

Key Quality Terms

Quality

Fitness for moral purpose. The institution's purpose is seen in its mission and its key development priorities are seen in its vision. For example, a learning program or activity is of high quality if it is demonstrably relevant, desirable and feasible for those intended to benefit from it. Quality is about adding value to individual, local and national capability. In some cases the university can determine its own purpose, free of external requirements. In other cases there are certain unnegotiable national development requirements within which it must determine its mission.

Quality Assurance

Aims to assure stakeholders that the appropriate policies, processes, structures and procedures are in place to guarantee that the design and delivery of core activities like learning programs or research projects are of consistently high standard. It seeks to determine that what the university aims to achieve is being achieved, consistently. Quality assurance is ongoing and internal, whereas quality accreditation is more periodic and external.

Quality Accreditation

Accreditation refers to a process of evaluation which recognises a higher education institution, program or activity as meeting an agreed standard. Accreditation can be by a government, a professional association or by the institution itself, if it is approved to do this.

Quality Audit

Quality audits can be both internally and externally initiated. A quality audit usually involves the target group or institution in a form of evidence-based self-assessment against a set of good practice criteria, a site visit by a trained audit panel for validation of this self-assessment, a report from the audit panel and some sort of follow-up on the key areas for enhancement identified. There are close links between quality audits and reviews.

Quality Control

Inspection of outputs to ensure conformity to preset standards. A concept first used in manufacturing and tricky to apply in all aspects of higher education.

Quality Tracking and Improvement

This has links to the total quality management movement. Using agreed quantitative and qualitative measures these systems track activities, processes and programs as they are implemented in order to identify what is working well (for use in benchmarking for improvement) and what is not (in order to identify key areas for enhancement). Each system requires sound tracking measures and processes to be in place and agreed procedures for ensuring that the improvement messages they generate are identified and acted upon promptly and wisely. The ongoing data generated by and acted on through the institution's tracking and improvement system can be aggregated periodically to prove quality as part of an external accreditation or audit process. In this way tracking data can be used to both prove and improve quality.

Quality Management

This term refers to the combined approach of the institution to quality assurance, quality tracking & improvement, quality control, strategic planning and self-accreditation (where this exists).

Associated Terms

Benchmarking

This involves comparing programs, activities and institutions on an agreed set of quantitative and, on some occasions, qualitative tracking measures. The results can be used to prove quality or to improve quality. An example of the former purpose is the production of public performance reports and 'league tables'. An example of the latter process is *benchmarking for improvement* where one institution shares its good practice on a particular measure with another institution which is performing less well on that measure.

Change vs progress

'Change' involves something being made different (a transitive definition) or becoming different (an intransitive definition). 'Progress' involves a value judgement that a given change has been in a desirable direction. It entails, therefore, an evaluation of its quality through an assessment of the standard of its performance. 'Change', 'progress' and 'quality management' are all closely linked.

Core Values

The university's enduring beliefs, 'the way we do things round here';

Criterion

An established rule for testing the quality of performance

Evaluation

This entails specific groups making judgements about the worth of a program activity or institution. It can involve making judgements about the quality of an activity's conception, resourcing, delivery or impact. At the heart of evaluation is value judgement. When people talk of 'fitness for moral purpose' they are bringing to bear evaluation and their own set of assumptions about what constitutes a valuable approach to teaching, research, community engagement or support. Various types and levels of evidence can be used to inform such judgements.

Implementation

Putting into daily practice what is described in documentation

Improvement

A better way of delivering an existing service. This is to be distinguished from an innovation which is about moving into a quite new direction.

Innovation

An idea, way of doing things or document perceived to be new by those who are to implement it (Zaltman, 1973)

Manage

To bring about, succeed in accomplishing

Mandate

The institution's unnegotiable charter and reporting obligations;

Mission

A declaration of organisational purpose – values plus the who, what, how, when, where and why of operation.

Policy

A definite course of action and an agreed way of proceeding in a particular context;

Review

A systematic examination of the performance and direction of an activity or process with a view to improving it or changing it.

Standard

Anything taken by general consent as a basis for comparison. A standard in higher education covers the area of provision to be judged and an indication of what minimum level of performance is agreed to be satisfactory. For example a criterion for successful educational provision could concern demand and the standard might be at least two qualified applicants for every place. Standards are subjective as they can only be determined by common agreement.

Strategic Planning

This complements continuous tracking and improvement systems. Whereas tracking and improvement systems focus predominantly on optimising the quality of current practice, strategic planning aims to identify what quite new directions (innovations) are necessary to keep the institution well placed in a continuously changing external environment.

Vision

A realistic, credible, attractive future for the university. Vision focuses on a better future, key institutional values, unity, uses imagery and metaphor to engage staff and is about excitement. Clear vision and its communication result in a shared purpose, in a feeling that the university knows where it is going and cares about this