



QA Lead Manual

Condensed version

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Introduction

The purpose of the manual is to complement the various quality systems which apply to PHE, by giving advice on how to implement a comprehensive quality management system within professional higher education institutions.

The intention of the manual is therefore to give guidelines as how to:

- (1) identify the mission and define a shared vision of quality within the institution;
- (2) identify the organizational culture – beliefs and values – of the institution;
- (3) use quality principles and the organizational culture as a base to establish a quality policy;
- (4) unfold the quality policy statements into concrete objectives with deadlines and plan the activities and associated responsibilities and resources needed to achieve them;
- (5) establish indicators and use them to monitor and measure the achievement of those objectives;
- (6) make improvements based on the results of monitoring and measuring activities.

1. Purposes of QA

Internal QA serves different purposes and QA processes can be identified at the level of the institution, faculty, department or individual members of staff where it can be applied in the context of the many different roles and functions of higher education institutions.

QA applies to both management and delivery of teaching as well as to the experiences of staff and students and the outcomes of the student learning experience. There is a general understanding that the purpose of QA is directly linked to the culture and values of higher education and driven by the motivation for continuous quality improvement.

Quality Culture

“Quality culture refers to an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and it is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand the cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts” (EUA, 2006)

Quality culture depends on good management on all levels, giving space to staff for experiment and time to make improvements, encourages listening to students and the world of work and support when risks are being taken and errors being made.

Continual improvement

Where quality assurance addresses the question if a certain minimum quality standard has been reached (however defined), quality enhancement focuses on the assumption that there is always room for improvement, regardless how high (or low) the quality (of education, learning outcomes, attainment, etc) is at the moment.

An enhancement oriented approach to quality aims to stimulate reflection and learning about development needs and potential for further improvements, both on the level of individual

teachers (and students) but also, and more fundamentally, on the level of the institution as a whole.

On the level of modules, there ought to be a focus on continual small improvements instead of the need (or fear) for periodical overhauls. This means teachers need to critically reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching methods and course content with the question what improvements can be made and how these can be implemented in the period towards the next time the module will be offered.

Responsiveness to stakeholder needs

The outcomes of higher education, in terms of students' achievements, does not only depend on the quality of teachers but to a large extent also on the students themselves, as co-creators of their own learning. Therefore, student centred learning is not just a pedagogical concept, but also an integral part of quality culture.

With an increasingly heterogeneous student population, the learning needs and learning styles of students are varied and improvements in the quality of education often mean more innovative and flexible ways of teaching expected from teaching staff. This can easily be seen more as a burden than as an opportunity for staff.

Especially in the context of professional HE, quality of modules and study programmes are closely correlated with their responsiveness to the world of work – and thus with the meaningful employability of graduates. Concretely, this means that a QA system needs to be responsive to new developments in the related professional fields and subject areas. But equally, the QA system should also include an awareness of the wider purposes of a HE degree, i.e. critical thinking and preparing students for active citizenship, and thus the importance of generic competencies for flexibility, adjustability and openness to continuous personal development of graduates.

'Academic' elements

Besides the views of stakeholders, QA should also take account of wider standards and expectations of higher education, including:

- *Qualification framework/EQF levels*

- *Subject specific standards*
Transversal competences throughout study programmes

Attitudes

Besides the essential building blocks, it is equally important for the institutional leadership to set the right tone in terms of attitudes that underlie a true quality culture:

- *A true quality culture values what's good but realises improvements are always possible.*
- *A quality culture that focuses on improvements is closely connected to the aim of institutional learning and that also means daring to try new things which don't always turn out as hoped.*
- *Risks are inevitable with this approach and should be managed accordingly.*

External QA

External QA¹ is not the focus of this manual and national QA requirements can be found elsewhere. However, it's worth to briefly mention the relation between external and internal QA.

External QA is not seldom a catalyst for change and improvement, in particular within institutions without a sufficiently developed quality culture. Here, the preparations for an upcoming external programme or institutional review includes an internal reflection in which different stakeholder are expected to be involved, resulting in a self-assessment report that forms the basis for an external review. This whole process is generally considered burdensome and stressful but also a unique opportunity for critical self-reflection and discussion and, eventually, the identification of concrete areas for improvement.

¹ External Quality Assurance may take different forms (such as audit, accreditation, evaluation, review) and may focus at different levels (such as programme, faculty or institution)

2. Creating a quality-first organisation

A quality first organisation aims to create an institutional culture in which on all levels and throughout all members of the institutional community there is shared believe that maintaining and improving the quality of higher education should always be the main priority of the HEI.

People

Within a typical institution, management of internal QA is a **joint responsibility** between top management and between quality assurance staff. The institutional leader needs to ensure the overall goals and strategies of the education provision are adequately reflected in the institution' learning and teaching practices and outcomes and it should be a key role of the quality manager to act as a consultant to the institutional leadership, reporting about possible areas for concern and advising where institution-wide actions are appropriate.

In communicating Quality Assurance strategies towards teaching staff and the wider HEI community, it is important to emphasize that **it's not a form of bureaucracy or interference from central management** with academic autonomy. Rather than regulating staff, it should **encourage staff** to be fully engaged with their education, reflect on it on their own, with colleagues and with students and strive for the highest possible quality and continuous improvement.

At the same time, educational management should **not be overly bureaucratic and top-down** and there needs to be full recognition of teachers as professionals and experts in their field who need to be given the autonomy for their teaching, encouraged to be innovative and made responsible for their own improvements. This also includes sufficient training and support.

Systems

Good documentation of QA policies, processes and procedures is the foundation of a good quality management system. A well-documented QA system is in the first instance important for those directly involved in the day to day QA activities (QA unit, manager, etc) to coordinate their work and continually improve the effectiveness of the QA system.

But for the institutional leadership, adequately documented QA policies, processes and procedures have the additional benefits of ensuring that quality standards are routinely met, the potential for errors is minimised and you have quick access to relevant data which allows for easy monitoring of QA outcomes and analysis of findings. This in turn again supports swift action when adjustments and improvements are needed.

Regular reviews and updates of the documentation underlying the quality system, including the quality policy, manual, procedures, etc are essential to ensure their continued fitness for purpose, that all processes are well understood by those people/ stakeholders involved in QA and that they are consistently applied as intended.

3. Setting QA objectives

How to set objectives

The concept of 'Quality' in higher education is difficult to define and often contested, meaning different things to different people (teaching staff, students themselves, but also the labour market, politicians, etc).

Broadly speaking, the overall objective of quality assurance is to ensure that the education provision provides a good quality learning experience to students and contributes to continuous quality improvement.

With this overall objective in mind, more specific objectives of QA ought to be set. Aligning the quality policy with clear QA objectives will provide a framework upon which to translate these objectives into concrete and specific targets.

In order for the QA objectives to be meaningful, institutional leaders must be fully involved in their formulation, ensuring they are in line with the institution's mission and vision, integrated with the overall strategy and goals of the institution and adequately resourced.

At the same time, objectives and targets cannot be set by the leadership alone but should involve faculty/departmental level management as well as staff and student representatives as key stakeholders as their input and buy-in are essential to help establish, plan for, and achieve the objectives and targets target. Equally important, the involvement of decentral management and stakeholders helps to build commitment and demonstrates positive leadership.

Writing good 'monitorable' objectives

QA objectives can apply to the entire PHEI, can be related to certain organisational entities or site- locations, or can be specific to individual activities.

In communicating objectives to decentral management and stakeholders, try to strive for SMART definitions of objectives and link them to the actual quality improvements being sought.

4. Monitoring QA

Types of data

A good quality assurance system relies not just on one type of data, but consists of a variety of methods, within an integrated institutional strategy, for collecting, analysing, and taking actions in response to feedback.

Any Educational Institution must collect, analyse and use relevant information coming from quantitative and qualitative data to effectively manage the Institutions, Programmes and make decisions. The findings of such data must be discussed in a manner which fits the educational Institution for enhancement purposes. Where will this data be discussed? This depends on the Institution.

Identifying data sources

Relevant data can be gathered from different sources such as student satisfaction surveys, peer lecture observations, institution-wide student analytics, focus groups, graduate career tracking, etc.

The management of every Educational Institution must consider the following:

- 1) Does the Educational Institution manage, collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of its programmes of study and to inform decision making?
- 2) Are there efficient systems to track student performance, gather feedback on learning and teaching matters to students, staff and any other stakeholders?
- 3) Does the Educational Institution have an effective management Information system (MIS) in place which is regularly monitored, reviewed and updated with reference to international good practice?
- 4) Are the findings of quantitative and qualitative data used to continuously improve the quality of the Institution and its information management system?

Creating 'efficient' feedback mechanisms

When deciding on what sort of feedback mechanisms are most suitable, consideration needs to be given to:

- *What is the purpose of this mechanism?*
- *Who has the information?*
- *What is the best way to get this info from them?*
- *Assigning responsibilities for collection*

All Data must be presented in a way which is understandable and therefore it must be provided in the appropriate form ex: a table, an excel sheet, a written report etc or a mixture of forms depending on the use of the Data.

Data must be discussed in the right Forums and many of it at Top level Management. Any actions required must be disseminated accordingly to the right stakeholders and in a timely manner. Someone or a department must follow that the actions required have been achieved and if not why not.

Types of monitoring

Various processes are involved in internal QA, including review, evaluation, audit, benchmarking and each of these processes have their own tools which can be used.

1. **Continuous/instant:** *Direct intervention, for example by the head of a study programme or department may be necessary when triggered by a specific incidence or complaint.*
2. **Immediately 'After':** *The most common tools used for this are student surveys, either collected at the end of individual study modules (the primary unit of teaching and learning in HE) or of the study programme as a whole. Other methods that can be used to collect feedback immediately after a module include staff-student meetings or focus groups. These methods can also be used to gather feedback from recent graduates to gain better insights into their experience of the entire study programme and learning journeys.*

3. **Long-Term:** *An analysis of module and programme level findings, for example through regular (internally organised) subject reviews, produces meaningful insight about the quality of teaching and learning and would ideally feed into annual monitoring reports and other periodic reviews, identifying overarching themes and subsequent institution-wide action plans. More systematic reviews of the outcomes of student questionnaires can also take place in formal programme committees, staff-student liaison committees or equivalent official governing or advisory structures on a decentral level within the institution.*

5. Acting on feedback

The focus of this section is on the development of a feedback culture as an essential part of internal quality assurance.

Capturing feedback is only ever useful if it leads to improvement-oriented actions. The institution, therefore, requires systematic action planning in response to results from feedback. Important hereby is that the timing between feedback collection and undertaking action is adequate.

It is important to '*close the feedback loop*' by regularly informing students on actions that are undertaken based on and as a response to feedback received from previous and current student cohorts and how the feedback is used to adapt the learning experience. There are many ways in which this could be done - for example through "*you said, we did*"- campaigns, a summary of findings published on a dedicated website or regular updates on improvements made to modules on the institution's virtual learning environment - but what's key here is that there's a clear and easily accessible message that feedback is taken seriously and acted upon.

Equally, positive feedback should be shared, providing examples of good practice. Moreover, for a true quality culture, clarifications should also be provided when no direct action can be taken to solve identified problems, but it then still serves to further identify potential areas for improvement.

This practice of keeping students informed also encourages improved response rates which are often low when students believe their feedback doesn't make any difference.

6. Rewarding quality

It is a necessity for ensuring and improving quality processes that a PHEI should have a strategic reward system for its employees. The reason for this is very simple. Each activity reflects a certain quality level of employees' work which the institution, leadership and work environment must recognize and retribute appropriately. As such, recognition and rewarding mechanisms (both financial and non-financial) always strengthen institutional quality culture and overall quality processes.

Inherent rewards

With a strategic reward system institution needs to address all 4 elements - **appreciation, recognition, compensation and benefits**, which have to be aligned with the institution's overall strategies and would encourage appropriate behaviours and support the realisation of planned goals.

Appreciation centres on expressing gratitude to someone for their actions. Showing appreciation to your employees by acknowledging excellent performance and the kind of behaviour you want to encourage is best done through simple expressions and statements. For example, you might send a personal note or stop by the employee's desk to convey your appreciation.

Recognition means acknowledging someone before their peers for specific accomplishments achieved, actions taken, or attitudes exemplified through their behaviour. This can for example also be done through the initiation of celebratory ceremonies such as annual teacher awards.

Compensation as a reward system should include an incentive compensation plan that is directly linked to the goals for an explicit period (for example, some type of longer-term rewards for key individuals in the institution). Another type of reward in a strategic reward system are benefits (health insurance, free parking, etc.)

The role of HR

The Human Resource Management (HRM) in each institution has a crucial role in establishing and implementing strategic recognition and reward systems. How something will be achieved, done, always depends on the staff and HRM – in HRM there is the Human Resource Department as well as management and leadership levels included. HRM is responsible for Employee Career Development in terms of professional and personal development. With influencing Employee Career Development, the institution can raise the quality of institutions' work results and institutional culture. As for HRM it is essential to know strengths and weakness of their staff on the professional area as well as their character, the circumstances they have and could impact work performance, their interests to motivate them and future goals they want to achieve (in professional and personal development area).

In that in mind, there are several key techniques to gather this information:

1. Periodic Discussions on Goals
2. Frequent Performance Check-ins and Conversations
3. Constructive Feedback
4. Learning and Skill Development Initiatives
5. Continuous Recognition and Appreciation

The constant and systematic recognition and rewarding can benefit the institution in:

- *Increased level of staff performance at work;*
- *Staff remain more focused on the job;*
- *Depict more positive staff attitude;*
- *Effectiveness of teamwork habits;*
- *Higher levels of satisfaction and staff feeling to be more valued;*
- *Higher engagement levels;*
- *Loyalty and commitment to their employer for long term;*
- *Contribute towards institutional growth.*

Promotion and demotion as connected to quality

Appreciation and a need to be recognized is a basic human need. Managers, Human Resources Department, and the leadership need to understand its significance and the direct impact it has on institutional growth and institutional culture. The recognition is one of the key elements of the rewarding system and usually seen as a low-cost element. With appreciation together has the most impact to engage and motivate employees. Employee recognition is the positive acknowledgement of a professional's appreciable work, efforts or behaviour that directly support institutional goals. It should be periodically related to maintaining consistency in the recognition process. Usually, the institution prepares a half-year or yearly recognition programme.

Among the most common programmes are those that recognize:

- *Length of service, generally in five-year increments.*
- *Exemplary one-time achievement, often with an on-the-spot cash award or additional paid time off.*
- *Noteworthy performance over a period of time, often for employees who add quality to the work process or product or who provide superior service.*

With well-designed recognition programmes the institution also manages and implements promotional and dissemination activities related to raising the institutional quality, of its employees and their work results, institutional culture, and societal impact. And more, the satisfied employees are the best promotion for the institution.

Making improvement visible

A successful employee reward systems include all 4 elements – combining appreciation, recognition, benefits and reward. And institutions should provide a clear, written policy and guidelines, including:

- *Employee eligibility requirements.*
- *The approval processes.*
- *The types of awards that are provided.*
- *The frequency of award presentations.*
- *The performance goals that are measured.*
- *The thresholds for awards.*

- *When defining the decision-making process and the levels of approval required to receive an award, authority and responsibility for programme administration should be distributed as widely as possible in the institution.*

The institution should communicate both the criteria and examples of the types of work behaviours that warrant an award. This communication will help all employees understand how to judge the desired outcomes. It will also ensure timely recognition, which is necessary for the programme to be effective.

7. Specific techniques

Innovative techniques that could be adjusted to quality management in PHEIs:

Kaizen

Kaizen represents a leadership approach to quality management based on the concept of creating a continuously learning and improving organisation. With a Kaizen approach, an institutional leader aims to encourage and empower all staff throughout the PHEI to continually look for areas for improvement in their own teaching/modules. The focus lies hereby on small and concrete changes that can be introduced relatively quickly and easily without the need to wait for the for large overhauls, such as curricular reform.



About the QA Lead Project and this publication

While having significant expertise as to what constitutes quality education, often leaders of Professional Higher Education Institutions will have never received any formal training in Quality Management and limited expertise in how to translate their mission and vision into a well-functioning Quality Assurance system. Therefore, despite efforts to the contrary, often quality assurance is reduced to a 'commitment to quality culture' supported by a bureaucratic and time consuming set of checks.

The QA Lead project aims to address this gap by developing training & resources specifically tailored to supporting institutional leaders in their strategic role towards Quality Assurance.



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