



**New Challenges to QA in the Changing World of HE**  
**2009 Conference Closing Remarks**  
**David Woodhouse, President, INQAAHE**

In planning this conference, the Board of INQAAHE deliberately included in the title the words 'new' and 'changing'. We did not merely want to talk about the status quo; we did not want to help our members just to stand still; and while it is appropriate to celebrate success and INQAAHE's wide range of activities, we did not want this to become self-congratulation.

Our thinking began with quality (Q), moved to quality assurance (QA) and focused on higher education (HE). Well, not solely HE. When INQAAHE was created, we included the 'HE' at the end to show the focus, but we have debated through the years whether to make it TE (tertiary) or PE (postsecondary). We have always decided against, because we do not believe that we could well serve that vastly larger sector. However, although the 'HE' remains, we are inclusive, and embrace a good number of members from college and technical education.

Also when INQAAHE was created, we included the second A (agencies) but nonetheless we recognise that quality is primarily the responsibility of the institutions. Hence, when we speak of 'QA' it can be 'EQA' (external) or 'IQA' (internal), and both must change to meet new challenges. Indeed, during the last biennium, INQAAHE has created a membership category of 'Institution Member', and a director on the INQAAHE Board will begin to work with these members to ascertain how INQAAHE can best help them.

In opening the Conference, Senora Maria Jose Lemaitre said that we need new meanings for quality. I'm not sure I agree about the new **meanings** – 'fitness for purpose' still has a lot of mileage in it. I say that because I interpret 'purpose' very widely, so it embraces the rapidly changing and evolving institutional purposes. Therefore, we need new ways of **thinking about** quality, and we need an openness to change. EQA agencies are often accused of conservatism through being too cautious, and only approving what they recognise from their own experience. In terms of my FFP definition, EQA agencies must be prepared to recognise and endorse new and innovative ways of achieving and ensuring 'fitness'. I certainly agree with Maria Jose's conclusion that 'it is essential to promote the institutional capacity for self-regulation'. Similarly, Lee Harvey spoke about quality culture, and while I do not agree with the route he took, I fully agree with his destination, namely that 'developing a quality culture means developing a self-critical and reflective community of practitioners, including all stakeholders'.

It is noteworthy that both of these statements speak of the HE institution. It is a truism (and appears in most EQA agencies' documentation) that it is the institution that is responsible

for quality (through its IQA). But what does this mean in practice? It means that quality is so built in (embedded) that there is barely need to mention the word. It becomes 'the way we do things'. In this vein, one way to engage sceptical academics is to not use the Q-word at all, but to talk to them about how they can do well what is important to them.

The task of building quality in an institution is often delegated to an IQA 'unit', that develops quality manuals, check-lists and so on. There has been some criticism of the rigidity and superficiality of such devices, but they are not inappropriate as a starting point. Most new learning begins with attention to the 'rules'. If you want to learn golf or swimming, there are manuals that tell you where to put your feet, how to move your arms and so on. Of course, as you become competent, you move past the manuals – you don't carry it with you down the pool or across the fairway! What started off by having to be read from a manual becomes 'the way you do things'. Even so, however, one hears of top players who decide to reconstruct their game and return to the manual and the coach. Maria Jose had a wonderful analogy of having to change to new software and temporarily being actually **less** competent than before. Thus, in quality, as in other activities, the rules and the manuals are not the end but the means to other ends. Of course, the IQA unit can come to see the unit itself and its manuals as the target end point, and this must be firmly resisted.

If we look to the external challenge, the EQA agency should support and facilitate the work of the HE institutions, their IQA units and their academic and administrative staff, to achieve their teaching and research and outreach goals. (In this conference, we have emphasised the quality of teaching, and in a future conference the quality of research and other activities of HE institutions must get more air time.)

The EQA agency can also act as a 'buffer body'. Lee Harvey suggested that no QA system we know today would look quite the way it does were it not for the politicians. But they are an inescapable fact of life, and facing towards the politicians, the EQA agency can interpret the nature and characteristics of the HE institutions, and affirm their quality and standards. Conversely, facing towards the institutions themselves, the agency can apply the necessary pressure to ensure that quality **is** preserved and enhanced. This buffer or linking role is vital, and it is essential that the agency remain closely in tune with the changing world of HE **and** with the changing nature of the wider world. We EQA agencies expect our institutions to evince continuous quality improvement (CQI) and we can do no less ourselves.

This conference has been the best attended so far in almost 20 years, with close to 400 participants. The pre-conference workshops were also overflowing as we acceded to pleas for admission. This augurs well for the enhancement of the quality of education in this country, in this region, and in the wider world.

I am in the job I do, leading an EQA agency because I believe in HE and believe that it should be as good as it can be. I detect among the participants here this week a similar passion and commitment. I hope this conference has spoken to that commitment, and helped you to address the challenges of balancing consistency with variety, of stability with innovation, in the Changing World of Higher Education.

