Quality for QAA

QAA sits in multiple and complex relationships with higher education providers and other sector stakeholders in the quality and standards space. In England, because the Office for Students regulates quality and standards, we focus primarily on enhancement work as a service to members. In the rest of the UK, we maintain an overview over the entire continuum of quality and standards. This article refers to all the work we undertake outside our role as the Designated Quality Body in England.

In practice, approaches to UK higher education draw something from many of the approaches outlined above. Within this complex environment, our work is not about standardising approaches or enforcing rigorous interpretations, but enabling providers to have a view of how their policies, processes and practices compare to those in other providers. We support the sector to reflect on its own practices and enhance its provision. We are not simply a mirror.

Across the UK, the higher education sector commits to minimum acceptable (or threshold) levels of achievement for equivalent awards. These are captured in some of the key sector reference points attached to the *UK Quality Code:* the *Qualifications Frameworks*, the *Credit Frameworks* and supporting standards, such as the *Subject Benchmark Statements*.[7] The how, and how well, of academic quality is defined by providers. Individual awarding bodies are responsible for setting local and contextual interpretations of these standards, through setting the grades, marks or classifications that differentiate between levels of student achievement above the threshold academic standard within an individual award.[8]

However, the word 'standards' is also commonly used to describe output measures (students' academic achievement, for example) and internal process metrics (such as the rate of continuation of a cohort from one academic year to another). Neither of these uses of the word is a quality requirement, so much as an assurance or control measure.

So, the type of quality management is dependent on how the measure is used. If the measure is used by a provider to check their internal processes are producing the desired results in either grades, employment or continuation, then that constitutes quality assurance. The provider then adjusts its processes to correct any variance on its planned output. If the measure is used retrospectively to hold a provider accountable, for example for its use of public funds, then that constitutes quality control, often leading to a penalty if the measure falls below the benchmark.

What does this mean for providers?

Providers might choose to exceed the threshold – or minimum – standards identified in the national frameworks for qualifications, but we nonetheless consider academic standards to be anchored to those sector reference points. Quality on the other hand is trickier to pin down and, as we have shown above, providers draw from different interpretations of the word. Quality is a more fluid concept, one which adapts to the nature of the student learning experience the provider is seeking to offer. Indeed, it can vary with the characteristics of the students themselves. When we talk about quality, we mean the nature of the learning opportunities students are offered that help them to reach the academic standard of the award they are seeking to achieve.

In quality assurance, providers systematically monitor and evaluate learning and teaching to check against sector benchmarks and reference points. But assurance is also, critically, concerned with the processes used to meet those benchmarks and reference points. This is because a provider will need to satisfy themselves that their quality is consistent – that it is able to guarantee the extent to which it will provide the learning opportunities it describes to students at the point at which the students sign up for their courses. Without well-understood processes that support the various elements by which students engage with their learning and the measurement of progress and attainment through that learner journey, a provider's quality and academic standards cannot be guaranteed.

The *UK Quality Code* identifies practices that providers can put in place to enhance the student learning experience and the academic standards of the awards they offer. There is considerable flexibility in the approaches that providers adopt, and this is important to ensure providers are addressing their students' personal context, including subject-specific traditions or practices to follow or servicing particular employer markets. Within that flexibility and opportunity for creativity, students have the right to expect the quality of their learning experience will meet the sector expectations in the *UK Quality Code*.

So, in this important regard, **quality assurance** is also concerned with how well the learning opportunities made available to a student enable them to achieve their award. A provider can assure itself of the quality of the opportunities it provides, but it cannot guarantee how an individual student will experience these. To do this, it needs to engage students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.

Quality control, certainly as a function of accountability to governments, by contrast, simply wants to measure the effectiveness of providers' outcomes and is less interested in the under-pinning structures that deliver them. Quality control will only concern itself with underpinning structures when the outcomes fall below the required standard, in which case the provider will be held accountable for its failure.

Quality enhancement is the process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which pedagogy is developed and students' learning supported. Enhancement allows a higher education provider to improve the quality of learning opportunities, and to have policies, structures and processes in place both to detect where improvement is possible and to measure the speed and extent of progress. Quality enhancement incorporates effective quality assurance; it operates in the space where the habitual review of processes underpinning quality identifies that, although the required sector expectations are being met or exceeded, there is nonetheless scope for innovations in pedagogy or other improvements in the student learning experience.

Enhancement is thus not merely an identification of need, but a recognition of opportunity for improvement. Inherent within it is the provider's sense of what they would like to achieve and a plan of how they are going to get there. Enhancement also involves student engagement – enhancing students' experience can only realistically be done by engaging them in partnership.

For providers, quality is managed through the confidence of assurance, the measurement of control and the systematic improvement of enhancement. Quality control may or may not reward the delivery of quality enhancement, depending on the policy priorities of the accountable authority. But through the three related – but not interchangeable – mechanisms, providers can have confidence that the quality of the student learning experience is secure.

Endnotes

1   QAA is the independent quality body for UK higher education. It is a higher education charitable company, which is limited by guarantee and whose UK and international members are representative organisations of the higher education sector. More information on QAA's work is available on www.qaa.ac.uk.

2   International Organisation for Standardisation, *Quality management systems – Fundamentals and vocabulary*, 2005.

3   Lee Harvey and Diana Green, *Defining Quality,* 1993, pp. 9–34.

4   Michelle Donelan, *Our new plan to crack down on low-quality higher* education, Conservative Home, 2022.

5   Alberto Amaral, *Higher education and quality assessment: the many rationales for quality,* 2006, pp. 6-10.

6   Lee Harvey and Diana Green, *Defining Quality,* 1993, pp. 9–34.

7   UK Standing Committee for Quality Assurance & The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *The revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education*, 2018; The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *The Frameworks for HE Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies*, 2014; The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Advice on Academic Credit Arrangements*, 2021; The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *Subject Benchmark Statements*.

8   In England, these standards are voluntarily adopted by providers and the only compulsory standards are those listed in the Regulatory Framework as Sector Recognised Standards. These are the standards against which the government, through the regulator, performs quality control for the purposes of holding providers accountable for their outcomes.