

# UNDERSTANDING QUALITY

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## ABSTRACT

Five different conceptions of quality are examined in some detail: excellence, consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformative. These are related to different notions of standards: academic, competence, service and organisational. There is a brief examination of the way each is assured. It is argued that transformative quality is a metaconcept that captures the essence of quality.

**Key words: quality, standards, assurance, accreditation, assessment, audit**

## 1 Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the concept of quality has grown in prominence in higher education and has a significant role in the Bologna process. The concept, though, is multi-faceted. This article is intended to help academics and administrators at institutional, faculty and department levels in higher education to understand the nuances of the quality concept and see how it relates to assurance processes.

This article will:

- differentiate quality as concept from quality as mechanism (that is, differentiate quality from quality assurance);
- explore the relationship between quality and standards;
- outline and discuss several definitions of quality and examine how these tend to be evaluated and assured.

## 2 Quality and quality assurance

Quality as a concept is quite separate from the processes of quality assurance, assessment, evaluation, audit or other forms of monitoring. For simplicity, these different types will all be referred to as 'quality assurance' in this paper. The difference between quality and quality assurance is conceptually similar to that between the concept of intelligence and IQ tests, which purport to measure intelligence. Quality assurance is about checking the quality of a process or outcomes. Purposes of quality assurance include compliance, control, accountability and improvement: quality is the conceptual tool through which these purposes are implemented. Implementation is via the quality assurance methodology.

Thus, for example, an agency may wish to ensure compliance with a policy, such as aligning curricula with a professional education requirement. Quality is evoked as the vehicle to ensure compliance, as alignment will be one of the quality criteria used by

evaluators in making their judgements about the quality of the provision. The methodology for arriving at the judgement is the quality assurance process.

Quality provides the conceptual underpinning for quality assurance processes. So much so that when the term quality is mentioned in higher educational circles it is often taken as shorthand for quality assurance processes. For example, people in higher education talk about ‘quality visits’, ‘preparing for quality’, ‘the burden of quality’ — meaning that quality evaluation processes are burdensome.

The UNESCO definition of quality, in higher education, (Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2004, pp 46–48), for example, conflates quality with the purposes and mechanisms for measuring quality. It states:

*Quality (Academic)*: Quality in higher education is a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional mission and objectives, as well as to specific standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline.

The intention of this article is to go beyond the conflation of quality and assurance mechanism to explore the nature of quality itself.

### **3 Quality and standards**

Quality issues in higher education are also closely related to issues of standards. In debates about the nature and functioning of higher education, there is considerable overlap between the concepts of ‘quality’ and ‘standards’. However, quality and standards are not the same. ‘Standards’ are specified and usually measurable outcome indicators that are used for comparative purposes.

The term standard is complicated because it means both a fixed criterion (against which an outcome can be matched) and a level of attainment. In German, for example, (according to *Brockhaus Enzyklopädie*) standard means ‘ein durch Vereinheitlichung geschaffener fester Maßstab’, which roughly translates as ‘a fixed yardstick developed by means of/as a result of developing a unified concept of something’.<sup>1</sup> A sporting analogy might be drawn. In golf, the standard score for a course is set out by specifying the expected number of strokes to complete each hole (the par score). This is the equivalent to the fixed criterion. This is distinct from the standard of the play; a high standard of play may still be achieved even when scoring above par if, for example, the weather conditions are very difficult. Alternatively, the course may be easy and all competitors find it easy to score better than par. In this paper, the emphasis is on standards of attainment not on criterion standards (on the playing score rather than the par score in the golf analogy).

It was noted above that there is a distinction between quality and standards. Broadly speaking, it is a difference between process and outcomes. Quality refers to how things are done whereas standards are used to measure outcomes. The golfer may hit the ball

elegantly (quality) and the outcome may be a good score (standard). The confusing term ‘quality standards’, which can be found in some settings, is equivalent to the notion of standard as criterion, as mentioned above, and in the golf analogy, ‘quality standard’ would be the par score.

There are four broad areas in higher education where standards are set and assessed: academic, competence, service and organisational standards.

*Academic standards* relate to the intellectual abilities of students. It is the demonstrated ability to meet specified level of academic attainment, usually relating to objectives or stated outcomes, operationalised via performance on assessed pieces of work. In this context, the grade achieved by the student would be the academic standard of the student, the ‘quality standard’ would be the pass mark (minimum grade to required to achieve the award). For research, standards are assessed, for example, via peer recognition.

*Standards of competence* relate to the technical abilities of students. It is a demonstration that a specified level of ability on a range of competencies has been achieved. Competencies may include general transferable skills as well as ‘higher level’ academic skills appropriate to an award. In some cases competence includes particular abilities congruent with induction into a profession and the award of a licence to practice, as for example, in medicine or law.

*Service standards* refer to the standards of service provided by the organisation to the student. It assesses whether identified elements of the service (process or facilities) are congruent with specified benchmarks or expectations. Such things as benchmark statements and student charters often focus on quantifiable and measurable items. *Post hoc* measurements of customer opinions (satisfaction surveys) are used as indicators of service provision. Thus, service standards in higher education parallel consumer standards.

*Organisational standards* are the principles and procedures by which the institution assures that it provides an appropriate learning and research environment. Organisational standards measure the attainment of formal recognition of systems to ensure effective management of organisational processes and clear dissemination of organisational practices. Organisational standards are also sometimes called ‘quality standards’. This is somewhat confusing. In the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ENQA 2005), for example, the standards are normative aims for quality processes, which are elaborated through a set of expectations (the guidelines) that are similar to objectives.

#### **4 Definitions of quality**

Quality, as a noun, is the embodiment of the essential nature of a person, object, action, process or organisation; it is sometimes used as shorthand for elite (The Quality’ was a term used, in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to refer to the upper class (Harvey and Green, 1993)).<sup>2</sup> As an adjective, quality usually means high grade or high status (as in a quality performance) and often implies exclusivity, desirability, goodness or even reliability.<sup>3</sup> In its adverbial form — qualitatively — it is usually linked to change and implies transformation (Harvey, 2004).

Quality should also be distinguished from *qualities*, which are the explicit expression of attributes rather than an essential embodiment of character. Qualities are the characteristics, attributes or properties of a person or object. Any object can be deconstructed, into a set of qualities: the more complex the object the longer and the more multi-dimensional is the list of qualities. But quality is not defined by a list of qualities; it is a holistic concept that evokes the essence of an object, person, organisation, or event.

The evolution of quality in higher education has added many nuances to the essentialist and status definitions of quality. In this section, five key definitions of quality will be explored.<sup>4</sup> These five quality concepts and the four aspects of standards are summarised in Table 1.

[TABLE 1 about here](#)

#### **4.1 *Quality as exceptional or as excellence***

The exceptional notion sees quality as something special (Harvey and Green, 1993). There are three variations on this. First, the traditional notion of quality as distinctive, second, a view of quality as exceeding very high standards (or ‘excellence’) and third, a weaker notion of exceptional quality, as passing a set of required (minimum) standards.

##### *4.1.1 Traditional notion of quality*

Traditionally, the concept of quality has been associated with the notion of distinctiveness, of something special or ‘high class’. The traditional notion of quality implies exclusivity: for example, the supposed high quality of an Oxbridge or Ivy League education. Quality is not determined through an assessment of what is provided but is based on an assumption that the distinctiveness and inaccessibility of an elite education is of itself ‘quality’.

The traditional notion of quality does not judge quality against a set of criteria. One instinctively knows. The traditional concept of quality is of little value when it comes to assessing quality in education because it provides no definable means of determining quality. However, it is of enormous value in crafting reputation, which is a major indicator in the construction of league tables. The *Times Higher Education Supplement* international league tables, for example, are almost entirely based on reputation. Reputation itself is a function of indicators such as the history, exclusivity, wealth and research profile of an institution.

##### *4.1.2 Exceeding high standards: excellence*

A second meaning of the exceptional is the excellence notion of quality. Indeed, excellence is often used interchangeably with quality. Unlike the traditional notion (see 4.1.1), the excellence definition provides benchmarks against which ‘high’ standards can be evaluated. This is not to say the benchmark standards are objective but they at least have the potential to specify the components of excellence in any given setting.

Normally, excellence is about excelling in input and output. An institution that takes the best students and provides them with the best resources is presumed to excel, whatever the process (by which students learn). The value added may be minimal.

However, Doherty-Delorme and Shaker (2001, p. 8) offer a non-elitist version of quality as excellence.

We have defined quality as the degree of excellence of the entire educational experience... this includes: the quality of student life; the adequacy of university or college finances; the breadth of disciplines and modes of learning offered; and student access to tenured faculty.

In this they move beyond the student qualifications as an indicator of excellent quality to service standards (what is provided to students), which all institutions can attain.

In any event, it should be noted that criteria of excellence are fluid, Berg and Sabatini's (undated) study at two western Canadian universities found that faculty members' definitions of excellence of graduate students tended to focus not on the characteristics of the students but primarily on external markers of success such as publications, conference papers, scholarships, awards, research grants, and grades. The graduate student themselves infrequently mentioned external indicators, such as grades. While some mentioned funding income as a factor that may have resulted in them being identified as excellent by their department, most considered this the result of their own actions and attributes, such as initiative, passion for learning and self-motivation.

#### 4.1.3 *Checking standards*

The final notion of quality as exceptional dilutes the notion of excellence. A 'quality' product in this sense is one that has passed a set of quality checks. Rather than difficult to attain, the checks are based on attainable criteria that are designed to ensure minimum standards. This corresponds with what have been described as 'threshold definitions' of quality, or in some cases, 'benchmark quality' (implying minimum benchmarks rather than the 'excellence benchmarks' discussed above) or minimum 'quality standards'.

Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) and Vlăsceanu *et al.*, (2004) suggest that the threshold notion of quality is about setting certain norms and criteria such that any programme, department, or institution, which reaches these norms and criteria, is 'deemed to be of quality'.<sup>5</sup> 'Quality' is thus attributed to all those items that fulfil the minimum standards set by the manufacturer or monitoring body.

The threshold standards approach to quality implies that quality is improved if thresholds are raised. A product that meets a higher standard is a higher quality product. In education, quality has often been equated with the maintenance and improvement of standards.

This approach to quality implicitly assumes that 'standards' are 'objective' and static because, at any given moment, there will be an 'absolute' benchmark (or standard) against which threshold judgements are made. Such minimum benchmarks may be set internally or externally, they may be pass/fail or on a graded scale. However, they are not as absolute as they appear. Standards are negotiated and subject to continued renegotiation in the light of changed circumstances. For example, the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (2000) states:

Excellence is generally taken to mean outstanding, or of a quality that surpasses a defined threshold in a particular field. In the case of research, there is no agreed way in which excellence is defined or measured uniformly across different disciplines at the international level, although some attempts

have been made using bibliometric analyses, with limited success. The UK Higher Education Funding Councils currently seek to measure the quality of research at the national level in all subject areas through periodic Research Assessment Exercises. The RAE does this by assessing research against assumed measures of international excellence. It does not however seek to benchmark quality against international comparators since there are no internationally-agreed measures of quality

#### *4.1.4 Assuring excellence*

In practice, relating an excellence notion of quality to academic standards emphasises a 'gold standard' of academic achievement. It implies a comparative evaluation of outputs, be they graduate abilities or research outcomes, which in the modern era must be internationally comparable. There is a tension between a 'democratic' demonstration of international excellence and an elitist desire to maintain pockets of excellence distinct from mass higher education. This may also reflect a desire to be able to claim rather than demonstrate excellence, perhaps based on reputation or wealth rather than, for example, value added (Table 2).

#### [Table 2 about here](#)

Assuring excellent academic standards can only be done through a system of standards monitoring, such as an external examiner system or a peer process, such as a research assessment exercise or direct assessment of teaching. Student feedback might provide an indirect measure of the latter. Accreditation schemes may allude to academic excellence but only do this indirectly as their main aim is to ensure threshold standards are achieved, or likely to be achieved. In essence, accreditation is more suitable for identifying whether, in particular professions, students are likely to achieve appropriate levels of professional competence to allow them a licence to practice (or to be admitted to the next phase of professional education).

Assuring exceptional service standards tends to be input driven, with an assumption that good facilities and well-qualified staff will result in good service to students. In practice, within the excellence approach, there is a marked reluctance to expose teaching competence to scrutiny.

Assuring excellent organisational standards is usually done through institutional accreditation procedures. However, this is principally a threshold checking procedure. An audit approach offers the opportunity to really explore how the quality processes actually operate through audit trails. Although audit is usually expected to evaluate against institutionally-prescribed norms, there tends to be a set of latent generic expectations about appropriate organisational procedures (such as fair assessment procedures) against which excellence could be appraised.

#### *4.2 Quality as perfection or consistency*

Quality is also construed as perfection or consistency. This involves a shift from outcome standards measurement to process standards. A quality product in this sense is one that is

consistent or without flaws (Ingle, 1985). This notion of quality emphasises reliability and is encapsulated in two interrelated ideas: *zero defects* and *quality culture*.

The zero defects approach to quality (Halpin, 1966, Crosby, 1979) replaces the emphasis on exclusivity with one that makes quality accessible for all. Excellence is redefined as *conformance to specification* (Harrington, 1988). The specification is not itself a standard nor is it assessed against any standards. Conformance to specification means ensuring there are no flaws and that outcomes are delivered consistently. Reliability, taken-for-granted in the exceptional notion of quality, becomes the vehicle for quality claims (Garvin, 1988).

‘Zero defects’ is not just about conforming to specification; it also embodies a philosophy of *prevention* rather than inspection (Peters and Waterman, 1982). The prevention philosophy is embodied in a quality culture that places the onus on everyone to maximise the quality of their services and outputs (Crosby, 1986). The focus is on ensuring that, at each stage, faults do not occur rather than relying on final inspection to identify defects (Oakland, 1989). It has been suggested that this approach to quality has no relevance to higher education because there is no intention to produce identical graduates or research outcomes. Indeed, the aim of higher education is to encourage independent critical and analytic development. This misses the point: ‘zero defects’ and a ‘quality culture’ has a role in the complexity of the educational enterprise, not least in flawless information systems and in reliable and consistent student grading and research assessment processes. Another focus is to provide consistent service and value. The University of Louisville (1995), for example, defines what it calls ‘operational excellence’ as a focus on reliability, convenience, and price competitiveness. ‘Customers would expect total availability, security and integrity of the infrastructure and services. Customers expect reliability to be the norm, followed by convenience (delivery of quick, dependable service), and then price competitiveness (lowest price.)’

Quality as perfection/consistency turns quality into a relative concept. There are no absolutes against which the output can be assessed, no universal benchmarks. In this sense, for example, a quality Rover car is one that on delivery from the manufacturer exhibits no defects and performs to its specification. This approach does not provide a basis for comparison with a Renault or a Volkswagen, which have different specifications. As higher education moves to a more differentiated approach, reflecting the US ‘market niche’ colleges, a relativist notion of quality may be more appropriate.

Despite concerns about the consistency definition of quality for higher education, it does relate to the idea of delegated responsibility for quality. It evokes issues of trust and the locus of control of the educational process, reflecting current battles about managerialist control and academic autonomy. A quality culture requires a facilitative managerial infrastructure alongside a trusting delegation of the academic process to those who directly engage with teaching or research.

#### 4.2.1 *Assuring consistency*

There is little formal attempt to evaluate or assure consistency in provision in higher education as this tends to apply mostly to service and organisational standards rather than academic ones. Achieving a consistent academic standard, year on year, is rather taken for granted. However, consistency in student grading, accurate records and reliable administrative procedures are important. A key mechanism for evaluating or assuring

these is feedback from students and staff. Quality audit or assessment processes indirectly address the consistency of student grading, although this is not a principal task. Audit may also comment on the reliability of administrative process. In essence, the assuring of consistency is in the hands of staff and students.

Consistency of organisational standards is quality assured through mechanisms such as ISO9000 or similar certification, which focuses on the codification of processes to ensure that errors are not made. This was a popular form of certification in some parts of the UK and US post-compulsory education sectors in the 1990s but has fallen out of favour, not least due to its emphasis on manuals and its failure to engage with academic processes.

### ***4.3 Quality as fitness for/of purpose***

Quality is also defined as fitness for purpose of a product or service. Fitness for purpose equates quality with the fulfilment of a specification or stated outcomes. Quality is thus judged by the extent to which the product or service fits a stated purpose.

This fitness-for-purpose notion is distinct from the idea of quality as something special, elitist, or difficult to attain. It is a functional definition of quality rather than an exceptional one. If something does the job it is designed for then it is deemed to be a quality product or service. Unlike the exceptional notion of quality, which, by definition, must be exclusive (even in the weaker standards checking approach) fitness for purpose, like ‘zero defects’, is inclusive. Every product and service has the potential to fit its purpose and thus be a quality product or service.

Although straightforward in conception, ‘fitness for purpose’ is deceptive (Moodie, 1986), for it raises the issues of ‘whose purpose?’ and ‘how is fitness assessed?’ For some, the objectives are set externally and fitness for purpose becomes compliance:

*Quality as fitness for purpose*: a concept that stresses the need to meet or conform to generally accepted standards such as those defined by an accreditation or quality assurance body, the focus being on the efficiency of the processes at work in the institution or programme in fulfilling the stated, given objectives and mission. (Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2004, p. 47) <sup>6</sup>

Similarly, for the US Council For Higher Education Accreditation (2001) quality, ‘refers to “fitness for purpose”—meeting or conforming to generally accepted standards as defined by an accrediting or quality assurance body’.

For others, the purpose is a more contentious issue and the notion of fitness *of* purpose has been introduced to evaluate whether the quality-related intentions of an organisation are adequate.<sup>7</sup> The notion emerged because of the relativism and non-comparability that besets fitness for purpose.

A major weakness of the fitness for purpose concept is that it may seem to imply that “anything goes” in higher education so long as a purpose can be formulated for it. This weakness is more likely to be exacerbated in large and diverse higher education systems in which a wide range of “purposes” at institutional level may be identified by individual institutions, generally through their mission statements, and at more precise academic levels through the learning outcomes of particular programmes. This diversity is often further complicated in transnational and distance education (situations in which

educational provision crosses borders) as there is frequently a divergence of national views between “sending” and “receiving” countries as to both “fitness” and “purpose”. (Campbell and Rozsnyai , 2002, p. 20)

The UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 1999), for example, also combines a fitness of purpose with a fitness for purpose approach: ‘the Agency will use the benchmarking statements in the course of review at subject level. They will be a means of determining the fitness of purpose of individual programmes. Accordingly, they should enable broadly comparable standards of attainment to be identified’.

Where fitness *for* purpose opened up the possibility of inclusive quality, as every product and service has the potential to fit its purpose and thus be a quality product or service, fitness *of* purpose closed down inclusivity as there are external determinants of what is acceptable as a quality criterion.

Broadly, fitness for purpose offers two alternative priorities for specifying purpose. The first puts the onus on the customer; the second locates it with the provider.

#### *4.3.1 Customer requirements*

This version of fitness for purpose defines quality as meeting the customer specification, needs or requirements. In principle, the customer is sovereign. The customer has requirements that become the specifications for the product and the outcome reliably matches these requirements.

In a situation where a customer wants a tailor-made suit, the process of customer specification and delivery against it is relatively straightforward. In practice, though, a customer-determined specification will be negotiated; the exact colour of the cloth, the detail on the suit will be adjusted to accommodate the available stock and the skill of the tailor. In a complex environment such as higher education, it is much more difficult to identify the customer let alone the specification. Further, as education is a longitudinal process the specification is likely to change over time.

In practice, what tends to happen is that customer needs are not encapsulated in a customer-originated specification but in a producer specification. The producer of mass-produced products, or provider of standardised services, assesses what the customer is prepared to buy (via market research and assessment of sales, and so on) and supplies a product or service, which targets consumers, usually via persuasive advertising. The customer is an ‘ideal type’ (Weber, 1969) that the market research and advertising has defined. In education, the emphasis is on ‘selling’ the programme and leaving the detail of the experience up to the producers (academics and managers), who decide what is appropriate. The programme is ‘surrounded’ by an institutional profile or habitus that situates and adds value to, or in some cases subtracts value from, the programme.

Despite rhetoric about choice, many higher education students opt for what is available to them. Choice may be restricted by entry requirements, lack of available places on courses, lack of knowledge about the full range of courses, mobility and other personal circumstances. The specifications are not determined directly by the customer. At best, they may have some influence on determining the shape of the product once they are in the system. These vary from the selection of various options, through to applying pressure via feedback on their experience.

#### 4.3.2 *Mission-based fitness for purpose*

The tricky issue of determining who are the customers of higher education, and what their requirements are, can be circumscribed by returning the emphasis to the institution. Rather than a concern about meeting customer requirements, quality is defined as the institution fulfilling its own stated objectives, or mission. This is, in theory, the favourite approach of most quality assurance agencies. Woodhouse (1999, pp. 29–30) notes:

“fitness for purpose” is a definition of quality that allows institutions to define their purpose in their mission and objectives, so “quality” is demonstrated by achieving these. This definition allows variability in institutions, rather than forcing them to be clones of one another. This at least is the theory, but whether it is achieved depends also on the culture. For example, systems based on the United States model tend to be comfortable with very different higher education institutions, but British-based systems often have policies that tend towards the reduction of variability.

Mission-based fitness for purpose reflects approaches that see quality as about anticipating needs: The ISO8402 definition of quality is, ‘The totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs’. This view sees quality as satisfying implicit needs and shifts the emphasis back to the producer.

Through mission statements, higher education institutions specify a set of goals and then demonstrate how they fulfil them. However, placing the onus on the institution to identify and fulfil a mission only partly resolves the problem of customer specification.

Student feedback on their educational experience has grown considerably in the last two decades and is an important feature in improving the student experience. However, it tends to be reactive feedback, leading to incremental change (at best) rather than proactive agenda setting.

#### 4.3.3 *Assuring fitness*

Fitness for purpose of academic standards is assured through quality assessment procedures. In theory, this is done by the institution demonstrating it fits either externally-prescribed standards (such as those specified by a regulatory or professional body) or its own objectives, as specified, for example, in its values and mission statement. In theory, an institution that embraces a fitness-for-purpose approach to academic standards should adopt criterion-referenced assessment of students, rather than norm-referenced. The criteria for evaluating academic standards should relate to specified objectives (be they internal or externally defined) rather than any normative absolute criteria. However, mission statements, for example, tend to be general in scope and often include comparative statements, such as ‘of international standard’, which implies a degree of norm-referencing and a reversion to excellence agendas.

Fitness for purpose of academic standards is also judged, indirectly, through accreditation schemes, which again assure minimum compliance to externally-imposed standards, such as those prescribed by a professional body. In all of this, there is no direct attempt to fit student requirements; students as customer are presumed to be well served by the mediators of fitness *of* purpose, viz. professional bodies, quality assurance agencies or government departments.

Standards of competence are also judged indirectly through accreditation. Again there is a tension between fitting the institutional purpose and fitting the requirements of the accrediting body, especially when it is a professional or regulatory body with the task of protecting the public from incompetent practitioners (as, for example, in medicine, architecture, law). Competence to practice can only be satisfactorily evaluated at a subject level and despite the rhetoric of fitness for purpose, the process is essentially the same as the excellence approach to checking minimum standards.

Fitness for purpose of service standards is assured through surveys of satisfaction with provision. The institution specifies service norms through its mission and values, its service statements and customer charters. The services provided, from teaching through library and computing support to other facilities, are assessed by users. In theory, service should be assessed against the institutional service norms but is often judged against student expectations or compared with provision elsewhere. Institutions thus endeavour to adjust student expectations to more closely match the institutional offer. Again, the student requirement, as customer, is not prioritised but is distorted to correspond, as far as possible, with institutional provision.

Fitness for purpose of institutional standards is essentially what institutional audit is designed to assure. Institutional audits explore whether appropriate mechanisms are in place and working effectively to deliver what the institution promises to deliver. In practice, though, auditors bring with them some generic expectations of institutional standards. Further, codes of practice and guidelines, such as those produced by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2006) in the UK and the new ENQA (2005) *Standards and Guidelines* provide a basis for making generic, rather than mission-based, judgements of organisational standards.

Fitness-for-purpose-based quality assurance approaches are designed to evaluate institutional mission fulfilment but despite the intention, all quality assurance systems have an overlay of generic requirements. In short, the institution or programme is not solely judged on its ability to fulfil its mission but on whether it complies with national, governmental, disciplinary, professional or other (threshold) expectations.

#### **4.4 *Quality as value for money***

Value for money is a definition of quality that judges the quality of provision, processes or outcomes against the monetary cost (both overt and hidden) of making the provision, undertaking the process or achieving the outcomes.

In essence, quality as value for money sees quality as return on investment. One view sees value for money as being achieved if a specified outcome (product or service) is obtained at lowest cost. An alternative view sees value for money as getting a specified product for a predetermined cost that suits the customer. These are slightly different: the first suggests one should always look for the lowest cost, the other specifies a fixed amount that will be spent on a given product and value is achieved if that product can be obtained for that amount.

As Erlendsson (2002) states: ‘value for money is a term used to assess whether or not an organisation has obtained the maximum benefit from the goods and services it both acquires and provides, within the resources available to it’. Erlendsson also points out that the value of some elements may be difficult to measure, because they are unclear

or intangible. Subjective judgement is therefore required when assessing value for money.

Value for money is a growing concern of major stakeholders in higher education. Governments, for example, seek to minimize expenditure on higher education and, through various accountability mechanisms, seek value for money from higher education institutions. Likewise, as students in many countries pay more and more for higher education, they also seek value-for-money.

Value for money is often linked to efficiency and effectiveness, which is achieving goals with optimum use of resources. For example, Vlăsceanu *et al.*, (2004, p. 38) argue:

Greater educational efficiency is achieved when the same amount and standard of educational services are produced at a lower cost, if a more useful educational activity is substituted for a less useful one at the same cost, or if unnecessary educational activities are eliminated. A programme or a higher education institution may be efficiently managed, but not effective in achieving its mission, goals, or objectives.

Over a decade ago, Fraser (1994, p. 104) had warned against overemphasising efficiency: 'it is unfortunate that governments frequently confuse quality in higher education with efficiency. Low-standard goals might well be achieved at low cost.'

#### *4.4.1 Assuring value for money*

Assuring the value for money of academic standards or standards of competence makes little sense other than that it implies that institutions deliver qualified and competent graduates at a specified cost. Assurance mechanisms include institutional performance indicators (such as first-year retention statistics, graduation rates, expenditure per student, graduate employment rates) and graduate feedback on the value of the programme (for example, how it related to career development). Again, accreditation is at best an indirect measure.

Customer feedback provides the clearest assurance of value for money of service standards; such an approach is predicated on a view that sees students as 'paying customers'. This may be applicable when examining infrastructure support facilities, such as catering and sports facilities but it is more problematic when teaching is seen in value-for-money terms. Indeed, large lectures with simplistic assessment processes (such as machine-read multiple choice tests) may be 'efficient' in as much as many students get processed at low cost. However, it is unlikely that this approach is optimal in developing, enhancing and empowering learners.

Value for money of organisational standards is a limited concept and refers to the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisational structure; it is not really the focus of any quality assurance processes. Institutional audit, for example, rarely comments directly on whether, for example, internal quality monitoring systems are good value for money.

### **4.5 *Quality as transformation***

Quality as *transformation* is 'a classic notion' of quality that involves a 'qualitative change' from one state to another (Harvey and Green, 1993).

Transformation as a process of transmutation can apply to an individual or an organisation or the product or service supplied by the organisation.<sup>8</sup> In their seminal paper, Harvey and Green (1993) noted that, in an educational setting, 'transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students or the development of new knowledge'. When related to higher education, transformation usually refers to the development and change that occurs to a student through the learning process. However, it can also apply to changes within an institution so that it is better able to provide transformative learning or research (Harvey and Knight, 1996).<sup>9</sup> Eckel *et al.* (1998), for example, assert that: 'Transformation (1) alters the culture of the institution by changing select underlying assumptions and institutional behaviors, processes, and products; (2) is deep and pervasive, affecting the whole institution; (3) is intentional; and (4) occurs over time'.

#### 4.5.1 *Enhancing the participant or provider*

A quality education is one that effects changes in the participants and, thereby, hopefully, enhances them. It can also refer to enhancement of the service provided to the learner. The implicit assumption is that enhancement takes place as a result of structured improvement activities, be they initiated, developed and implemented internally or externally to the institution or programme of study. Enhancement is increasingly being identified, by quality agencies, as one of the purposes of quality assurance processes. However, by enhancement, they mainly mean improving internal quality processes with the assumption that this will enhance the quality of the learning experience or research process and thus implicitly and, hopefully, the transformative enhancement of the learner or research endeavour. In short, this is an indirect process of enhancement.

Enhancement is closely linked to notions of added value and these have traditionally provided a summative approach to enhancement; its purpose is to measure the increase in learning (skills, knowledge, abilities of students) that can be attributed to the educational experience (Astin, 1985; Kogan, 1986). Bennett (2001) for example states:

Measuring value [added] requires having assessments of students' development or attainments as they begin college, and assessments of those same students after they have had the full benefit of their education at the college. Value added is the difference between their attainments when they have completed their education and what they had already attained by the time they began. Value added is the difference a college makes in their education.

Exactly how much is added, however, depends on the methodology (Barnett, 1988; CNAAs, 1990) and what is defined as being of value in the first place. Astin (1990, p. 25) argued that value added actually measures *excellence*. Excellent institutions are the ones that 'have the greatest impact — "add the most value," as economists would say — to students' knowledge and personal development'. However, as we have seen (section 4.1), this does not concur with most notions of excellence.

Measuring the difference in input and output qualifications provides a quantifiable indicator of added value, however it can also conceal the nature of the qualitative transformation.

#### 4.5.2 *Empowering the participant*

The second element of transformative quality is empowerment (Harvey and Burrows, 1992). This involves giving power to participants to influence their own transformation.

Empowerment is much more than accountability to the consumer to be found in such things as customer charters, which although seeking more accountability from producers, leave the decision-making processes and control in their hands.

Empowering participants in education does two things. First, it involves them in decision making that affects their transformation. Second, the transformation process itself provides the opportunity for self-empowerment with consequent impact upon decision-making processes that affect the participant.

Empowering learners is purportedly done in several ways, including: student feedback evaluation; guaranteeing minimum service standards to students; providing more choice; and developing students' critical reflective ability. Space precludes a full analysis of these processes but only the last is fully empowering as a transformative process. Minimum standards and student feedback contribute to continuous incremental improvement. Providing choice, through optional modules, while superficially liberating does not necessarily empower the student. Choices may be limited and determined by the producer, selection may be ill-informed and the composite may not add up to a 'deep' learning experience. Independent learning contracts are the only version of 'choice' that empower the student through the negotiation of a learning and assessment experience.

Developing empowering critical reflective thinking requires an approach to teaching and learning that goes beyond requiring students to assimilate a body of knowledge and be able to apply it analytically; it is about encouraging students to challenge preconceptions, their own and those of their peers and teachers. As Wiggins (1990, p. 20) noted a decade and a half ago: 'we have a *moral obligation to disturb students intellectually*. It is too easy nowadays, I think, to come to college and leave one's prejudices and deeper habits of mind and assumptions unexamined – and be left with the impression that assessment is merely another form of jumping through hoops or licensure in a technical trade'.

Empowerment as developing critical, reflective learners frames quality of education as the extent to which the education system transforms the *conceptual* ability and *self-awareness* of the student. Empowering the learner, involves engaging all relevant participants in the learning process, in setting standards, endorsing practices, specifying curricula, and constructing assessment criteria. Quality is judged through the democratisation of the process, not just the outcome.<sup>10</sup> Thus, at an institutional level, transformation is about changing the culture and practices of institutions so that they provide a transformational experience for students (Harvey and Knight, 1996). In brief, such transformation requires *inter alia*, shifting from teaching to learning; encouraging critical reflection; developing explicit skills, attitudes and abilities as well as knowledge; developing appropriate assessment procedures; rewarding transformative teaching; encouraging discussion of pedagogy; linking quality improvement to learning.

#### 4.5.3 *Assuring transformation*

Assuring that academic standards and standards of competence are transformative requires a process that, at the very least, identifies the value added by the student experience. The institution only plays a partial role in any transformation and identifying

its contribution is problematic. The improvement process is not easily captured by periodic assessments, which focus on the institutional or teacher performance.

In practice there has been little attempt to explicitly engage with transformative learning. There have been some attempts to identify value added measures but they are difficult to apply systematically because appropriate data is not always available and there are endless debates about the methodology, not least the value assigned to different qualifications. In any event, performance indicators based on longitudinal data would be only crude indicators of added value because formal qualifications, before and after an educational experience, do not necessarily reflect the nature and extent of the enhancement and empowerment of the student. In some cases, accreditation processes might explore the value-added of a programme to be accredited, especially in the light of widened access to higher education. External examination, especially of research degrees, evaluates transformation, at least implicitly.

Assuring transformative service standards emphasises the assessment of standards of service and facilities that enable the process of student learning, enhances student attributes and empowers students as critical learners. A key element is the feedback *to* students about their abilities and progress. Conversely, feedback *from* participants, usually through surveys or direct discussion, evaluates the transformative value of the service provided. Elements of this may be alluded to in subject or programme assessments, such as direct observation of student-teacher interactions, although to be effective this needs to be done by someone properly trained as a learning facilitator and the observations fed back to the teacher (and students). In essence, assuring transformative learning is an iterative process based on dialogue.

The emphasis of transformational organisational standards is on institutional structure and processes that encourages dialogue, team working and, ultimately, empowerment of the learner. In practice, this tends to require delegated responsibility for quality and standards. Innovation, responsiveness and 'trust' are prominent. The principal evaluation mechanism is improvement audit; that is an audit that is forward-looking and agenda setting.

## **5 Conclusion**

Quality is distinct from standards and quality assurance. Quality is about process while standards relate to levels of outcome. Quality is dynamic and about change. Harvey and Knight (1996) argued that quality as transformation is a metaconcept<sup>11</sup> of quality and that other definitions are partial indicators of the transformation process at the heart of quality. In the context of higher education, quality is fundamentally about development and improvement, which is embodied in the transformative approach. Excellence, consistency/perfection, fitness for purpose and value for money are static state evaluations.

Quality as fitness for purpose, for example, although widely used, especially by agencies, is only a partial definition of quality. Fitness for purpose, even if linked to fitness of purpose, thus implying a non-trivial purpose, does not address the core notion of quality. In practice, purpose is specified by institutions; often in response to external suggestions, directions, or requirements. However, such purposes are necessarily glossed

and superficial as they cannot begin to capture the complexity of purposes of higher education. Given the complexity of purposes, who is to judge the fitness?

Texts, as Eco (1979) argued, do not exist in isolation with a fixed meaning. They are created as social objects through the role of the reader. Whatever the author intended is just one interpretation of the text. A university is a text with many nuances and each participant is reading it in his or her own way, not least because they *are* the university. The university is not a thing but an ever-changing, multi-faceted text that is being read and re-read, not by policy makers but by the active participants.

A fitness-for-purpose definition is faced with every participant having several purposes and everyone reflecting on the fitness of each purpose in unique and dynamic ways. This renders fitness for purpose unreliable as a quality concept.

However, there is a more fundamental problem with fitness for/of purpose. It fails to engage with the conceptual nature of quality *per se*. Quality is about transformation. Fitness for purpose substitutes matching specification for a fundamental understanding of the transformative nature of the education process.

Quality as fitness for/of purpose removes the focus on the essential quality of provision. In essence, what, for example, is the nature of the student learning experience? A cynical view might suggest that is the intention of fitness for/of purpose approaches to conceal the decline of essential quality and to legitimate that decline. A less cynical approach might suggest that fitness for/of purpose is merely lazy pragmatism that redefines quality as accountability. In the last resort, one might argue that fitness for purpose transmutes quality into quality assurance.

Quality as transformation is conceptually in tune with the essential nature of quality. To be effective, quality assurance must uncover the transformative nature of quality. This means that quality assurance needs to explore, dig down, to the essential quality of the programme or institution that it is reviewing. It is not enough to tick off accomplishments on a mission-based fitness-for-purpose checklist.

The paper has set out the different conceptions of quality, suggested how they relate to different notions of standards — academic, competence, service and organisational — and briefly explored how they are assured. The paper has argued that transformative approaches capture the essence of quality and that other definitions merely assess provision or outcomes against (absolute or relative) criteria. Excellence, value for money, consistency and fitness for purpose judgements are essentially static here-and-now assessments. Transformative quality encourages an approach that sees quality as a dynamic and continuous; that does not simply encourage improvement but enables a process of transformation of the student, the researcher and the institution.

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**Table 1: Definitions of quality and standards**

<i>Quality</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Exceptional	A traditional concept linked to the idea of 'excellence', usually operationalised as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. Quality is achieved if the standards are surpassed.
Perfection or consistency	Focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet. Quality in this sense is summed up by the interrelated ideas of zero defects and getting things right first time.
Fitness for purpose	Judges quality by the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose. The purpose may be customer-defined to meet requirements or (in education) institution-defined to reflect institutional mission (or course objectives).
Fitness of purpose	Fitness of purpose evaluates whether the quality-related intentions of an organisation are adequate. It provides a check on fitness for purpose. As such, it is not a definition of quality <i>per se</i> .
Value for money	Assesses quality in terms of return on investment or expenditure. At the heart of the value-for-money approach in education is the notion of accountability. Public services, including education, are expected to be accountable to the funders. Increasingly, students are also considering their own investment in higher education in value-for-money terms.
Transformation	Sees quality as a process of change, which in higher education adds value to students through their learning experience. Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant. This leads to two notions of transformative quality in education: enhancing the consumer and empowering the consumer.
<i>Standards</i>	
Academic standards	The demonstrated ability to meet specified level of academic attainment. For pedagogy, the ability of students to be able to do those things designated as appropriate at a given level of education. Usually, the measured competence of an individual in attaining specified (or implied) course aims and objectives, operationalised via performance on assessed pieces of work. For research, the ability to undertake effective scholarship or produce new knowledge, which is assessed via peer recognition.
Standards of competence	Demonstration that a specified level of ability on a range of competencies has been achieved. Competencies may include general transferable skills required by employers; academic ('higher level') skills implicit or explicit in the attainment of degree status or in a post-graduation academic apprenticeship; particular abilities congruent with induction into a profession.
Service standards	These are measures devised to assess identified elements of the service provided against specified benchmarks. Elements assessed include activities of service providers and facilities within which the service takes place. Benchmarks specified in 'contracts' such as student charters tend to be quantified and restricted to measurable items. <i>Post hoc</i> measurements of customer opinions (satisfaction) are used as indicators of service provision. Thus, service standards in higher education parallel consumer standards.
Organisational	Attainment of formal recognition of systems to ensure effective management of

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standards                      organisational processes and clear dissemination of organisational practices.

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Source: adapted from Harvey, 1999

**Table 2: Relationship between quality and standards in higher education and means of assurance (items in parentheses are indirect assurance mechanisms)**

<i>Standards Quality</i>	<i>Academic standards</i>	<i>Standards of competence</i>	<i>Service standards</i>	<i>Organisational standards</i>
Exceptional	Emphasis on summative assessment of knowledge and, implicitly, some 'higher-level' skills. Implicit normative gold standard. Comparative evaluation of research output. Élitism: the presupposition of a need to maintain pockets of high quality and standards in a mass education system.	Linked to professional competence; emphasis mainly on traditional demarcation between knowledge and (professional) skills.	Input-driven assumptions of resource-linked service/facilities. Good facilities, well-qualified staff, etc. 'guarantee' service standards. Reluctance to expose professional (teaching) competence to scrutiny.	Clear role hierarchy reflecting academic status and experience. Often a heavy emphasis on 'traditional values'. Strong emphasis on autonomy and academic freedom. Aversion to transparency.
	Assured by: Standards monitoring Research assessment Teacher assessment (Accreditation)	Assured by: Standards monitoring Professional accreditation	Assured by: Accreditation (Performance indicators)	Assured by: Institutional Accreditation (Audit of quality processes)
Perfection or consistency	A target level of academic standard is consistently achieved (year on year).	Expectation of a minimum prescribed level of professional competence. Problem in assessing for 'zero defects'.	Primarily relates to reliable and consistent student grading and to administrative processes, such as accuracy and reliability of record keeping, timetables, coursework arrangements.	Right first time. Document procedures, regulations and good practice. Obtain ISO9000 certification.
	Assured by: (Standards monitoring)	Assured by: Standards monitoring (Accreditation)	Assured by: Participant/user feedback (Audit) (Assessment)	Assured by: External QM certification (Accreditation)
Fitness for purpose (Fitness of purpose)	Theoretically, standards should relate to the defined objectives that relate to the purpose of the course (or institution). Summative assessment should be criteria referenced, although as purposes often include a comparative element (e.g., in mission statement) these are	Explicit specification of skills and abilities related to objectives. Evidence required to at least identify threshold standards. Professional competence primarily assessed in terms of threshold minimums against professional body requirements for practice. This is similar to excellence	The purpose involves the provision of a service. Thus, process is assessed in terms of (minimum) standards for the purpose — usually teaching competence, the link between teaching and research, student support (academic and non-academic), other facilities. Purpose is, for students, often	Ensure appropriate mechanisms in place to assess whether practices and procedures fit the stated mission-based purposes.

	mediated by norm-referenced criteria.	approaches to checking minimum standards.	judged against expectations.	
	Assured by: Assessment (Accreditation)	Assured by: Standards monitoring (Accreditation Subject assessment)	Assured by: Customer charters/ surveys (Accountability audit) (Assessment) (Accreditation)	Assured by: Institutional accountability audit
Value for money	Maintenance or improvement of academic outcomes (graduate standards and research output) for the same (or declining) unit of resource. That is, ensure greater efficiency. Concern that efficiency gains work in the opposite direction to quality improvement. Provide students with an academic experience (qualification, training, personal development) to warrant the investment.	Maintain or improve the output of generally 'employable' graduates for the same unit of resource. Similarly, ensure a continual or increasing supply of recruits to post-graduation professional bodies. Provide students with an educational experience that increases competence, in relation to career advancement, which ensures a return on investment.	Customer satisfaction analyses (student, employers, funding bodies) to assess process and outcomes. Students and other stakeholders are seen as 'paying customers'. Customer charters specify minimum levels of service (and facilities) that students (parents, employers) can expect.	Relies heavily on periodic or <i>ad hoc</i> reviews of whether organisational structure is effective and efficient, often informed by management information (especially basic output statistics).
	Assured by: Performance indicators Graduate feedback (Accreditation)	Assured by: Performance indicators Graduate feedback (Accreditation)	Assured by: Customer surveys and charters (Performance indicators)	Assured by: (Institutional accountability audit) (Performance indicators)
Transformation	Assessment of students' acquisition of transformative knowledge and skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation) against explicit objectives. Focus on adding value rather than gold standards. As transformation includes empowerment, formative as well as summative assessment is required. Transformative research standards are assessed on their	Provide students with enhanced skills and abilities that empower them to continue learning and to engage effectively with the complexities of the 'outside' world. Assessment of students in terms of the acquisition of transformative skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation) and the transformative impact they have post-graduation.	Emphasis on specification and assessment of standards of service and facilities that enable the process of student learning <i>and</i> the acquisition of transformative abilities.	Emphasis on organisational structure that encourages dialogue, team working and, ultimately, empowerment of the learner. Delegated responsibility for quality and standards. Innovation, responsiveness and 'trust' are prominent.

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*impact* in relation to objectives.

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Assured by:  
Value added  
performance  
indicators.  
(External  
examination)  
(Accreditation)

Assured by:  
Value added.  
Professional  
accreditation

Assured by:  
Participant feedback  
(Accreditation)  
(Assessment)

Assured by:  
Improvement audit

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Source: Adapted from Harvey (1995)

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Jürgen Kohler for providing this example.

<sup>2</sup> Dictionary definitions of quality as a noun include: ‘An essential and distinguishing attribute of something or someone’ (WordNet Dictionary). ‘That which makes, or helps to make, anything such as it is; anything belonging to a subject, or predicable of it; distinguishing property, characteristic, or attribute; peculiar power, capacity, or virtue; distinctive trait; as, the tones of a flute differ from those of a violin in quality; the great quality of a statesman’ (Websters).

<sup>3</sup> Quality as an adjective is defined, for example as: ‘quality — of superior grade; “quality paper”; “choice wines”; “prime beef”; ...quality — of high social status; “a quality family”’ (WordNet Dictionary)

<sup>4</sup> Fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose are combined below as they are interdependent although some commentators treat them as independent. A further concept, of ethical or moral quality has been mooted by Yorke (2003) but has not been developed or widely used and space precludes an exploration of it.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) have quality as threshold as a separate category rather than a weak form of the exceptional and Vlăsceanu *et al.*, (2004) see it as an approach to ‘fitness of purpose’.

<sup>6</sup> Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2004 conflate value-for money and transformational versions of quality with their notion of standards conformance fitness for purpose. In so doing they confuse (a) the concept of meeting needs with funding accountability, although linked they are distinct, efficiency criteria are not a necessary element of fitness for purpose; and (b) meeting needs with transformation; again distinct despite some interrelationships. Transformation or added value is a desirable outcome of fitness-for-purpose driven quality evaluations — though rarely assessed directly.

<sup>7</sup> Although some people include fitness of purpose as a definition of quality it does not advance the conceptualisation of quality. Fitness of purpose is not a definition but a subjective judgement of the parameters of quality: it serves only to endorse a purpose. Fitness of purpose is not, in itself, a judgement of, let alone definition of, quality.

<sup>8</sup> The transformative view of quality is rooted in the notion of ‘qualitative change’, a fundamental change of form, including cognitive transcendence. This transformative notion of quality is well established in Western philosophy and can be found in the discussion of dialectical transformation in the works of Aristotle, Kant, Hegel and Marx. It is also at the heart of transcendental philosophies around the world, such as Buddhism and Janism.

<sup>9</sup> In South Africa, transformation has a particular meaning related to the political transformation of society: higher education having a transformative role in moving from apartheid to an inclusive society. However, transformation is not just overcoming apartheid but addressing technological change. As the *Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation* (Department of Education, 1996, section 4) proposed: ‘Higher education policy in South Africa ... will have to increase access for black students and for women; and it will have to generate new models of learning and teaching to accommodate a larger student population.... The transformation of higher education intended by the Ministry is

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a far-reaching process. It has three central features: *Increased participation ... Greater responsiveness ... Increased cooperation and partnerships...*'

<sup>10</sup> Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002, pp. 20–21) agree that quality as transformation focuses firmly on the learners. However, like Vlăsceanu *et al.*, (2004, pp 46–48), they prefer to talk of quality as enhancement or improvement rather than transformation. In so doing they substitute continuous improvement for qualitative change. <sup>10</sup> Seeing quality as enhancement or improvement again conflates the purpose of quality processes with the concept of quality itself. Transformation is about qualitative state change. Transformation is more than just enhancing or improving, it is more than adding, it is about changing shape, in an educational sense, the underlying purpose of study is not simply to add more information but to change the way the information is assimilated, to enable *inter alia* reconceptualisation, transfer, analysis, synthesis, lateral thinking and critique.

<sup>11</sup> Metaconcept is taken to mean a 'higher order' concept, using the notion of meta as 'lying behind', 'transcending', 'comprehensive', 'of a higher state'