

Subject	Maintaining Quality within the Institution
Module	Context and Approach
Topic	1.3 Institutional Context

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1. Introduction



This topic considers the institutional quality in terms of institutional, values, policy, governance, committee structures, line management and reach (i.e. the extent to which these aspects apply within an institution).

Higher education institutions have to greater and lesser extents develop internal frameworks for quality to address the external pressures outlined above. It is probably true to say that for the most part the quality mechanisms constructed by institutions have been at the 'lower' end of the spectrum rather than the 'higher' end – that is they have been practical and ad hoc rather than conceptual, holistic and systematic. While institutions may have detailed specific policies concerning assessment, for example, they may not have developed a position on where this fits within an overall approach to quality. It is this 'higher' institutional level that will be considered next.

Objectives: Institutional Context

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to

- evaluate the institutional context for quality in terms of its values, policy governance, committee structures, line management and reach

2. Values

All policies, practices and approaches to teaching and learning are based in values, although these are rarely stated. The same applies to approaches to quality. The table below presents the examples of institutional values and principles.

Institutional Values and Principles

	Values	Principles
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1. Professional Responsibility	The institution recognises and values the professional responsibility of each individual and work team for quality assurance and improvement. It values participation and empowerment as better able to deliver quality assurance and improvement than formal and imposed quality systems and controls.	While the institution as a whole develops and agrees general policy for quality, responsibility for delivering quality is best located with those closest to each particular university activity.
2. Learning Organisation	The institution values collaboration and the sharing of ideas for quality assurance and continuous improvement within the university. It values a long-term view of quality through organisational learning and the development of staff. The institution values staff creativity at all levels, including their ability to learn and solve problems.	The best way to effect quality assurance and accountability is through continuous quality improvement and the development of a learning organisation.
3. Diversity, Devolution and Comparable Treatment	The institution values diversity and acknowledges the need for devolved decision making concerning quality assurance and improvement. It also values the need for appropriate and comparable treatment in all areas. The institution acknowledges and values the creative tension caused by the need for devolution and the need for consistency and comparable treatment.	Central policy is developed to assure comparable treatment in all areas, leaving room for different areas to develop implementation for each particular context.
4. Open and Informed Approach	The institution values an open and informed approach to quality. It values rational and open discussion on ways of improving informed by local, national and international research, scholarship and practice.	The institution will continue to develop an approach to quality that is thoughtful, informed and flexible. It will not slavishly or mechanistically implement a particular quality formula or system.
5. Planned and Systematic Approach	Quality is too important to be left to chance. Because of the importance of quality assurance	The institution will systematically plan, monitor and evaluate its

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	and improvement, the institution places high value on a planned and systematic approach to quality.	activities, and ensure that the results of monitoring and evaluation are fed back in order to effect improvement.
6. Self-Reflection and External Reference	The institution values self-reflection by groups and individuals in order that they continue to learn and improve. It also values external points of reference as providing valuable perspectives for further reflection and action.	The institution encourages external reference in many shapes and forms, including systematic collection of stakeholders' views, benchmarking and external input to review processes.

The first value, Professional Responsibility, refers back to Deming and the Japanese quality experience (Anderson et al, 1994) of empowering the site of action, while the second value, Learning Organisation, supports whole-of-institution improvement through developing as a Learning Organisation (Senge, 1990) and the third value, Devolution and Comparative Treatment, also supports organisational consistency to ensure fair treatment. The latter values concern implementation – that this will be informed by knowledge (fourth value), that it will be systematic and in the form of a Plan, Act, Evaluate, Improve quality cycle (fifth value) and that it will be subject to external reference including benchmarking (sixth value). Together, these represent an example of a reasonable framework of values within which to develop a considered approach to institutional quality assurance and improvement.

3. Policy

One of the truisms of policy is that it tends to develop ad hoc over time and with very infrequent overall review. This means that policy regarding quality is usually uneven and often buried. It is unusual for higher education institutions to have a 'Quality Policy' for example, although statements about supporting quality may be found in various documents, including Mission Statements, Strategic Plans and Teaching and Learning Plans. Some policies that relate to quality may be extraordinarily detailed, and this is particularly true of Assessment Policies. On the other hand, other policies that are important for quality may not be in the form of 'policy' at all, or may be entirely missing (e.g. policies to ensure good teaching or staff qualifications for teaching).

4. Discussion

Discussion: Policy

Consider the following key questions regarding Policy at your own (or choose one) institution:

- How comprehensive is policy on quality generally and on teaching and learning in particular?
- Are there clear and explicit value positions supporting the policy positions?
- Is there a clear and uniformly applied separation of higher level policy and detailed operational procedure?

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- When was a comprehensive (rather than ad hoc) review of policy last undertaken and was this informed by external reference?
- Are there obvious gaps or holes in the policy suite?
- Is policy provided in one place? If so, is this place easily located, searchable and well known to all staff?

5. Governance

The governance of quality is an interesting area from a number of perspectives. First, it reflects the organisational complexity of most higher education institutions, especially universities, in that there are essentially two controlling mechanisms: governance through committee structures and management through line accountabilities. This means that ultimate responsibility for quality will almost certainly be shared between Committees such as Council/Senate, Academic Board, Teaching and Learning Committee and Faculty or School Committees, and line management through such officers as the Vice-Chancellor/President/Rector, Deputy-Vice Chancellor/President/Rector (Academic), Pro Vice-Chancellor/President/Rector (Teaching and Learning), Deans of Faculties, Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning) and Heads of Department/School.

Trying to figure out who has ultimate responsibility for making a quality action happen can therefore be complex and often leadership is exhibited by particular individuals irrespective of whether they happen to chair a committee or have a line-management role. Perhaps the best features of these arrangements are that individual and especially higher-level line managers can move quickly, are held to account and can often display strong leadership and committees can ensure that activities (such as policy) gain a wider airing before being endorsed. Conversely, managers may not be inclusive in terms of decision making and committees tend not to be good at moving quickly or precipitating large-scale change. The best outcomes occur when both structures come together for the benefit of the institution, and where this happens, it is generally through tolerance, understanding and the ability to work through obstacles with some give and take from both sides.

Reading:

Read the following articles:

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) has produced an occasional publication for Universities: [A Thematic Analysis: The Role of Academic Boards in University Governance](#) and another for non-self accrediting institutions: [Academic Governance and Quality Assurance: Good Practice for Non-Self Accrediting Institutions \(2010\)](#). In the UK's [Good Governance Standard for Public Services](#), the principle of quality provision forms the core of Good Governance.

Some other questions on the governance of quality relate to 'reach.' For example, some higher education institutions have a high-level Quality Committee chaired by the Vice-Chancellor/Rector/President or Deputy Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for quality, and with a 'reach' to not only teaching and learning but quality more generally, including in the areas of Research and Research Training and Support Services. The question of quality applying to all areas of the Institution, rather than teaching and learning alone, can be raised at almost every point of the discussion on quality in institutions. In industries, a 'whole-of-organisation' approach to quality is most common; whereas in higher education institutions, it has been more common to regard 'quality' as a matter for teaching and learning.

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6. Discussion

Discussion: Governance

Consider the following key questions regarding Governance at your own (or choose one) institution:

- How are governance (committee) and line management responsibilities understood and how well does this work?
- Is there a quality 'champion'?
- What is the 'reach' of organisation level governance and management with regard to quality – is it for teaching and learning only or does it extend to Research, Research Training and Support Services?

7. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- All policies, practices and approaches to teaching and learning are based in values. Some examples of institutional values are:
 - Professional Responsibility
 - Learning Organisation
 - Diversity, Devolution and Comparable Treatment
 - Open and Informed Approach
 - Planned and Systematic Approach
 - Self-Reflection and External Reference
- The ultimate responsibility for quality is shared between committees and line management. The best outcomes occur when both structures come together for the benefit of the institution, and where this happens, it is generally through tolerance, understanding and the ability to work through obstacles with some give and take from both sides.