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Defining Quality

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Introduction

In this presentation I will focus on four concepts: quality, standards, quality assurance and quality culture. Being clear about these concepts aid understanding of higher education policy and practice.

In essence, quality is about process; standards are about outcomes; quality assurance is about monitoring; and quality culture is about implementation. That, though, is where simplicity ends and complications arise.

Quality

Twenty years ago (Harvey and Green, 1993) I suggested a set of definitions of quality, which, although tweaked by various commentators, have stood the test of time. Quality is defined as follows (derived from 'Understanding Quality' (Harvey, 2006)):

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. The excellence approach, which provides benchmarks (or other criteria) against which 'high' standards can be evaluated is the main meaning used by institutions in their mission statements, reflecting the approach in various ranking systems.

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*. 'Zero defects' is not just about conforming to specification; it also embodies a philosophy of *prevention* rather than inspection (Peters and Waterman, 1982). Quality culture in this sense means everyone is responsible for quality; it relates to the idea of delegated responsibility for educational 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, aimed at consistency of output, requires a facilitative managerial infrastructure alongside a trusting delegation of the academic process to those who directly engage with teaching or research.

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 apparently 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.

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 to specify requirements; the second locates it with the provider, as expressed through mission, and is the more usual in higher education.

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.

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.

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. In an educational setting, 'transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students or the development of new knowledge' (Harvey and Green, 1993). 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; Eckel *et al.*, 1998).

Transformation involves either or both the enhancement of the participant (or providing institution) the empowerment of the participant (learner or researcher). 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. 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.

Standards

Standards are distinct from quality. They relate to outcomes.

(Note that the term standard is complicated because it means both a fixed criterion (against which an outcome can be matched) and a level of attainment. A sporting analogy helps explain: 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). The confusing term 'quality standards' is not a 'standard' but rather a norm and 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.

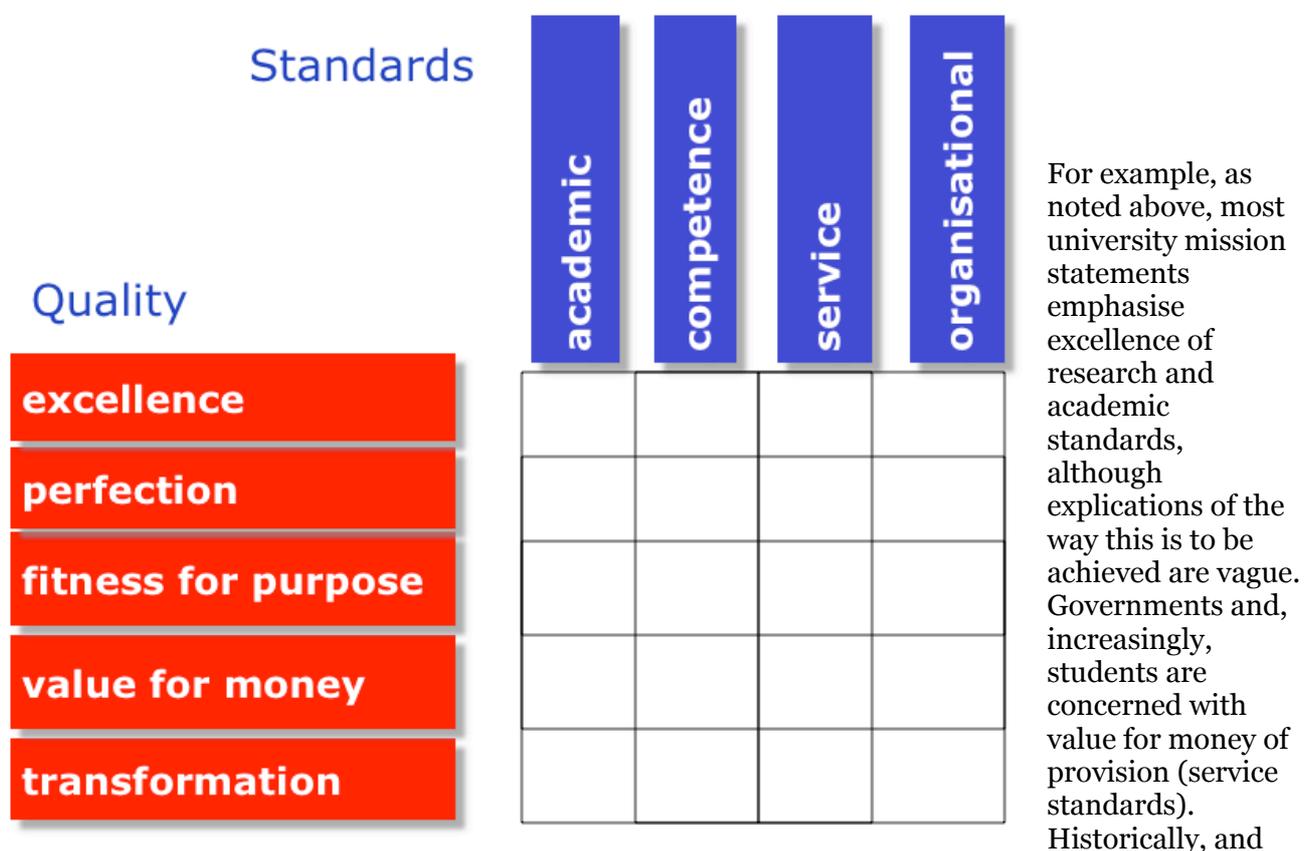
Service standards refer to the standards of service provided by the organisation to the student. It assesses whether identified elements of the service (process or facilities) are congruent with specified benchmarks or expectations. Such things as benchmark statements and student charters often focus 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.

Quality and standards

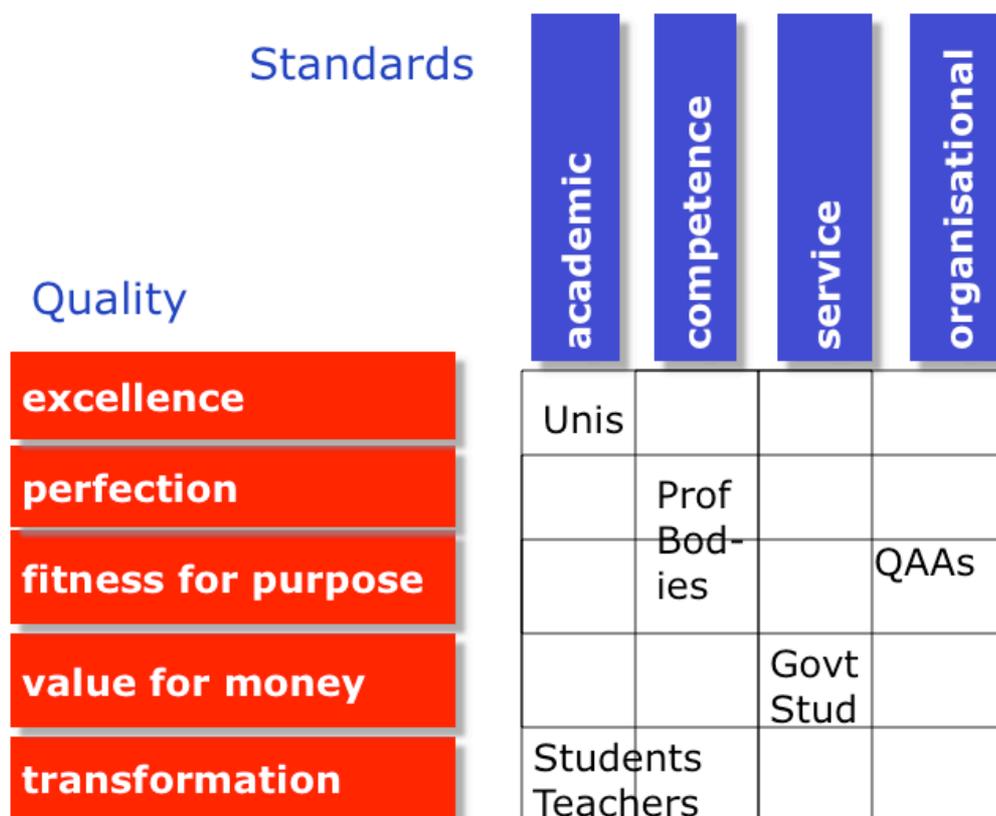
Quality as process and standards as outcome can be seen to intersect (Figure 1), suggesting 20 points of intersection.

Figure 1: Intersection of quality and standards



still fundamentally, students, and their teachers, have been focused on the development of their skills and abilities (the intersection of transformation and both academic standards and standards of competence). Professional bodies are concerned with both the consistency of professional competence produced by an institution in graduates hoping to practice and in the fitness-for-purpose of the programmes in delivering the competences specified by the professional or regulatory body. Quality agencies are mainly concerned with the fitness-for-purpose of organisational standards. (Figure 2)

Figure 2: Intersection of quality and standards: some preferred focuses



Quality Assurance

There are four broad approaches to quality assurance: accreditation, audit, assessment, and external examination (or external review of service and outcomes standards of one sort or another). (Note: quality assurance used to have a narrower meaning, referring principally to auditing processes rather than assessment, accreditation or standards checking, but since most of these processes in practice tend to use much the same methods, the term assurance has become a catch-all term although in some cases 'monitoring' is used to encompass the variety of procedures.) These are not distinct approaches as there is considerable overlap in practice.

The object of attention of assurance processes ranges from the institution, through subject and programme to the service provision, the learner or the learning outcomes. Different systems vary the emphasis placed on each of these elements.

The focus of quality evaluations can also be diverse, ranging from governance and regulation and financial viability to the student experience of learning, curriculum design, programme content, and teacher competence.

Although methods vary and include inspection, documents analysis, direct observation of teaching and consumer surveys, the process of self-assessment followed by peer review is prevalent (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Purpose, approach, object, focus and methods of quality assurance

Quality assurance (external)



There is no simple correlation of purpose with approach, object, focus and method. Indeed, different approaches may have the same object or diverse objects, focuses and methods, depending on the unique circumstances of the evaluation/monitoring process.

Figure 4 indicates what types of quality assurance approach are adopted for each of the quality and standards intersections in Figure 1.

Figure 4: Relationship between quality and standards in higher education and means of assurance (items in parentheses are indirect assurance mechanisms)

Standards	Academic standards	Standards of competence	Service standards	Organisational standards
Quality	Emphasis on summative assessment of knowledge and, implicitly, some 'higher-level' skills. Implicit normative	Linked to professional competence; emphasis mainly on traditional demarcation between knowledge and (professional)	Input-driven assumptions of resource-linked service/facilities. Good facilities, well-qualified staff, etc. 'guarantee' service standards.	Clear role hierarchy reflecting academic status and experience. Often a heavy emphasis on 'traditional values'. Strong

	gold standard. Comparative evaluation of research output. Elitism: the presupposition of a need to maintain pockets of high quality and standards in a mass education system.	skills.	Reluctance to expose professional (teaching) competence to scrutiny.	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).	Explicit specification of skills and abilities related to objectives. Evidence required to at least identify threshold	The purpose involves the provision of a service. Thus, process is assessed in terms of (minimum) standards for the	Ensure appropriate mechanisms in place to assess whether practices and procedures fit the stated mission-based

	Summative assessment should be criteria referenced, although as purposes often include a comparative element (e.g., in mission statement) these are mediated by norm-referenced criteria.	standards. Professional competence primarily assessed in terms of threshold minimums against professional body requirements for practice. This is similar to excellence approaches to checking minimum standards.	purpose – usually teaching competence, the link between teaching and research, student support (academic and non-academic), other facilities. Purpose is, for students, often judged against expectations.	purposes.
	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	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).

	investment.			
	Assured by:	Assured by:	Assured by:	Assured by:
	Performance indicators	Performance indicators	Customer surveys and charters	(Institutional accountability audit)
	Graduate feedback (Accreditation)	Graduate feedback (Accreditation)	(Performance indicators)	(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 <i>impact</i> in relation to objectives.	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, teamworking and, ultimately, empowerment of the learner. Delegated responsibility for quality and standards. Innovation, responsiveness and 'trust' are prominent.
	Assured by:	Assured by:	Assured by:	Assured by:
	Value added performance indicators. (External examination) (Accreditation)	Value added. Professional accreditation	Participant feedback (Accreditation) (Assessment)	Improvement audit

Source: Expanded version of a diagram first published in Harvey (1995)

The process is perhaps even more complex. If, for example, we identify the intersections between quality assurance purposes and approaches (Figure 5) there are again 16 possible intersections (not to mention the further possible arrays if we were to take into account object, focus and method). Each of these, in theory, operates within

Figure 5: Purpose and approach of quality assurance

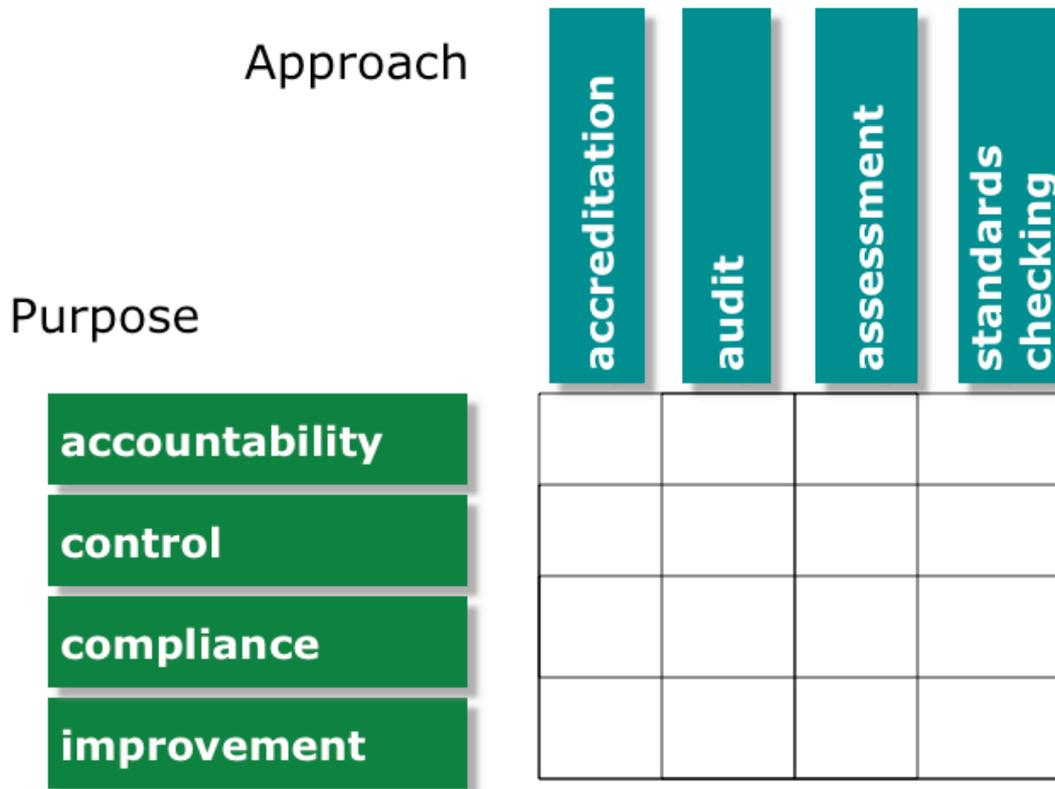
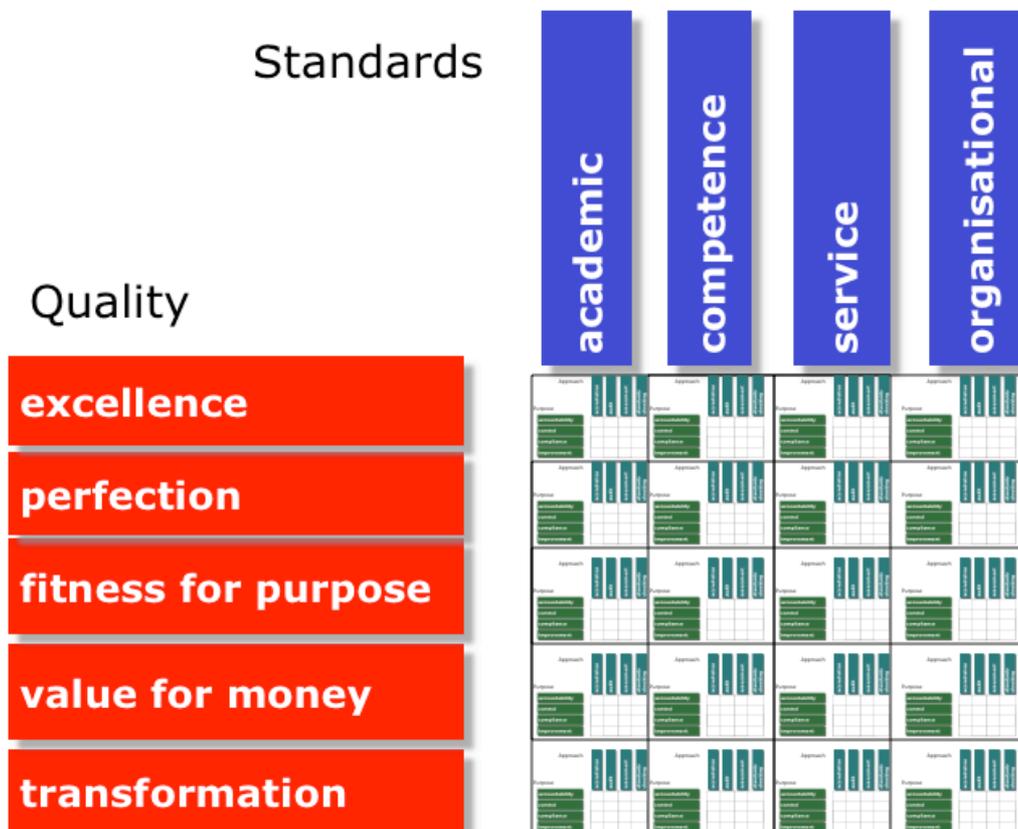
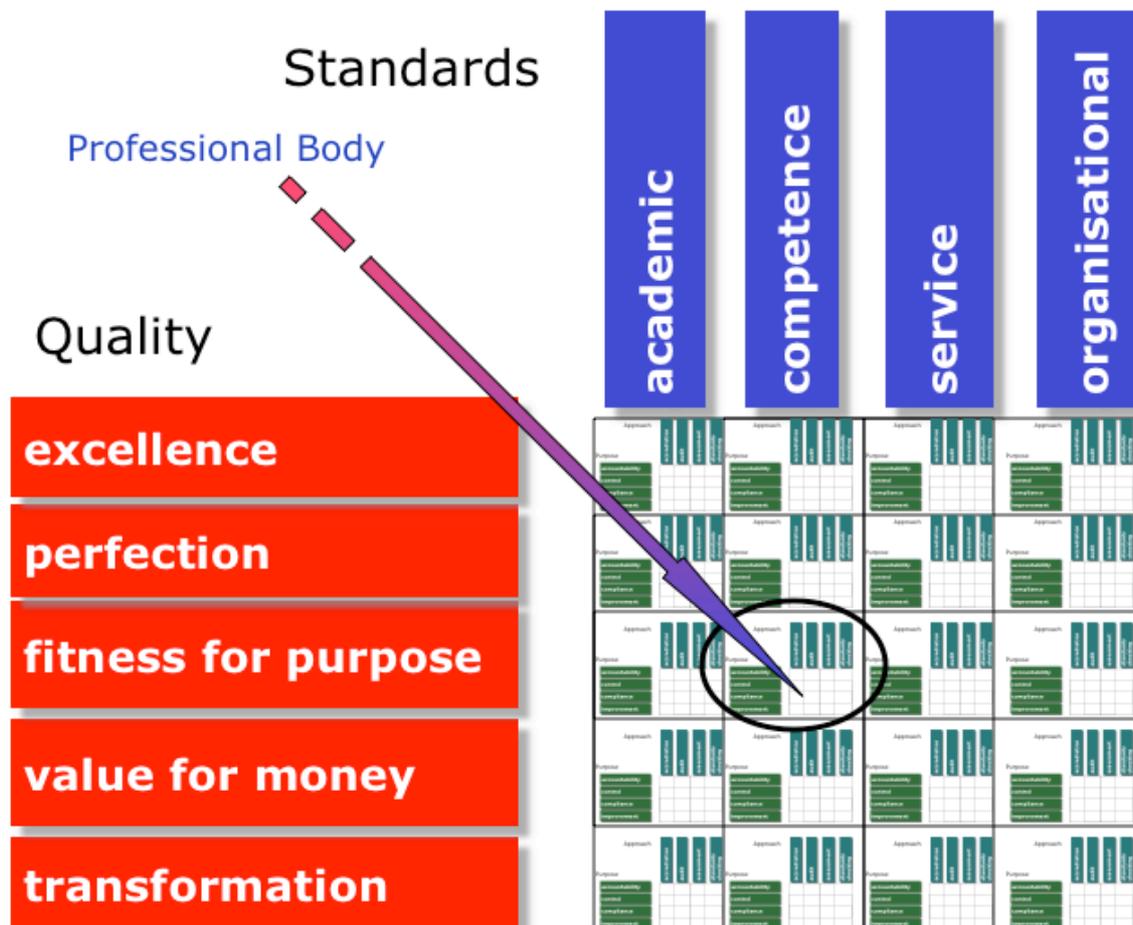


Figure 6: Purpose and approach of quality assurance



As an example, professional body regulation demands compliance to the requirements of professional competence, which most bodies attest to through a form of accreditation based on a fitness-for-purpose methodology (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Professional accreditation example



So much for policy and procedures. However, policy has to be implemented and quality assurance procedures serve to encourage appropriate activity: although the whole notion is a contested terrain and the question remains ‘appropriate for whom?’

Quality culture is about implementation. As noted above; the ‘perfection’ approach to manufacturing is about establishing a quality culture where everyone takes responsibility for ensuring that their part of the process is done flawlessly. Education is rather more complex than producing a consumer object and the notion of what constitutes a quality process is, as we have seen, more complicated. However, implementation, in the end, is primary and this can be said to manifest itself through the so-called quality culture.

Quality culture

Quality culture tends to have a variety of interpretations and meanings. One established way of addressing culture is to examine the extent to which it is group oriented (whether individual behaviour is group-controlled) and prescriptive (whether individual behaviour is pre-scribed by external rules and regulations) (Douglas, 1982; Thompson *et al.*, 1990). This results in four

possible Weberian ideal-types of ‘quality culture’ (Figure 8) and the following description is from Harvey and Stensaker (2008).

Figure 8: Types of quality culture

Quality culture

		Degree of group-control	
		Strong	Weak
Intensity of external rules	Strong	<i>Responsive</i>	<i>Reactive</i>
	Weak	<i>Regenerative</i>	<i>Reproductive</i>

Responsive quality culture: as an ideal-type, is primarily led by external demands, be they governmental imperatives, such as widening access, or agency expectations of compliance, such as delivering a self-assessment document. The responsive mode is positive in taking the opportunities offered (or forced on) the institution and using them to review practices, create forward looking agendas, explore how to maximise benefit from engagement with policies or requirements and to engineer improvement. The responsive mode will thus have an improvement agenda for quality assurance, although it will be acutely aware of accountability issues and compliance requirements. It is likely that the responsive mode will attempt to learn from culturally similar good practice, adopt it and (hopefully) modify it but essentially see the culture as something created to deal with the evaluation problem, a solution to an issue created by others. This is likely to be exacerbated internally by a lack of buy-in to a quality culture as a way of life and lack of feeling of ownership or of any real control. Rather quality culture will appear as existing beyond their control as something, perhaps, that the institution encourages its staff to embrace but which is unconnected with everyday experience, a parallel reality that staff journey to periodically.

Reactive quality culture: as an ideal-type, reacts to, rather than engages with external demands. The reactive mode may take advantage when action is linked to reward, such as research evaluations linked to funding, but is likely to be reluctant to embrace most forms of quality evaluation having reservations about the potential outcomes. The reactive mode, will have doubts about any improvement potential resulting from evaluation, will tend to be driven by compliance and, reluctantly, accountability; although mourning the lost of trust (and autonomy). The reactive mode will tend to deal with one thing at a time, with a rather disjointed or dislocated cultural ethos that may well reinvent wheels. The quality culture is likely to be construed as externally constructed, managed and imposed, with little or no sense of ownership. It is more likely to be something delegated to a specific space (a quality office). The reactive mode may, for example, harbour counter cultures among academics that perceives any kind of quality culture as a beast to be fed (Newton, 2000).

Regenerative quality culture: as an ideal-type, is focused on internal developments, albeit fully aware of the external context and expectations. The regenerative mode, although taking the

opportunities afforded via review exercises and making the most of government initiatives, is one that has a co-ordinated plan for its own internal regeneration which has primacy and external opportunities are included where they add value, otherwise they are accommodated at the margins or even actively subverted. A regenerative quality culture tends to be widespread, with clear overall goals, in a state of flux as activities and events evolve. Its dynamism is manifest not just in an improvement agenda but also in an ongoing reconceptualisation of what it knows, where it is going and even the language in which it frames its future direction. The improvement process will be a taken-for-granted norm and the regenerative mode will assume that its continual improvement programme is itself a form of accountability. The regenerative mode will likely encompass a learning-organisation approach, seeking out learning opportunities, benchmarking possibilities and generating space for reflective review. The quality culture will be indistinguishable from everyday work practice and while it leads to regeneration it will be unquestioned. Ideologically, the quality culture will be attuned with the aspirations of the team. However, if regeneration stalls or is interfered with externally, be it by a higher layer of management or by an external force, the quality culture will have an intrinsic subversive potential.

Reproductive quality culture: as an ideal-type, is focused on reproducing the *status quo*, manipulating the situation to minimise the impact of external factors as far as possible. The reproductive mode is focused on what the institution or its sub units do best and for what it is rewarded and its plans go little beyond reproducing them. A widespread, internalised quality but with clear boundaries, it has established norms and is unlikely to reconceptualise core concepts or future goals. The quality culture, although indistinguishable from everyday work practice, is not transparent and is encoded in various taken-for-granted or esoteric practices. Nonetheless a sense of a job well done is maintained and perpetuated through the culture. Ideologically, the quality culture reflects the expertise and individual aspirations of members. Any attempt to develop a more open, self-critical approach is likely to result in an implacable resistance culture.

Although the outlines of the four quality cultures are ideal-types, their central characteristics are to be found in various higher education settings. As such they may serve as a starting point for investigating how structure and culture can be matched with respect to quality assurance. This is an important point as studies have shown how structures of quality assurance often are designed without taking into account existing social structures and tacit institutional ways of handling quality assurance issues (Henkel 2000, Newton 2000). Hence, it should be quite obvious that a quality assurance system (and 'quality cultures') will be inclined to look very different located within a reactive or regenerative cultural setting, or within a responsive or reproductive cultural setting.

To be successful, a quality culture, in the last resort, has to synchronise with academic culture and become part of the taken-for-granted. This means that systems alone will not work; quality must have a cultural element.

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