Exploring perceptions, tensions and possibilities of an integrated approach to quality assurance in Higher Education: A Case Study in an Institute of Technology in Ireland

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A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Education) The Faculty of Education and Health Sciences University of Limerick, Ireland

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June 2020
Exploring perceptions, tensions and possibilities of a collaborative approach to quality assurance in Higher Education – A case study in an Institute of Technology in Ireland

Abstract

National rhetoric speaks of Higher Education institutions as powerhouses of knowledge and innovation and staff are hailed as one of their greatest assets. Engaging the commitment and innovation of staff is the stated function of Higher Education management. However, tensions frequently emerge between the perceptions of staff role groups and the goals of the Higher Education endeavor that can hinder rather than enhance progress. This research explored perceptions and tensions between “tribes and territories” in Higher Education to determine if a collaborative approach to quality assurance processes in Higher Education can mitigate some of these tensions and achieve better outcomes for the institution.

The research provided multiple insights into perceptions of and orientations towards quality assurance in Higher Education through a study in one Institute of Technology in Ireland. The importance of context, values and attitudes as drivers of quality in Higher Education was confirmed. Cognizant of changing staff profiles and changes in student engagement, the study was novel in exploring academic staff, professional staff and student views on QA. This inclusive approach was not previously documented in the literature and is an important contribution to understanding of QA in Higher Education. The research defines a novel, collaborative and inclusive methodology for developing quality policy.

Building on Lipsky’s concept of street level bureaucracy, the research moved beyond the existing focus on management and academic tribes. Broader staff and student stakeholder group views within Higher Education were included. This wider view makes the contribution to knowledge of illuminating underlying tensions between different staff role identities in Higher Education. It was an important study in its questioning of traditional views of staff roles and identities. The study reveals how staff group understanding and engagement with academic quality has evolved, as staff profiles have changed to higher levels of qualification and professionalization in the Institute of Technology sector.

The research methodology included the application of the survey approach early in the study to establish the thematic areas for investigation in semi-structured depth interviews for in-depth exploration. The Delphi method was used to research QA expert, management and participant communities’ perceptions of QA management, measurement and performance. Analysis of the surveys demonstrated that despite identity differences, a significant level of agreement can be established across all staff sub-cultures and role groups with regard to QA and QA Systems. These findings from the surveys were explored in semi-structured depth interviews with expert informants. The interviews triangulated the survey views on academic QA and revealed where current QA and management thinking differs from staff views discerned through an integrated academic QA process.

The main findings of the research are the potential for wider collaboration of staff in academic quality assurance and the value for HE institutions in genuinely acknowledging the centrality of staff to QA development and implementation. Collegiate culture in HE can be deepened beyond the academic community through collaboration and inclusion across role groups.
Declaration

This thesis is solely the work of the author and is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Doctorate of Philosophy.

The work represented in this PhD is entirely my own work and is not copied or plagiarised from other sources.

Signed: ________________  Dated: 19th June 2020

Conference Contributions


Acknowledgements

This thesis was based on the input of the students and staff who participated in the research and freely shared their views. They provided over two hundred and fifty hours of survey response data on which to base the research. I would like to thank the staff and students of Limerick Institute of Technology for so generously sharing their views, knowledge and time.

A special thank you to my research supervisors Professor Sarah Moore and Professor Patricia Mannix-McNamara, for their academic direction and insights, for their motivational support and for their patience in reading multiple revisions of my work. As a mature student, it was invaluable to benefit from their richness of experience and guidance on the research method employed. I came away from each supervisor meeting reinvigorated, with a better understanding and enthused to progress. My research supervisors walked the long road with me, nudging and pointing the way ahead. I am grateful to them both for that guidance.

My thanks to those who supported me by proof-reading the thesis document: my colleague Ann Murray, my daughter Niamh Twomey and her partner Shane Nolan. I am grateful also to my employer Limerick Institute of Technology for supporting and encouraging me throughout this doctoral research.

There is a theory in the sociology of education that we achieve our parents’ educational aspirations. I dedicate this doctoral thesis to my parents, Philomena and John Twomey.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1: Quality Assurance in Higher Education</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Introducing the Study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Scoping the Research Project</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Contextualising Quality Assurance in Higher Education</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Research Questions and Limitations</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Significance of the Study</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Organisation of this Thesis</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Quality Assurance Management</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Historical Context of Quality Assurance</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Defining Quality Management</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Developments in Quality Management</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Impacts of Higher Education Quality Management</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Quality Assurance in European Higher Education</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Introduction</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 European QA Development in the 1980s</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 European QA Development in the 1990s</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Critical Perspectives on European Higher Education QA</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Cross-Country Comparisons of QA Systems</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Country Specific Examples of QA in Higher Education</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 Current Thinking on QA in European Higher Education</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8 Conclusion</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Quality Assurance in Irish Higher Education</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Introduction</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Evolution of QA Systems in Irish Higher Education</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Impact of International Developments on Education QA</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Approach to QA for Institutes of Technology</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Approach to QA in the University Sector</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Irish QA Systems International Comparisons</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 Influences and Trends in Irish QA Systems</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8 Conclusion</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Identity Nexus in Higher Education</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Perceptions and Tensions</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Academic Perceptions and Tensions</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Management Perceptions and Tensions</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Administrator Perceptions and Tensions</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Conceptual Framework, Epistemology and Ontology</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Introduction</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Organisation &amp; Culture</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Dimensions of the Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 The Conceptual Depth in Culture</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 Culture and Higher Education</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6 New Public Management (NPM)</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7 Culture and Collaboration</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8 Innovation and Collaboration in Irish Higher Education</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9 Checks and Balances in Higher Education</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.10 Alternative Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.11 Conclusion</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Research Methodology</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Introduction</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 Methodology Debate</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 Issues in Research Methodology</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4 General Methodology Considerations</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5 Choosing a Research Strategy</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6 Research Design: Participants</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7 Research Design: Methods</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8 Research Strategy</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.9 Choosing Research Methods</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.10 The Delphi Method</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.11 Delphi Round 1: Survey Questionnaire</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.12 Delphi Round 2: Respondent Reactions</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.13 Delphi Round 3: Structured Interviews</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.14 Limitation of the Research</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.15 Conclusion</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Analysis of Surveys</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1 Introduction</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2 Survey Analysis</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3 Research Findings: What is Academic Quality Assurance?</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4 Research Findings: What are the Best QA Processes?</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5 Research Findings: Assessment of QA Systems</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.6 Research Findings: QA Management</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.7 Research Findings: Focus of Academic QA</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.8 Research Findings: Comments &amp; Conclusions on QA Process</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.9 Conclusion</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9: Expert Review of Integrated Survey Findings</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1 Introduction</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2 What is Academic Quality Assurance</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2.1 Inclusivity in the Research Cohort</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9.2.2 Staff Group Sub-Culture and Identity .................................................. 254
9.2.3 Responsibility for Quality? ................................................................. 255
9.2.4 Interrogating the Tensions: Culture and/or Identity .......................... 257
9.2.5 Responsibility Abdication ................................................................. 259
9.2.6 Group Perceptions of Academic Quality ........................................... 260
9.2.7 Collegiate or Procedural Operation ...................................................... 262
9.2.8 Effectiveness of the Academic Quality System .................................. 264
9.2.9 Response to Criticism of the Quality System ...................................... 264
9.2.10 Quality Assurance and the Student Experience ................................. 265
9.2.11 A Hidden QA Consensus ................................................................. 266
9.2.12 Tensions and Perceptions of Difference ........................................... 268
9.3 Best processes of Academic Quality Assurance ..................................... 269
9.3.1 Policies and Procedures ..................................................................... 269
9.3.2 Collegiate Professional Judgement ...................................................... 270
9.3.3 Critical Self-Reflection ........................................................................ 271
9.3.4 Management Monitoring of Quantitative Outputs .............................. 272
9.3.5 External Examiners Monitoring of Assessment .................................... 272
9.3.6 Student Feedback on their Programme ............................................. 273
9.3.7 Student Feedback on Assessment ....................................................... 274
9.3.8 Industry Feedback on Academic Programmes .................................... 275
9.3.9 Academic Council Participation .......................................................... 277
9.3.10 Support for Academic Council .......................................................... 278
9.3.11 Management Commitment to Quality Assurance .............................. 280
9.4 Assessment of the Academic Quality Assurance System ........................ 281
9.4.1 Main Strengths of AQA System ........................................................... 281
9.4.2 Identity as Teacher or Researcher ....................................................... 283
9.4.3 Primary Relationship with Colleagues and Students ........................... 283
9.4.4 Main Weaknesses of AQA System ...................................................... 284
9.4.5 Quality of Teaching ............................................................................ 288
9.4.6 Weaknesses in AQA System – Administration Perception .................. 289
9.4.7 Weaknesses in AQA System – Support Staff Perception .................... 291
9.4.8 Potential for Improvement .................................................................. 292
9.4.9 AQA focus not on the Student Experience ........................................ 294
9.4.10 AQA Improves Academic Staff Performance ................................... 296
9.4.11 Managerialism Shifts Focus Away from Classroom .......................... 296
9.5 Academic Quality Assurance Management ........................................... 297
9.5.1 Pursuit of Knowledge ......................................................................... 297
9.5.2 Higher Education as a Business .......................................................... 298
9.5.3 Education v. Training for Employment .............................................. 298
9.5.4 Staff Understanding of HE .................................................................. 299
9.5.5 Flat Management Structure ............................................................... 300
9.5.6 Diversity of Staff and Knowledge ....................................................... 302
9.5.7 Legitimacy and Buy-in ........................................................................ 303
9.5.8 Collegiate v. Managerial Focus ........................................................... 304
9.5.9 Management and Academic Measures .............................................. 305
9.5.10 Student Results a weak Quality Indicator .......................................... 305
9.5.11 Staff Ownership of Academic Quality ............................................. 306
9.5.12 Management Driver of Academic Quality ...................................... 307
9.5.13 Front-line Staff Activities ................................................................. 308
9.5.14 External Scrutiny and Accountability ............................................. 309
9.6 Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in your Institution ..................... 310
 9.6.1 Quality Enhancement ....................................................................... 310
 9.6.2 Quality Monitoring .......................................................................... 311
 9.6.3 Assessment of Quality ...................................................................... 311
 9.6.4 Combination of Quality Enhancement, Monitoring and Assessment ...... 312
 9.6.5 QA Not about Impression Management ........................................... 312
 9.6.6 QA misfit of Industrial Models ......................................................... 313
 9.6.7 QA Not about Meeting Staff Expectations ....................................... 315
 9.6.8 QA Not about Management-Staff Agendas ...................................... 314
 9.6.9 Adapting, Not Adopting External Quality Policies ............................ 315
 9.6.10 Focus on Substance v. Form ............................................................ 315
 9.6.11 Focus on Accountability versus Improving Operations ................... 317
 9.6.12 Staff Positive View of Academic QA ............................................ 318
 9.7 Expert Group Comments of Staff Views of this Research ..................... 319
 9.7.1 Different Staff Group Perceptions of Academic QA ......................... 319
 9.7.2 Different Views and Perceptions are role related .............................. 320
 9.7.3 Organisation Culture Consists of Subcultures that are Role Related .... 320

Chapter 10: Conclusions ........................................................................... 321
 10.1 Overview of the Research and Thesis ................................................. 321
 10.2 Revisiting the Research Aims and Objectives .................................... 321
 10.3 Major Findings of the Research .......................................................... 323
 10.4 Contribution to Knowledge of QA in Higher Education ..................... 328
 10.5 European Context of Academic Quality in Irish HE .......................... 335
 10.6 Limitations of the Research ............................................................... 340
 10.7 Implications for Practice and Future Research ................................. 341
 10.8 Conclusions & Recommendations .................................................... 343

References .............................................................................................. 346

Appendix A – Academic Quality Assurance Survey .................................... A
Appendix B – Academic Quality Assurance Survey (Follow-Up) .................. M
Appendix C – Follow-up Interview on Staff Views on Quality Assurance ........ KK
List of Tables

Table 1.1 – Research Objectives........................................................................................................9
Table 1.2 – Alignment of Research Objectives and Research Questions.................................15-16
Table 3.1 – Types of Recommendations of Audit Teams (Wahlen 2001)................................. 54
Table 4.1 – H.E. Policy and Legislation 1967-2018.......................................................................... 71
Table 6.1 – Dimensions and Components of the Integrative Conceptual Framework for Quality Assurance..................................................................................................................108
Table 7.1 – Validity Procedures Within Qualitative Lens & Paradigm Assumption
(Creswell & Miller 2000, p.126).......................................................................................................123
Table 7.2 – Positivist and Phenomenological Paradigms in Contrast
(based on Easterby-Smith 1991; Gummesson 2000; Hinfelaar 2004).................................128
Table 7.3 – Role Identity Analysis.....................................................................................................134
Table 7.4 – Relationship Between Research Objectives and Methodology.................................136
Table 8.1 – Round 1 and 2 Group Percentage Response Rates......................................................151
Table 8.2 – Primary Results of Academic Quality Assurance on Quality.................................199
Table 8.3 – Academic Quality Assurance on Staff..........................................................................201
Table 8.4 – Academic Quality Assurance Staff (Round 1/Round 2).............................................204
Table 8.5 – Insights into what Primarily Higher Education is understood to be.........................206
Table 8.6 – Best Means for Managing Academic Quality............................................................215
Table 8.7 – Primary Drivers of Academic Quality.........................................................................218
Table 8.8 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Quality Enhancement...........................221
Table 8.9 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Quality Monitoring...............................223
Table 8.10 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Assessment of Quality......................225
Table 8.11 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Impression Management....................227
Table 8.12 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Quality as Improvement....................230
Table 8.13 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Quality Discipline & Technology .232
List of Figures

Figure 2.1 – USESCO General Education Quality Analysis/Diagnosis Framework  
(Source: UNESCO Education for All, p. 12) ................................................................. 27

Figure 2.2 – Return to a Euro Spent at Different Levels of Education ......................... 30

Figure 2.3 – The Baldridge Model for Performance Excellence in Education  
(Hertz 2005) ................................................................................................................. 31

Figure 6.1 – Formal and Intrinsic Aspects of Organisation Culture ............................... 93

Figure 6.2 – Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance  
(Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh 2011, p. 6) ................................................................. 106

Figure 6.3 – Conceptual Framework for Integrative Quality Assurance  
(Adapted from Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh 2011, p. 6) ..................................... 107

Figure 6.4 – Public Service Reform Plan 2014-2016  
(Department of Public Expenditure & Reform 2014) ................................... 111

Figure 8.1 – Role in the Organisation ............................................................................ 152

Figure 8.2 – Primary Responsibility for AQA in a Higher Education Institution .......... 154

Figure 8.3 – Academic Quality .................................................................................... 158

Figure 8.4 – The Academic Quality Assurance System is Based On ....................... 161

Figure 8.5 – The Academic Quality Assurance System Improving Academic Quality ... 163

Figure 8.6 – The Academic Quality Assurance System Has Helped to Improve  
the Student Experience ......................................................................................... 166

Figure 8.7 – The Best Processes of Academic Quality Assurance in  
Higher Education Are ......................................................................................... 168

Figure 8.8 – Critical Self-Reflection on Their Teaching by Academic Staff is Important  
for Academic Quality Assurance ........................................................................ 170

Figure 8.9 – Managing Monitoring of Quantitative Outputs is Important for Academic  
Quality Assurance .............................................................................................. 171

Figure 8.10 – External Examiner Monitoring of Assessment is Important for Academic  
Quality Assurance ............................................................................................ 172
Figure 8.11 – Student Feedback on Their Programme is Important for Academic Quality Assurance ..............................................................173

Figure 8.12 – Student Feedback on Assessment is Important for Academic Quality Assurance ..........................................................174

Figure 8.13 – Industry Feedback on Academic Programmes is Important for Academic Quality Assurance .................................................175

Figure 8.14 – Academic Council Monitoring of Academic Programmes is Important for Academic Quality Assurance ...............................176

Figure 8.15 – Academic Council Monitoring of Assessment is Important for Academic Quality Assurance ..............................................179

Figure 8.16 – Management Commitment is a Key Element in Establishing a Viable Quality Assurance Culture ........................................181

Figure 8.17 – First Strength of the Academic Quality Assurance Systems in Operation ...........................................................................183

Figure 8.18 – Second Strength of the Academic Quality Assurance Systems in Operation .......................................................................183

Figure 8.19 – Third Strength of the Academic Quality Assurance Systems in Operation .......................................................................184

Figure 8.20 – First Weaknesses of the Academic Quality Assurance Systems in Operation .......................................................................188

Figure 8.21 – Second Weaknesses of the Academic Quality Assurance Systems in Operation .......................................................................189

Figure 8.22 – Third Weaknesses of the Academic Quality Assurance Systems in Operation .......................................................................189

Figure 8.23 – Potential for Improvement in Academic Quality Assurance .................................................................194

Figure 8.24 – Higher Education is Primarily .................................................................205

Figure 8.25 – Academic Quality is Best Achieved within Institutions with a Hierarchical Management or Flat Management Structure 210

Figure 8.26 – Academic Quality is Best Achieved within Institutions with a Managerial or Collegiate Focus ........................................213
Figure 8.27 – Academic Quality is Best Managed Through the Use Of…………………………..214
Figure 8.28 – The Primary Drivers of Academic Quality Assurance…………………………..217
Figure 8.29 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Quality Enhancement ………….221
Figure 8.30 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Quality Monitoring ………….223
Figure 8.31 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Assessment of Quality ………….225
Figure 8.32 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Impression Management ……….227
Figure 8.33 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Improvement …………………..229
Figure 8.34 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Discipline & Technology ……….232
Figure 8.35 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Meeting Staff Expectations of a Quality Work Environment ……………………………………………………………………..234
Figure 8.36 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Breaking Staff Expectations of Management’s Responsibilities ……………………………………………………………………..236
Figure 8.37 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Adapting External Quality Policies ……………………………………………………………………………………………238
Figure 8.38 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Adapting External Quality Policies ……………………………………………………………………………………………240
Figure 8.39 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance on Form Rather than Substance……242
List of Acronyms

ACRP – Academic Council Regulations and Procedures
AQA – Academic Quality Assurance
BFUG – Bologna Follow-up Group
CHEPS – Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies
CHIU – Conference of Heads of Irish Universities
DAM – Design Align Manage
DCU – Dublin City University
EHEA – European Higher Education Area
ENQA – European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG – European Standards and Guideline
ESRI – Economic and Social Research Institute
EC – European Council
EU – European Union
EUA – European Universities Association
EURASHE – European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
HE – Higher Education
HEA – Higher Education Authority
HEQC – Higher Education Quality Council
HETAC – Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IOT – Institute of Technology
IHEQN – Irish Higher Education Quality Network
INQAAHE – International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IOTI – Institutes of Technology Ireland
IUA – Irish Universities Association
IUQB – Irish Universities Quality Board
IUT – Instituts Universitaire de Technologie
NCEA – National Council for Educational Awards
NPM – New Public Management
NQAI – National Quality Authority of Ireland
OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
QA – Quality Assurance
QQAHE – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
QQI – Quality and Qualifications Ireland
TLRP – Teaching and Learning Research Programme
TQM – Total Quality Management
UK – United Kingdom
UL – University of Limerick
Chapter 1: Quality Assurance in Higher Education

1.1 Introducing the Study

"Quality is a highly contested concept and has multiple meanings to people who conceive Higher Education and quality differently," (Tam 2001, p.47).

In considering the measurement of quality and performance in Higher Education, Tam (2001) concludes that the varying models of measuring quality are underpinned by explicit and/or tacit differences in understanding and assumptions made of Higher Education and quality. The wide range of internal and external stakeholders with often quite varied vested interests in Higher Education has resulted in Higher Education quality becoming a contested territory of national, industrial, community, academic, non-academic and student perspectives. National governments in the Western world increasingly used a managerial approach. This approach was justified by citing the need for greater openness, transparency and accountability in Higher Education. This in effect has led to significant challenges for traditional academic processes. Academic quality assurance (AQA) has also been subject to this questioning, with the consequence identified above by Tam.

My perspective on quality assurance (QA) in Higher Education is influenced by my academic background and my experience in management. As an academic now working in management, I was conscious of the need to interrogate my assumptions, given the potential biases of both academic and managerial identities. Throughout my 30 years working in Higher Education in both the UK and in Ireland I have always been conscious of the tensions between different staff role groups, specifically between academics, administrators, managers and student support staff. Hence, I have always been sensitive to the need to balance and perhaps in some cases to mitigate my inclination towards managerial and propositional views on QA. Managerial and academic lenses are often positioned as two polarized viewpoints on QA in Higher Education. However, less prevalent views that critique these perspectives are also extant in the literature. In this regard, the classical Marxist militant revolutionary perspective, evident in work by Dave Hill (2011), can be distinguished from the mainstream left-wing, non-militant, political analysis of Kathleen Lynch
(2014) and the critical theory perspectives of Stephen Ball (2013) and Michael Apple (2014) who offer challenging critique of recent new managerialist and neoliberalist trends in education generally, and in Higher Education specifically. Their perspectives on the influence of neoliberalism and managerialism, need to be considered by managers and academics alike.


As a manager, I was challenged by McLaren’s alternative critical pedagogy perspectives on content, structure, nature, ownership, management and operation of education provision in society. McLaren’s critical pedagogy perspective supports and encourages the front-line educator to challenge the dominant culture and social policy. The potential to challenge inequalities through education was placed at the heart of his critical pedagogy. McLaren’s perspective differs considerably from the dominant contemporary view of Higher Education in Ireland and Europe as an instrument of the state, social cohesion and economic development (Karseth and Solbrekke 2016).

The potential of Higher Education in Ireland to challenge dominant culture has had some degree of impact in the context of gender and racial inequalities and social disadvantage in education. The primary aim of Peter McLaren’s *Life in Schools* to challenge the inequalities in education specific to class and economics has proved more difficult. One might even suggest that the bastions of the dominant culture McLaren is challenging through education are in Ireland very closely aligned with the education system. The state-trained and state employed teachers and the privileged class of public policy makers, have at best used critical pedagogy to address social issues and social change around the margins. Indeed, it could be argued that the purpose of even these limited efforts to address social issues have been guided by the need to maintain the dominant culture and its claims to be open and responsive to the needs of subcultures within society. I had to be conscious
that the collaborative approach to QA that is the subject matter of this research could in itself be viewed as challenging to the dominant cultural, policy, management and agency within Higher Education in Ireland. Finnegan (2019) reflects on “the need to build alliances and dialogue between residual and emergent cultures in Irish HE” to develop a new vision of the university “which draws critically on a notion of the public good and the commons” (De Angelis, 2017).

Conversely, a changing political context that intended systemic benefits of openness, transparency and accountability could also promote a neoliberal or managerial agenda in education. It is how we apply policy as much as the policy itself that defines outcomes (Sharpe 2019). Exploring these alternative views has heightened my consciousness of my ontological perspective, making me more open to criticism of including an overly managerial commitment to accountability and responsibility in Higher Education. While aware of the complexity of perspectives on QA, it was nonetheless important to align my intellectual view with my experience in defining an authentic ontology and epistemology.

This research examines perceptions of and orientations towards quality assurance in an Institute of Technology (IoT) in Ireland, to establish the various views, identify tensions and consider possibilities of a collaborative approach to QA. I acknowledged the importance of organisational context, values and attitudes as drivers of the QA systems operating in this sector. My methodology distinguished between staff role groupings, with management, administration, student services and academic identified as distinct staff role groupings. My study was explicit and novel in addressing administration and student services identities within the institution, where the dominance of academics and managers are generally considered central to the mission and QA. I aimed to develop an accurate, evidence-based understanding of the staff identities within the institution under study and to use this understanding to make recommendations for the institute’s and the sector’s approach to QA.

My research explored participant perceptions of Higher Education to identify underlying tensions between staff role groupings and possibilities of an integrated approach to QA within Higher Education. QA is integrated when the different role groups impacted by QA policy decisions are included in the QA policy development. My research identifies the different cultures and
approaches extant within a Higher Education organisation that impact on organisation quality assurance. Because of the complex and distinctive nature of the Higher Education endeavor, inspiring learning and giving rise to new ideas, definitions of academic quality based on single stakeholder views are often contested (Yorke and Vidovich 2016; Warner 2016; Elassy 2015). To capture the essence of inspiring students and of creating new knowledge, concepts of Higher Education limited to inputs and outputs or to student experience or to value adding, do not in themselves provide sufficient insight to the views of staff participants in an academic institution (Tam 2001). The different conceptions of Higher Education are considered in detail within the research, viewed through culture and identity as the conceptual framework (Chapter 6). My research looked inside the black box of academic quality at the participant perceptions in a Higher Education organisation to seek an enhanced understanding of the perceptions, tensions and possibilities of an integrated approach to quality assurance in Higher Education.

In Chapter 5, I set out in more detail the tensions that arise between staff groups in Higher Education. Staff orientation based on positioning and cultural identity were to the fore in my experience. I formed the view that rather than allowing differing staff views to fester unaddressed in Higher Education, it should be possible to design a process of challenging alternative truths so as to build shared truths and meaning in the organisation. The thesis of my research was to explore a novel collaborative QA process, supporting the different staff role groups to dialogue the other groups’ ideas in a mediated way.

My experience in higher education management was that the growth of audit culture and hierarchical management can undermine collegiate culture, feeding a culture of ‘them and us’. Quality in Higher Education is too complex to be reduced to an audit culture. The centrality of quality in Higher Education also requires analysis of identity and purpose. The QA journey in Higher Education goes beyond the understanding of policies and procedures to quality as a lived and meaningful experience from which knowledge and innovation can arise. My research was motivated by a need to address the changing nature of Higher Education organisations. Shifting job roles, changes in organisation mission and higher qualifications among profession staff have given rise to the concept of the “third space”, reflecting the heightened interdependence of different staff roles (Veles et al. 2017).
Chapter 1 positions the complexity of quality assurance across the spheres of ideology, politics, financing, academia, national and international policy. This chapter begins by reflecting on quality management as a phenomenon and sets out the historical context of quality assurance and the international context of developments in QA in Higher Education. The research aims and objectives are defined and the significance of the research is considered, with a focus on participant experience of quality systems in Higher Education. Chapter 2 then examines the historical context of quality management and the transfer of quality philosophy from manufacturing to services. The definition of quality and its evolving services context are considered. Current developments in service quality management are discussed. A final section of Chapter 1 sets out a roadmap for the content and structure of the thesis that documents the research, outlining the scope of each chapter in this thesis.

A subscript of the National Strategy for Education to 2030 is a recognition of the rise of managerialism and the government aspiration for stronger, centralized control over Higher Education policy and institutions (HEA 2011). Rather than Higher Education institutions developing their own strategy, the National Strategy dictates the types of organisational structures expected. It sets out objectives for transition to newly formed regional clusters and technological universities. The extent of stronger, centralized, state control is evidenced in both the detailing of the regional clusters implementation, in the performance compacts policy implementation and in setting up Technological Universities based on a forced merger policy. The National Strategy requires institutions to compete for innovation funding that facilitates these specific strategic developments. Operating in an economic context that has seen a 38% fall in state grants to Higher Education and a decrease in overall funding for Higher Education of over 13.5%, the HEA innovation stimulus funding has been characterised as a claw-back of funds that were top sliced from core budget to be re-allocated under the strategic development banner (Boland 2015). In the first round of Regional Clusters and Performance Compacts, institutions set their own cluster and performance objectives from 2014 to 2016. The HEA attempted to further influence performance compacts after 2016. Aspects of government central planning and control of HE are challenging for the traditional concept of a university as an autonomous institution where academia can offer an independent critique for the benefit of society at large. The CEO of the HEA resigned in November 2018 to highlight the extent of political policy interference in the work of the HEA.
Higher Education in Ireland could be characterized as finding itself in a tug of war between academia and educationalists on the one hand and government and external stakeholder interests on the other. There is a significant body of literature on academic culture, on managerialism, on technical rationalism in education and on government policy and reform that provides indications and evidence of this struggle across HE (Bok 2003; Boxer 2005; Olssen and Peters 2005; Wright and Greenwood 2017).

There is also evidence in Higher Education operations of a struggle between the traditional academic or collegiate culture on the one hand and the growing communities of non-academic staff cultures among management staff, administration staff and student support staff. As Higher Education organisations grow in complexity and expand their mission the need to employ non-academic staff to support new roles and services has also grown. The widening of the mission and mandates of Higher Education institutions has changed them from the tradition of teaching and research institutions to include regional development, industry engagement and community engagement. These new mandates have strengthened the position of these non-academic groups within the operational and management structures in Higher Education. It is increasingly common to find non-academic directors of enterprise, finance, human resources or strategy included within the senior management teams in universities that traditionally were dominated by academics. Institutions need to adapt to the new internal reality of these distinctive identities. Wider mandates are now too numerous and too central to the mission of Higher Education to be ignored, as is their impact on quality and QA within the broader vision of Higher Education.

If Higher Education QA were about an agreed view of academic quality perhaps it might be less problematic. Issues emerge around how different staff subcultures perceive and define quality. Conflicting views on QA can reflect the position of the people involved and indeed their perception of QA within the standards of operation of their role, such as an administrative adherence to dates, deadlines and procedures as opposed to an academic focus on a rounded assessment of a student. These perceptions are central to differing views on whether quality needs to be measured in all contexts and how those measurements should be achieved. Different perceptions of Higher Education have implications for understanding quality, how quality might be measured and who might be the most appropriate parties to carry out this measurement. This in turn leads us to the
A fundamental consideration of the purpose for which the specific measurements are carried out. A measurement could, for example, aim to measure continuous improvement, to verify fitness for purpose, to support management, to compare benchmarks or indeed to participate in league tables. Despite the laudable aspiration for education to stand above politics and vested interests, it is unclear if this aspiration can prevail. The strength of external stakeholder influence and agendas are particularly important in a Higher Education system that is significantly dependent on public funding. This in turn differs from the drivers of the QA agenda in Higher Education from the perspective of the staff communities involved and the cultural or identity groupings within institutions. Thus, one could argue that far from being above politics and vested interests, Higher Education institutions in Ireland operate within an external context of politics with a capital P and within an internal context of politics with a small p. Maintaining internal unity of vision to create strong ownership of quality-oriented values is increasingly challenging for Higher Education and was central to my motivation to carry out this study. The research questions derived from this problematising are set out more directly in Section 1.4 of this chapter.

In this doctoral process I engaged with Higher Education quality assurance perspectives by employing a phenomenological approach to illuminate the specifics of formal policy. The research was cognisant of Lipsky’s (1980) theory of “street level bureaucracy” engagement of front-line staff with policy and what was manifest in the different staff role cultures pertaining to quality assurance. I grappled with questions such as whether the value systems extant in Higher Education are best understood through a corporate perspective, through sub-culture value systems associated with staff role groupings or as personal perspectives? What the significance is of these different views on quality assurance culture and the extent to which Institutes of Technology define and create their own QA? My research took a pragmatic theory approach by reflecting expert and practitioner views on the definition of quality in Higher Education, the role of QA and how it is operationalised, to explore the concepts and issues involved in the development of an inclusive and integrative QA framework, through systematic, rigorous research procedures. My study engaged with the complexity of QA in Higher Education, reflecting the diversity of propositional and socratic voices that occupy that space. I acknowledged the platonic position that conflicting views can be held simultaneously, reflecting the complexity of human thought and experience. Through engagement with four role specific subgroups of staff within a single Institute
of Technology, four different lenses were availed of through which to view quality and quality assurance under emergent conceptual categories. The Delphi Method was utilised, with its multi-phase approach to consensus building, to support a progressive refining of survey data. I used a mix of closed and open questions within a highly structured questionnaire as the primary research instrument. Triangulation of the survey findings with the findings of semi-structured interviews with a control group of QA and management experts completed the methodological toolset used in the research. The research topic and approach were chosen to take full advantage of my ease of access to a QA expert community and the staff groupings. The importance of this research rests in the context of the current re-visioning and restructuring of Higher Education in Ireland. A cornerstone of the research was an effort to strip away some of the QA rhetoric to establish the fundamental principles, beliefs and values at play among the different identity groups within Higher Education in an integrative approach to QA. The research was integrative at organisation level through cross-cutting the different role identities, functional subcultures and structural silos of activity.

1.2 Scoping the Research Project

The parameters for the research were a study of QA within one Institute of Technology in Ireland, where I positioned myself in a middle ground of quite a contested space inhabited by those who propose neoliberal managerialism on the one hand and by critical theory and discourses of resistance on the other. Specifically, the broad aims of this doctoral study were to:

a) critically review the quality assurance systems in operation in a single Institute of Technology in Ireland.
b) assess the levels of agreement or disagreement on the process of QA among different staff groupings in an Institute of Technology in Ireland.
c) examine and evaluate provider views of the QA systems derived from the Qualifications (Education & Training) Act 1999 and the 2012 QQI Act.
d) explore the perceived value of the QA process
e) explore the perceived value of incorporating different QA tools into the QA process.

These broad aims supported the following research objectives:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective 1:</th>
<th>To investigate the QA systems in operation in Irish Higher Education, with particular reference to the context of a specific Institute of Technology.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective 2:</td>
<td>To establish Higher Education staff and student views on the concepts of quality, quality assurance and quality enhancement in Higher Education and how the QA process might be improved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 3:</td>
<td>To evaluate the operation of the QA systems with particular focus on the differences and possible tensions between managerial, administrative, academic and student support staff perceptions, values and cultures in an Institute of Technology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 4:</td>
<td>On the basis of this research to make recommendations on processes and on approaches to QA in Higher Education in Ireland.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.1 – Research Objectives

These aims and objectives in turn underpinned the research questions set out later in Section 1.4 and influenced how I read the data, as well as the discussion and the recommendations set out in Chapter 10. Critics of the influence of neoliberalism in education, such as Giroux (2014; 2015) describe some of the less desirable implications of neoliberalism and new managerialism in Higher Education as an oppressiveness of and disassociation from people. Torres (2008) highlights a narrow focus on testing and lack of regard for the wider role of education in supporting democracy and human liberation as criticisms. Klees (2008) critiques the benefits ascribed to managerialism in education and proffers a view of “the multiple and devastating impacts of neoliberal globalization on education” (Klees 2008 p.409). The criticism has given rise to terminology such as knowledge capitalism (Olssen et al 2005), market agenda (Connell 2013) and corporatisation of education (Baltodano 2012). While acknowledging these concerns for the potential negative impacts of managerialism on education, I was not fully convinced by the critics that managerial approaches have no role to play in education. Public funding inevitably requires a competitive argument for each budget area and public accountability for the benefits of alternative funding decisions. The essence and added value of this thesis is the exploration of staff group perceptions of quality assurance. If the oppressiveness and disassociation critiques of managerialism above
have substance, the integration of these participant views could offer a more empowering and supportive perspective, an alternative to the dogmatic and controlling aspects of neoliberal and managerialist identified in the critical narratives.

1.3 Contextualising Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Quality Assurance Systems have the potential to provide a clear focus on achievement, performance and impact, offering a counter balance of substance to the irresistible exuberance of corporate image or market performance. In the dynamic and fast moving Higher Education context of the twenty-first century it may be necessary for quality assurance to serve an additional function in providing a bridge between the sometimes competing objectives, value systems and cultures of managerialism and academia, influenced as they are by the tensions of independence and control, of institutional ownership and state policy. The historical context in which quality management arose in management theory, leading over time to Total Quality Management and Just-in-Time manufacturing (referred to as the ‘Japanisation’ of industry) is set out in Chapter 3. More significant for Higher Education is the subsequent transfer of quality management from manufacturing industry to the services sector and this is considered in more detail in Chapter 2. Having established the context, the aims and objectives of this research are enumerated in Section 1.4. The overall structure of this thesis is then mapped out for the reader. The significance and value of this research and its contribution to knowledge are confirmed.

The contemporary vision for QA in Higher Education in Europe dates to 1984 when Higher Education QA was first enacted into law in France. This initiative led in time to the OECD Report on Internationalisation and Quality in Higher Education in Europe (OECD 1999). This report in turn formed the basis for the Bologna Agreement, with its vision of transparency and convergence in European Higher Education and the internationalisation of the European education space. The QA evaluation of universities that began in France in 1984, spread to the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Finland by the early-1990s. The case for QA in Higher Education had been established internationally by the late 1990s. It was first muted as an approach being considered by the Department of Education in Ireland in 1994 (McDonagh 1994). Quality
assurance was formally adopted in Irish Higher Education through the Universities Act 1997 and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, I recognise the variations in position on the value of QA systems in Higher Education. There were ideological and cultural influences on the focus of the QA initiative. Its potential value was as a process that is designed to help develop approaches that deliver on the goals of Higher Education institutions. The political ‘shift to the right’ and the new economics formed the political context and social backdrop to the introduction of Higher Education evaluation and QA in Europe. Fundamental questions were raised for Higher Education as to the QA initiative’s value or viability in supporting wider educational objectives of human development, individual creativity and transmission of cultural identity. The Economic Rationalism brand of enterprise dependent economic theory espoused by the New Right (Apple 1993; Roberts 1997) directly contradicts the Keynesian economics of government tax and spending based management of aggregate demand that was the foundation of post-war western economics (Codd 1997). The concepts of a market-led approach, accountability for public spending, the need for deregulation and free competition became the basis for reform in health, education, social welfare and the wider public sector and services (Codd 1997). More recently, the validity of the political and economic philosophies underpinning the new economics and globalisation vision has been brought into question (Benería, Berik, and Floro, 2015; Berend, 2016). The sharp downturns in stock markets, banking and construction industries in Europe and the USA from 2007 onwards severely undermined the Neoliberal economic philosophy. Yet this was the vision on which the massification of Higher Education and the QA approach to Higher Education had developed. The economic crash seemed to justify a view that perhaps a business and industry led economy might not be the panacea after all. Central banks and government agencies were forced to intervene to save private enterprise and the global economy from collapse. It is important for the success of the QA initiative in Higher Education that it does not become identified too closely with the proponents of a particular economic or political philosophy. Education quality, supporting the full potential for progress in thinking and ideas, is fundamental enough to the individual, to the institution, and to the interests of society to need to withstand ever changing economic and political ideologies. Education quality needs to have an ethos and value
system that can accommodate difference without losing its purpose in supporting knowledge
development (Deem and Brehony 2005).

Much of the contemporary debate in society with regard to Higher Education quality has focused
on funding, return on public investment, economic impact, social outcomes and accountability to
the public purse. Scholars have questioned the intuitive and often assumed direct correlation
between resources and quality (Bowen 1980; Ehrmann 2011). Howard Bowen’s (1980) Revenue
Theory of Higher Education Costs states that universities raise all the income they can raise and
spend all that income. Hence revenue is the primary determinant of cost. William Baumol and
William Bowen counter the revenue theory of costs with their Cost Disease theory of costs, stating
that the centrality of intellectual labour to the Higher Education process, as the academic product
rather than as an input to a production process, is the primary driver of costs and comparable to
other industries in this regard (Baumol 1967; Baumol & Bowen 1966). A comparison and
evaluation of these cost theories is presented in a 2008 paper Explaining Increases in Higher
Education Costs (Archibald & Feldman 2008). This research accepts that cost control across
different industries is directly linked to productivity growth and that in Higher Education
“productivity growth is often synonymous with lower quality”, arguing that additional students
per class reduces the benefit gained by each student, resulting in reduced learning outcomes for
the student and reduced student retention rates. Similarly, increased teaching workload reduces
research and scholarly activity, impacting the quality of teaching. Baumol and Blackman provide
a helpful update on the original Cost Disease theory applied specifically to the changing education
evidence to support the view that Higher Education behaves similarly in cost terms to other
personal services based on highly educated labour. So, examined through the lens of the Revenue
Theory of Cost, Higher Education has specific reasoning and cost significance that yet play a
limited role in cost determination. It is therefore concluded that “the cost disease phenomenon is
the dominant reason” for rising costs in Higher Education. What is most interesting in the context
of this research is the linking of cost to quality in Higher Education and the conclusion that “the
cost-quality locus shifts downward” such that “cost decreases could be achieved without reduction
in quality, or alternatively, higher quality is possible at constant cost” through integration of
information technology more fully into service design (Archibald and Feldman 2008, p.290).
Whichever theory of cost one espouses, it is evident that without resources there are limited choices and limited capacity to assure quality. Even the gains in quality that are suggested to result from education technology enhancements require resourcing (Archibald and Feldman, 2008). Education quality is fundamental enough to the individual and society to merit consideration within the dominant arguments of economic and cost theories. While end of month, end of quarter and end of year are the recognized cycles of business, decades and centuries may be more significant in the development of knowledge, culture and society. In our apparently fast-moving world, there are alternative long-term views of education, society, culture and civilisation that counsel caution against the next ‘Ponzi Scheme’, the latest yet unproven business model and short-lived visions of a new economic order (Hartmann 1999).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) raised concerns about ‘Quality in an era of Diminishing Resources’ (QQI 2016). Their linkage of quality and resources was based on reports from the different Higher Education institutions themselves. Nonetheless, the QQI report drew the following response from a senior academic in one Higher Education institution:

“I have read the QQI report Quality in an Era of Diminishing Resources: Irish Education 2008-2015. I am disappointed in the report in that it portrays the sector negatively and the report in my view is not balanced. I have no doubt that the extracts are correct and that what is stated is factually correct but it does not report on the positive quality aspects that have been achieved in the period 2008-2015.” (From an email distributed to the Council of Registrars of Institutes of Technology, April 2016).

This quote from a senior academic manager demonstrates one of the dilemmas faced by academic institutions. Even when the evidence from independent external agencies points to quality issues due to under-resourcing, the institution will often respond defensively to protect its good name and reputation. Hence, QQI (2017) has shifted its focus to emphasise the effectiveness, impact and enhancement highlights of QA to encourage more open reporting by institutions on their QA systems. Quality is a sensitive and critical consideration for HE institutions. Hence, it can be challenging for the state and QA agencies to access QA data at institute level in the way this research has engaged directly with unfiltered opinions and experience.

The education quality debate came to the fore previously in Ireland following publication of the political and social agenda for Higher Education in the OECD Report (OECD 2004). In the words
of one academic, social critic and educational commentator, “Neo-liberal politics defines the citizen as a ‘consumer’, an economic maximiser, a ‘free chooser’ in education” (Lynch 2004, p.19). Yet while one cannot ignore the ideology that drives educational change, the development of a QA approach to Higher Education also results from other drivers, such as issues of education mobility, globalisation, internationalisation of education, public sector and private sector competition, and the transfer of consumerism and the service culture from other arenas. Not all might agree, especially within the academic community, that through documented success in delivering improvements in Higher Education, QA may also counter ideology and be more than a neoliberal strategy. QA is widely accepted among the public as a basis for public management of Higher Education and other public service provision and for benchmarking of standards within states and across international borders.

Notwithstanding the philosophical issues above, the current culture of public accountability and freedom of information support the introduction of control and measurement of Higher Education performance. Moreover, the need to move beyond an institute’s historic reputation, public image and social attitudes as determinants of Higher Education quality, necessitates the development of qualitative and quantitative measures and comparators. While the philosophical underpinnings and implementation frameworks may change, QA in Higher Education looks set to continue as the international norm for measurement of educational outcomes and economic outputs.

The Lisbon Strategy defined by the European Council in 2000 set the objective for the European Union to become the world’s most dynamic knowledge-based economy and defined a strategy to reach this objective by 2010. With this mandate, countries across Europe reflected on the concrete objectives of Higher Education required to deliver the Lisbon Strategy. A landmark report delivered at the European Council meeting in Stockholm in 2001 identified three broad objectives for European education:

1. Improve the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU.
2. Facilitate the access of all to education and training systems.
3. Open-up education and training systems to the wider world.

My research on quality assurance systems is in the context specifically of the first objective above for Irish Higher Education to Improve the quality and effectiveness of education and training
It is important to explore beyond this systemic rhetoric to practice, beyond espoused culture to culture in use. This required my research to embrace the complexity, messiness, inconsistencies, identities and boundary crossing integral to academic quality.

1.4 Research Questions and Limitations

I set out to explore the QA systems operating in Irish Higher Education. Evidence from an Institute of Technology in Ireland was used to explore perceptions, tensions and possibilities of an integrated approach to quality assurance. The broad research aims and objectives, set out earlier in Section 1.2, guided the alignment of the four objectives in Table 1.2 below to the related research questions.

The four research questions below align coherently with the four research objectives. By investigating these specific questions the research aimed to fill a gap in the literature and to contribute new knowledge. These questions in turn refer back to the research objectives defined in Section 1.2 previously.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective 1: To investigate the QA systems in operation in Irish Higher Education, with particular reference to the context of a specific Institute of Technology.</td>
<td>Q1 - What does Quality mean to managers, administrators, academics and students in this Institute of Technology and how might this be extrapolated to other institutions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 2: To establish Higher Education staff and student views on the concepts of quality, quality assurance and quality enhancement in Higher Education and how the QA process might be improved.</td>
<td>Q2 – To what extent do the different staff groupings and students in Institutes of Technology agree on the process of quality assurance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 3: To evaluate the operation of the QA systems with particular focus on the differences and possible tensions between</td>
<td>Q3 – What is the perceived value among different staff groups in Higher Education of the approach to quality assurance in</td>
</tr>
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</table>
managerial, administrative, academic and student support staff perceptions, values and cultures in an Institute of Technology.

operation, in terms of its strengths, weaknesses and potential for improvement?

Objective 4: On the basis of this research to make recommendations on processes and on approaches to QA in Higher Education in Ireland.

Q4 – How might these findings help to guide and enhance the process of QA in Higher Education in Ireland?

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<tr>
<th>Table 1.2 – Alignment of Research Objectives and Research Questions</th>
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The focus of the research was on the student and staff communities. It may be arguable that different cultures have developed across the different Institutes of Technology. Yet based on the statutory nature of QA, the standardised approach enforced by QQI and their common evolution under NCEA and HETAC before QQI, the institute in this study is representative of the QA systems operating within the Institutes of Technology sector generally. The institutes and universities are subject to the same QA statute and process, with a growing compatibility in how these are applied by the national QA agency QQI. Therefore, it is arguable that the findings of this research will resonate with and be relevant to Irish Higher Education providers that include consultative and collaborative culture and processes in their academic and management value systems.

1.5 Significance of the Study

*The world that we have made as a result of the level of thinking we have done so far creates problems that we cannot solve at the same levels as they were created.*

*(Attributed to Albert Einstein by Pascale 1990)*

Exploring perceptions and tensions around QA systems highlights the variation in values and cultures between managerial, administrative, student services and academic perspectives on Higher Education. From this exploration I considered the possibility of developing an integrative approach to institutional QA that encompasses this range of perspectives. Analysis of stakeholder
responses in survey data offered further insight into the QA culture and evaluation of the QA systems in operation. This participant level thinking provides QA operations insights that are often missed in high-level thinking and reports on QA.

Abraham Lincoln is credited with having said ‘if we could first know where we are and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do and how to do it’. This research contributes to knowledge and understanding of the quality management systems in operation in the institute. The study thereby has the potential to facilitate reflective decisions on QA processes for the Institutes of Technology, based on the views of the institutes’ staff and student stakeholders.

The research is valuable in offering insight into the operation of quality management in an Institute of Technology, how the national QA system is viewed by those working in that Institute of Technology, how the national QA system is experienced at institute level and how this system is implemented at the coalface and institute level. While there is a substantial literature advancing theoretical arguments, empirical evidence and micro studies of operational effectiveness in European Higher Education are meagre at best (Barr 2004; Greenaway & Haynes 2004; Cartwright 2007; Tsinidou, Gerogiannis, & Fitsilis 2010). This research adds significantly to the micro data on evaluation of QA in Irish Higher Education by providing an indepth micro study of academic QA within a single organisation that offers insights to culture and sub-cultures that impact on QA operation and effectiveness within the organisation. The research adds to the literature on the practical implementation of QA in Higher Education and on a best practice QA review process within Higher Education. Thus, the significance of the study could be viewed as relevant beyond the IoT sector. It addresses the Irish Higher Education context as a study of how the wider European model of Higher Education QA is being implemented in one institution in one state and the lessons that can be learned from this Irish case study may be applicable across Irish Higher Education or even within the European education space, to respect the European principle of subsidiarity in QA decision making.

In keeping with a reflective practice approach, this research evaluates the QA processes in use in an Institute of Technology in Ireland, based on the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for QA in Higher Education that is the standard for quality assurance in Irish Higher Education
With the various standards in use in Higher Education in the different national and institution scenarios, it would be wrong to think that all Higher Education institutions are alike or operating in the same context. The experience of QA in Higher Education can vary from something that is ‘done to staff’ to a ‘collaboration’ around a shared part of the institution’s mission and identity. The integrated approach to QA proposed in this research is positioned firmly in this collaborative paradigm.

1.6 Organisation of this Thesis

This chapter introduced the subject of this research, Quality Assurance in Higher Education. The subject was entered into within the historical and international context of developments in quality management generally. QA in Higher Education provides a context within which to structure and focus the research study on the human factors that impact on QA.

The aims and objectives of the study were explained and the focus of the study was defined. The significance and value of the research was alluded to at this early stage to provide context for reading this thesis. The validity procedures defined for the study were documented. It is helpful to understand the research aims and objectives to position the work undertaken in a historical context and to define quality management within that context.

This introductory chapter sought to define quality in the Higher Education setting and to present this QA context. By giving a broad over-view in this chapter it was intended that the reader be given an understanding of the study before progressing to the formal literature review. The full structure of this thesis is set out below to guide the reader.

Chapter 1 sets the context from the literature of quality management systems and philosophy. Chapter 2 contextualises the research to identify the study area. Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 examine the relevant literature on QA systems in the European and Irish Higher Education systems. Chapter 3 considers the significance of the Bologna Agreement and the work of European education research and policy agencies such as the ENQA, CHEPS and EURASHE. These provide the international backdrop of QA in Irish Higher Education. The institutional review methodology of
the Middle States Commission for Higher Education in the United States of America provides an additional perspective from outside the European context. Relevant details of institutional review quality evaluation systems and issues in Europe and Ireland are set out in Chapter 3.

Following on from examination of the European QA context in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 narrows the focus onto QA systems in Irish Higher Education. However, the strong link between QA development in Europe and Ireland is interwoven with the consideration of QA systems in Ireland, reflecting the changing environment in Higher Education across Europe. Again, the American system provides a useful external benchmark comparator.

In Chapter 5 I consider in more detail the role identities and cultures in Higher Education. The perceptions of different staff groups are explored and the tensions that exist between groups are identified. Chapter 5 in effect defines the research problem to be addressed.

Chapter 6 sets out the conceptual framework to be used as the lens through which to approach the problem defined in Chapter 5. Choosing a conceptual framework requires both explanation and justification. These are provided in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 7 the question of an appropriate research methodology for this study is addressed. Having considered the theoretical foundations of the methods and approaches available and the conceptual framework underpinning this study, an explanation is provided for the basis of the research methods employed. The research strategy, structure and methods are mapped out in detail in Chapter 7.

The research data collected forms the subject matter of Chapter 8 and Chapter 9. The results of two rounds of surveys, using the Delphi method, are presented with initial analysis in Chapter 8. This provides the input for the Semi-structured Interviews. The results of these interviews are presented and analysed in Chapter 9. In both these Chapters the QA system governing the operations of the Institutes of Technology is subjected to in-depth analysis.
The critique of QA in Irish Higher Education is finalised in Chapter 10, bringing together the different strands of the empirical study of the literature in earlier chapters with the critique of QA Systems by the expert, practitioner and student stakeholders from the research detailed in Chapters 8 and 9. The conclusions, implications and recommendations of this study are presented in Chapter 10 in the context of the evolution of QA under the Technological Universities Act (2018).

The next chapter, Chapter 2 provides the background to quality assurance management and the historical context.
Chapter 2: Quality Assurance Management

2.1 Historical Context of Quality Assurance

The concepts of managed production and operations can be traced through history as far back as the building of the pyramids in Egypt. In contrast, the concept of quality management is recent. It has its origins in the scientific management of Taylorism and drew heavily on the statistical analysis based development of Operations Management. This development is exemplified in the work of Shewhart (1939) on Statistical Method from the Viewpoint of Quality Control. Quality management ideas were established in the United States of America through the work of Eugene Grant, Richard Leavenworth and Armaud Feigenbaum. Their ideas were initially treated as peripheral to competitiveness by US companies, paying little attention to quality management theory until its effect on Japanese competitiveness could no longer be ignored (Grant & Leavenworth 1946; Feigenbaum 1951). Joseph Juran’s critique of the history of quality offers an understanding of the historical process that gave rise to the quality revolution (Juran 1994).

Current quality management theory and practice is traceable to the work of W. Edwards Deming. Deming built on Walter Shewhart’s use of statistics to identify systemic quality failures. Deming’s systems approach defined quality as:

\[
\text{Results of Total Efforts} \quad \frac{}{\text{Cost}} = \text{Quality}
\]

He developed this into a “system of profound knowledge” in the 14 Points for Management to guide “continual never-ending improvement” (Deming 1986, pp.23-24). His work on building in quality at source with Japanese and later with American companies firmly established quality management as a new approach to organisation management.

Juran, a contemporary of Deming, promoted the same belief in quality management. He moved the focus beyond Deming’s emphasis on quality in processes to the higher management functions
of planning and strategy, to ensure that quality goals and targets were met through the *Juran Trilogy* of planning, control and improvement (Juran 1988).

Having been exposed to quality management ideas by Deming and Juran, Kaoru Ishikawa became the leading Japanese figure in the quality movement, providing tools to work within the Deming and Juran approaches (Ishikawa 1986). Another luminary in the quality movement was Genichi Taguchi. Working at the AT&T Bell Laboratories in the US, Taguchi built on Deming’s work with the *Taguchi Method*, defining the quality loss function and the concept of robust design.

Winn and Green (1998) examined the application of Total Quality Management (TQM) in a Higher Education context, taking their cue from earlier work in 1990 with TQM in Oregon State University. They looked at educational processes using Deming’s 14 points within a consensus framework. A few of Winn and Green’s principles for quality in education merit repetition here. Under Deming’s *Adopt a New Philosophy* point for management, they place “quality in everything” at the centre and counsel “Do away with the ‘us versus them’ attitude” (Winn & Green 2008, p26). Regarding Institute Leadership they advise that “Everyone at the university has a leadership role of some sort” (Winn & Green 2008, p26). Winn and Green’s commentary on breaking down barriers states:

> “Encourage cooperation, not competition. Encourage the forming of cross-function teams to address problems and process improvements. A team made up of faculty, staff and students will have a broader perspective in addressing issues than a more narrowly composed committee” (Winn & Green 2008, p27).

In working towards an integrated approach to AQA Winn and Green’s guidance above is fundamental and relates directly to this research study.

In introducing quality management into a group-oriented society such as Japan, those involved also imported American individualism, giving rise to the management guru phenomenon that continues to influence mainstream business thinking. Guru ‘self-marketing’ has continued as a characteristic of the development of quality management. Philip Crosby became famous for his *14 Step Quality Improvement Programme* and the *Zero Defects* approach (Crosby 1979). Robert C. Camp wrote a best-selling book around his pioneering of *Benchmarking* in the Xerox Corporation
(Camp 1995). With Tom Peters quality research and writings became even more marketing oriented and less engineering oriented. He defined *Excellence* based on a snapshot in time of corporate performance and linking this retrospectively to factors defined as symptoms of quality (Peters & Waterman 1982). The reputation of quality management was sullied somewhat in the 1990s when the ideas of Michael Hammer and James Champy on organisation flexibility and change management gave rise to a flurry of organisation reengineering. The genuine potential to achieve quality through *Business Process Reengineering* (BPR) gave way in recessionary times to the use of BPR to shed cost from organisations through job reductions and slimming down of operations (White 1996). The limitations of the BPR approach as a financially driven strategy only became evident later, when companies found themselves too lean to respond to the turn in the economic cycle of improving market conditions and opportunity for business growth. The overuse or misuse of BPR as a cost led rather than a process improvement led strategy gained a negative reputation for QA for a period of time. Wider criticisms levelled at QA methodologies is that they have a tendency to be market driven, to thrive on internal and external competition rather than collaboration and can force commercial structures, administration and provision systems onto service environments where the fit is less than optimal (Stricker & Rodriguez 1988). As QA is often associated with being the bearer of bad news about the effectiveness of a process or a product it should not come as a surprise that there can be mixed feelings about QA, even when it is effective.

This potential for conflict between the quality led and the financially led agenda within businesses and organisations remains one of the challenges for quality initiatives. The potential for conflict between the quality lens perspective and the finance lens perspective was mirrored as quality initiatives found their way into Higher Education management since the mid 1980s. Few would dispute that the take-up of certain quality management ideas in Higher Education was slow. In the academic environment a collegiate approach to management had been embedded in the culture over time. Within academia there was also greater knowledge of and mistrust of some of the agendas that quality initiatives had been misused to serve, both in manufacturing and in services. While quality and public accountability are now acknowledged as requirements for Higher Education, the international Higher Education community has, perhaps rightly, reacted slowly and carefully to such requirements. The reservations of Higher Education to embrace the quality
agenda wholeheartedly have occasionally been intellectualised into a theory of management conspiracy against academia:

“The audit culture, in other words, has created an intricate grammar of requirements and measurements. It rests upon a self-justificatory vocabulary of quality and best practice and accountability. Quality parades as a universal truth and therefore continually extends its domain” (Morley 2003, p53).

Research indicates that no single QA approach from industry is directly translatable to the Higher Education context, but rather one must choose and tailor to match specific needs (Harvey 1995). My personal experience of the complexity of the academic environment and the educational endeavour suggests a somewhat intuitive sense that quality management in Higher Education in particular does need to capture this eclectic aspect.

2.2 Defining Quality Management

Defining quality management is problematic. Doherty (2008, p.256) argued that ‘quality’, like ‘beauty’ is subjective and ‘a matter of personal judgement’. Krause (2012) described the Wicked Problem of quality in Higher Education. Because of the range of applications of quality theory across production and service environments, public and private operations, profit-driven and not-for-profit contexts, the meaning of quality management is nuanced, tempered and tailored to suit various contexts. This is consistent with the view of modern economics, which looks beyond the analysis of economies and pecuniary qualities to an economic methodological approach to human behaviour, providing a general method of analysis of individual rational behaviour (Lazear 2000). The economics of Higher Education and the management models employed thus need to be based on an understanding of the behaviour of the people involved in the education process. A key concept in the economics of education is the notion of education as an investment in human capital (Brown & Sessions 2004). The European philosophy of Higher Education encompasses the potential of education to act as a crucial means to form the traits of social capital that help to increase the standard of societal well-being (Temple 2001; De la Fuente & Ciccone 2002). De la Fuente estimates that each additional year of average educational attainment raises macroeconomic productivity by a direct 6.2 percentage points in the average EU country and by a further 3.1 percentage points in the long run, through its contribution to faster technological progress. Hence,
the definition of quality is influenced by economic and social purpose and the nature of the endeavour, organisation or business, be it service or product oriented, for profit or not for profit, public or private. Higher Education can cross all these categorisations. This study focused on the largely service driven and not for profit public sector Higher Education system. Here the predominant concepts in quality management in Higher Education are the role of cost and value to the economy and society and to the individual to a lesser extent. Working with these concepts of quality, quality management can be defined in terms of quality as added value, quality as outcomes or quality as the total process. An ongoing debate on HE quality in Ireland centres on state investment or lack of investment and the consequences for system quality (QQI 2018).

As set out above, quality theory originally developed in the context of manufacturing companies. Early manifestations of manufacturing quality theory can be translated to service contexts where there is an artefact type product. This presents greater difficulty for services based on human interaction or relationship services. In operations such as health services, hotel operations and Higher Education provision, definitions of quality management normally centre on fitness for purpose or conformance to standard or on meeting customer expectations. As these measures of quality are attained across a sector the definition of quality has a tendency to then shift to a requirement for additionality or added value above the base standard or purpose. Similarly, there are often blurred lines between quality assurance which tends to imply a baseline and quality as enhancement which tends to focus on growth, change and additionality beyond that baseline. Enhancements in effect drive the baseline upwards. This phenomenon was also seen in the motor car industry as quality based on product reliability or brand became less decisive when reliability standards rose across the industry and gave way to additional features marketing such as heated seats and windows, air conditioning, sound systems, space provision and more recently on-board wireless internet access, on-board Geographical Positioning Systems and fuel economy control systems.

Examples of step change quality improvement can occasionally be found in Higher Education, such as outcomes-based assessment, work-based learning and the introduction of Learning Management Systems (McGill and Klobas 2009). The norm of quality improvement in Higher Education combines a language of standards, continuous improvement and quality initiative
projects. It is a language of comparative standards with additionality of service and distinctiveness of mission. This continuous improvement philosophy is well suited to the Higher Education mission. It echoes somewhat Deming’s (1986) “14 Points for Quality Management” that guides the Deming Method of Continual Never-ending Improvement (Deming 1986, p.17; Foster 2004, p.93).

The complexity in defining QA in HE stems from the need to relate formal standards to learner experience or to what is in the eye of the beholder or customer (Nels Lee et al. 2002). The very concept of the customer in Higher Education can be interpreted as government, society, economy, employers or students. Our understanding of quality and quality management vary over time and context. Quality is tangible, yet loosely coupled with the phenomenon to which it is attributed. Deming and others have acknowledged the subjective nature of quality that is present across much of the quality literature from the 1980s quality revolution (Juran 1985; Deming 1986; Feigenbaum 1986; Imia 1986; Gitlow et al. 1989). Tam (2001) provides an insightful analysis of the subjective nature of quality in the Higher Education context (Tam 2001).

The complexity inherent in defining education quality has given rise to determined efforts to classify the range of quality definitions. Generally, the university academic community in Ireland continues within the Humboldtian tradition of academic predominance over administrative or governance views. Student views, as reflected in the Irish Survey of Student Engagement, again display a parallel valuing of employment centred consumerist views while also seeking a quality education that prepares for life. Newman’s idea of a university is also influential in the Irish context, with its dual focus on centralised and generalised pastorality. Institutes of Technology osculate at the interfaces between these perspectives (Saleh 2002). The first principles underpinning the academic quality debate centre fundamentally on whether quality is viewed as transformative and value adding within the Humboldtian tradition or whether the focus is on value for money as measured in terms of efficiency and effectiveness against administrative and managerial criteria. Tam (2001) distinguishes between models of measuring quality that reflect the differing focus. Three widely used models place this differing emphasis on Higher Education production based on inputs and outputs or based on a value-added model measuring learning gain in the student or based on a total quality model that evaluates the wider learning experience.
defining quality the Institutes of Technology have a history of strong managerialist and state control that is increasingly being challenged by traditional academic values. As the Institutes of Technology raise the standard and quality of their operations they increasingly aspire to university status. Mimicry of university sector structures, autonomy and values is clearly evident in the Technological Universities Act 2018. This developmental experience is consistent with the work of Jungblut (2015, p157) which records “some blurring of the boundaries between the more traditional Humboltian and the consumerist views on Higher Education among students.”

The UNESCO General Education Quality Analysis/Diagnosis Framework (GEQAF) offers a developmental view of Higher Education quality that was adopted by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2003:

Figure 2.1 – UNESCO General Education Quality Analysis/Diagnosis Framework
(Source: UNESCO Education for All, p. 12)

The UNESCO GEQAF is particularly well suited to supporting the vision and needs of developing countries. Quality assurance of each key element of the model can be addressed separately within this interactive and iterative framework for QA development.

In an article entitled “What does product quality really mean?” published in the Sloan Management Review in 1984, Garvin distinguishes five groups of quality definitions: product led, process led, value led, customer led and transcendent. Writers on quality management theory may
be distinguished as having placed emphasis on external, customer satisfaction (Ishikawa 1985; Deming 1986; Feigenbaum 1986) or as having placed emphasis on the internal organisation management and control of quality to meet specified requirements rather than external customer needs (Crosby 1980; Taguchi 1986). These definitions are in some ways related, yet they represent philosophically different approaches to quality. The outcomes may be satisfactory within one approach but not so when measured against the other approach. Hence, it may be necessary to develop multi-factor definitions of quality for complex environments, where quality may be measured not in absolute terms but as a correlation of multiple and sometimes competing objectives. In the complex Higher Education context, more complex or multi-factorial models are more likely to provide the integrative approach that meets the operational needs of QA in a manner that maintains ownership within and strengthens the Higher Education knowledge-worker community. Thus the QA process in itself should strengthen the institution’s capacity for improvement in QA. Rather than accept the current models in use or simply adopt established industrial quality models, such as Lean or Six Sigma, I endeavoured to look beyond the generality of QA to the specific requirements of Higher Education QA.

The contested definition of quality in Higher Education is likely to continue to evolve as our understanding of the processes and outcomes of Higher Education institutions develops. Much of the literature in this area defers to Harvey and Green’s (1993) seminal work on defining quality in Higher Education. Harvey and Green identified six conceptualisations of quality in Higher Education: quality as exceptional in general, quality as exceptional specifically as excellence, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money, quality as transformation in general and quality as transformation specifically as added value. Doherty (2008) examines key aspects of quality in education, looking closely at QA design, methodology and approaches that continue to define quality in education.

Buried within these contested definitions of quality are different perceptions, attitudes, values and tensions regarding the purpose and mission of Higher Education. One might argue whether the primary value of Higher Education should be economics and wealth creation driven, or social capital and social knowledge driven, or personal knowledge and financial rewards driven. There is evidence that all three are potential and often actual outcomes of Higher Education. Research
into return on investment on Higher Education has produced evidence of increases in individual earning power through improved productivity (Card 1999; Harmon et al. 2003; Neal & Johnson 1996; OECD 2000; McIntosh & Vignoles 2001; Currie & Thomas 2001). In Ireland, two reports from the Economic and Social Research Institute have analysed both the economic returns and the health effects of higher levels of education. They identified a premium rate for graduate salaries and positive effects on self-rated health and reduced risk of non-cardiovascular chronic illnesses as measurable benefits (ESRI 2010; ESRI 2012). Though disaggregation of these results by discipline is an important factor, the ESRI finding supports the wider research on the personal career value of Higher Education. By highlighting the range of interests, actors and stakeholders within a Higher Education institution across differing roles, this research makes explicit some of the buried perceptions and tensions with regard to value, purpose and mission. The identity of academic, manager, administrator or student support are based on values and perceptions of the Higher Education endeavour that need to be explicated, acknowledged and structured within the QA system.

The body of evidence of monetary and non-monetary benefits of Higher Education is increasing (Wolfe & Haveman 2000; McMahon 2004; McMahon 2009; Baum et al. 2013). The benefits of education in increasing life-satisfaction, general well-being, trust, and job-satisfaction are outcomes of education subject to increasing volumes of research and will likely find their way in future into the metrics of education level and education quality (Clark 1996; Putman & Helliwell 1999; Grossman 2000; Blanchflower & Oswald 2004; Stoner 2014). It is also likely that emerging economic models of the technology of skill formation - education and training – will give rise to education life cycle measures of education quality (Heckman 2000; Carneiro & Heckman 2003; Cunha et al. 2006).
In the dominant European social democratic culture, Higher Education has been viewed as a social good, of social value in generating economic and social capital. So it is substantially funded by the state. The United States of America model views Higher Education as predominantly a personal good, of most value to the recipient of education and therefore to be substantially funded by the individual. This philosophical difference reflects underlying economic and social value systems. Values and perceptions are often the unstated premise or cultural bias that underpins policy and practice in Higher Education. QA in Higher Education is agenda and values laden. Researching Higher Education QA from a cultural perspective makes such values explicit.

‘What the hell is Quality? What is it?’ asked Robert Pirsig in his famous book on ‘Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance’ (Pirsig 1974). The Baldrige model for performance excellence in education offers a conceptual framework of quality management that addresses and overcomes any sense of vagueness regarding the nature of quality and how it is managed in Higher Education:
Baldridge’s model defines seven criteria for performance excellence. While the model is somewhat leadership focused and managerialist in its structure and values, equally there is value in the framework in specifying the categories and criteria that define core components of quality assurance in HE (Badri et al. 2006).

Quality management in the Irish context is defined by a statutory institute-led process that is managed internally by Higher Education institutions through a statutory Academic Council and is managed externally through annual reporting and periodic review by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) against the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Higher Education quality management.

This quote from a QQI report on quality in Irish Higher Education sets out the national QA agency view of quality management (QQI 2016, p.7):

“Quality in Higher Education can be an elusive concept and is often defined more by its absence than presence. Institutions, funders and regulators have a number of instruments
designed to measure and improve quality. These include surveys of student satisfaction and engagement, surveys of employer satisfaction with graduates, reports of external examiners and periodic institutional quality reviews organised by external quality assurance agencies. Irish Higher Education institutions, as part of their statutory quality assurance responsibilities, are also required to organise periodic evaluations of the quality of education and to report the outcomes of these evaluations. However, it is important to note that there are no internationally agreed definitions or metrics on what constitutes quality in Higher Education.”

All the more reason then for Higher Education institutions to define an integrated approach for QA that establishes the relevant definitions and metrics for quality management.

### 2.3 Developments in Quality Management

The emergence of the TQM philosophy in the 1980s greatly influenced the development of quality management in Higher Education. TQM has seen a methodological and philosophical evolution from the earlier TQM concept of ‘right first time, every time’ to the continuous improvement stakeholder philosophy prevalent in public services development in Ireland. With the transfer of quality management from manufacturing to service based environments in the 1990s the concepts of change management and individual participation have moved more to the centre of the quality debate (James 1996; Miller 1996). Other writers have focused on the importance of quality management as a management system for the development of a quality culture among staff and for the development of competitive advantage (Kanji et al. 1992; Beecroft 1999; Hellsten & Klefsjo 2000; Ugboro & Obeng 2000; Huq 2005). This view speaks to the Higher Education context, where knowledge resides in the academic staff and the organisation context for provision of this knowledge by academic staff is administered and managed by other staff cohorts. Reflecting these different roles, one might distinguish between the academic or teaching quality and the quality of the wider learning experience. It is the combination and synergy of these differing roles that the learner experiences as the Higher Education quality. Hence, the approach adopted in this study of defining quality is based on the views and perceptions of the different internal stakeholder groups.
Watkins (1997) offers a useful exploration of the myths and reality of TQM application in Higher Education. It can be difficult at times to separate education quality and reputational quality in Higher Education. Strength in a particular area, such as research or a single discipline can create a halo effect that attributes quality to all aspects of an institution. The limitations of TQM and other techniques used to manage and measure quality in Higher Education are addressed in a meta-study review by Harvey and Williams (2010). There remains a place for research studies, such as my research, that seek new participative, consultative or collaborative approaches to engaging with QA within the Higher Education context.

The Strategic Planning Initiative in Ireland is a good example of the recognition of the strategic potential of quality management. Strategic planning has grown in prevalence since the 1990s (Dew 1998; Harrington & Lenehan 1998; Erstad 2001). As a means of managing rapid change in large service organisations, it has been argued that strategic quality management initiatives offer the scope to influence the varying aspects of service provision in a holistic approach (Hasan & Kerr 2003). The growing economic importance of services for employment and wealth creation relative to manufacturing in the developed world indicates the strategic importance of quality management in service industries (Thomson 1999). The performance improvements to be gained from quality management are documented in a number of broadly based and longitudinal studies of company performance (Hendricks & Singhal 1997; Easton & Jarrell 1998; Samson & Terziovski 1999). While this study may have potential to add to the performance improvement literature through longitudinal monitoring of outcomes into the future, the focus of this research is less on outcomes and more on perceptions, tensions and possibilities of integrated QA.

Westerheijden et al (2007) consider both the micro and macro levels of QA and its impact on the whole education system from regulation to translation and transformation. They also explore the reasons why actors in Higher Education find it difficult to trace the effects of QA. Turner (2011) provides further balance to the quality in Higher Education debate by focusing on “the intensely personal nature of education” and how quantitative approaches such as performance indicators, rankings and league tables can mistake organisation history, financial strength or student quantity with education quality as experienced by the individual.
The importance of customer focus and understanding in quality management has been shown to be greater than benchmarking, process re-engineering and other management tools in the development of competitiveness (Harris & Harrington 2000). Equally, the overriding importance of people to the provision of many services makes implementation and effectiveness of a quality strategy a more complex and contested challenge (Longenecker & Scazzer 1993, 1996, 2000). The importance of management commitment to quality management has been well documented over the years (Deming 1986; Juran 1993). These layers of complexity within a quality initiative are acknowledged in this thesis so as to explore the elements required to arrive at a model of quality assurance in Higher Education. Specific questions in the research surveys are informed by these considerations.

2.4 Impacts of Higher Education Quality Management

The academic community has struggled with the general direction of development in Higher Education towards greater accountability to government, greater transparency to the public and openness to both industry and government. Wright (1989) provides an understanding of this struggle for identity within academia. Less sympathetically, Klein (1987) placed blame for the declining image of the academic profession as a response to the academic community’s failure to engage with the changing requirements for accountability. Kogan (1986) explored the nature of this educational accountability, as a consequence of changing expectations of public services among external stakeholders. The more recent acceptance by Higher Education of the third pillar of its mission to serve the economy, industry and community has given rise to an increased emphasis on the outward facing roles of academic staff within Higher Education.

The critical role of front-line staff in the delivery of quality is widely understood and accepted. Yet studies of the standard and consistency of such service provision give cause for concern with regard to staff selection and training (Douglas & Connor 2003; Lewis & McCann 2004). A critical questioning of pre-requisite importance of standards and consistency for quality is valid. Perhaps concerns about standardisation and consistency are themselves revealing of the underlying nature of the quality assurance process. Commentators such as David Puttnam and Ken Robinson argue that quality is based on a more creative and vibrant process than adherence to mere standards and
consistency (Robinson, 2011). While there is a particular significance in such arguments at the highest end of academic provision, it is arguable that the mass Higher Education system can benefit from assurance of minimum standards and consistency of operations.

There is research evidence that even a marginal improvement in front-line service can lead to a much greater increase in organisation performance (Reichheld & Sasser 2003). This hypothesis has not been studied in the Higher Education context specifically. Considering the personal and inter-personal nature of Higher Education, the magnitude of the effect of even a marginal improvement in front-line service in Higher Education could be of great interest and strongly support the process of QA proposed by this research. It would seem logical that by offering front-line staff the opportunity to input into QA it is more likely that they would carry an awareness of QA into their work. The inclusion of a wide range of stakeholder views in QA in Higher Education was the subject of a study by Leisyte et al (2013), undertaken for the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS). The study identified shared stakeholder governance, democracy, public trust building and inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders in QA as the characteristics of QA in Higher Education across the seven European countries examined in the case studies. The CHEPS report also indicated the importance of student involvement in QA to add legitimacy to QA processes in Higher Education.

Chapter 3 below builds on this QA context to examine current thinking on quality management systems in European Higher Education to identify the international drivers that are shaping quality in Europe and that impinge directly on quality management in Ireland.
Chapter 3: Quality Assurance in European Higher Education

3.1 Introduction

The history of quality management set out in the previous chapter provides context for the examination in this chapter of developments in QA in European Higher Education. The previous chapter and this chapter combined form the backdrop to the consideration of QA in Irish Higher Education in this thesis.

Quality in Higher Education assumed the status of a ‘hot topic’ in the 1980s. This chapter considers European quality assurance developments in the 1980s and 1990s and presents a critical perspective on European quality assurance. There follow a series of low-level cross-country comparisons and country specific quality assurance examples that give a sense of the differences that remained within the wider programme of convergence across Europe. The discussion then returns to the high-level view of current developments in the context of participation by the new EC accession states. This chapter on European Higher Education QA references the Higher Education QA system of the United States of America as a contrast to the European model.

Organisational behavioural theory offers an understanding of the way in which values and perceptions influence action and behaviour. McShane and Von Glinow (2015) explored the relationships between individual behaviour, personality and values in organisational behaviour. The strong influence of role perceptions on individual behaviour and performance was linked in the literature to the importance of values congruence using the Schwartz Values Model. Previous work by Jarvenpaa and Staples (2001, p.151) had already established the value of “a collaborative type of ownership situation for both information and expertise.” They found that organisational culture and employee roles within organisations “influenced the beliefs of organisational ownership of information and expertise that he or she has created.” The term ownership in this context referred to a mentality of connectedness to ones labour, a feeling of empowerment within the sphere of influence of a role within an organisation not solely related to level within the organisation. Van Dyne and Peirce (2004) researched the detail of the psychology of ownership and possession and their impacts on employee attitudes and organisational behaviour. The
importance of employee perceptions, values and ownership are acknowledged in management training for Higher Education but are rarely attributed the importance that the literature would indicate (Leadership Foundation for Higher Education 2011). This failure may not be unrelated to the top-down evolution of Higher Education QA in some Europe countries.

Addressing Academic QA in the Irish context cannot be restricted to the research treatment of teaching and learning. The scope of Academic QA includes dimensions of quality beyond the classroom. The QA of European HE has focused on standards and guidelines that emphasise the importance of documented policies, procedures and processes to support quality provision. Improvement of teaching and learning provision in Ireland led to initiatives in this regard through the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, similar to the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom. These initiatives are required to fill the perceived gap in the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (EURASHE 2015) between a policy and process audit type QA and evaluation and enhancement of front-line provision of teaching and learning. The ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) carried out a decade long study up to 2006 that defined Ten Principles for Effective Pedagogy. James and Pollard (2011) examined the evidence and reasoning underpinning the TLRP’s ten principles. The UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education (2011) builds on the TLRP ten principles to define the activities, core knowledge and professional values for teaching. These detailed teaching frameworks are noticeably absent from the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Higher Education. At the level of organisation theory and behaviour it is accepted that values and perceptions influence actions and ownership within HE of teaching and learning. By focusing on staff and student values and perceptions of quality, this research bridges the gap between the ESG policy and process audit and front-line initiatives to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

### 3.2 European QA Development in the 1980s

In the 1980s universities were censured for not changing with the times (Kerr 1982), for being a closed sub-culture of academics (Hardy 1983; Clarke 1983) and for not changing fast enough to

European governments’ interest in the management and QA of universities changed in the 1980s, as Europe started to compare and consider linking national Higher Education systems. The mid-1980s saw a spate of government led, statute based, quality policies established. In 1984, Sir Keith Joseph declared that in the UK the principal objectives for Higher Education should be quality and value for money, while in France the Comite National d’Evaluation was set up in the same year. In 1985 the Netherlands published a government policy paper titled ‘Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality’, introducing the concept of steering Higher Education at a distance (Goedegebuure et al. 1994). In the space of a few years several countries undertook to design quality assessment systems for Higher Education (Kells 1989; Neave & Van Vught 1991), with parallel concerns for the quality of research outputs (Martin & Irvine 1989). Similar quality and accountability debates were raging in the US and Australia. The Dawkins reforms emphasized quality control mechanisms in the 1980s. The Dawkins reform was followed by a further Baldwin reform package, proposed by the Minister for Higher Education and Employment Services, Peter Baldwin, in the 1990s (Australia 1991).

The different views on QA that emerged in the 1980s continue to influence to the present day. Differing definitions of quality, for example, as fitness for purpose or as the pursuit of excellence or as continuous improvement are not in themselves value free. The concept and implementation of quality is thus prone to being politicized by promoters and opponents seeking to further alternative values. Government, academic and commercial interests can shape views of quality in Higher Education, depending on the needs and interests of each. Academic opposition to the requirement for transparency and accountability to government centred around the limitations of quality performance indicators (Goedegebuure et al. 1990) and on the complexity in Higher Education that cannot be easily quantified (Ball 1985; Williams 1986). The need to counter the managerial and philosophical arguments for reform led to wide acceptance in Europe of peer review as a research reliable index of quality in a world where infallibility is unattainable (Moodie
1986; Becher & Trowler 2001). While peer review was not without its detractors (Conrad & Blackburn 1985; Westerheijden 1991) combined with Self-Assessment (Kells 1988) it formed the backbone of the European QA system. The peer review systems put in place by national QA agencies aimed to provide the level of transparency and accountability demanded by governments, while respecting the self-management tradition of academia. Dill and Beerkens (2013) offered a helpful retrospective view that what has been evolving in academic quality is a response to government requirements of “oversight or direct regulation”, business need for “competition or steering of market forces” and the academic tradition’s need for “mutuality or professional self-regulation.” These they argue have defined the “essential components of a national framework for assuring academic standards” (Dill and Beerkens 2013, p.341).

As a researcher I find myself drawn to the findings from Dill and Beerkens (2013, p.354), also supported by Gugerty and Prakash (2010) and by Ostrom (2010), that “The self-organisation of internal governance arrangements, the importance of face-to-face communication among peers for increasing trust, and the active, collective monitoring of valid measures of performance are the critical design principles” that “assist autonomous universities in improving the collegiate processes essential to assuring academic standards in the new age of academic globalization and massification.” The contention of this research is that even at the coal face of massification in an Institute of Technology these values and principles of quality apply.

### 3.3 European QA Development in the 1990s

Quality assessment in Higher Education has been described as an excellent example of ‘policy borrowing’ to create cross-national learning (Richardson & Lindley 1994, p.2). There is documentary evidence that quality reviews undertaken in Higher Education have resulted in significant and important follow-up activities by institutions, to use quality review findings to improve QA (HEQC, 1994). But an effective Europe-wide QA process had to be fashioned in terms of shared European experiences, traditions and the needs of European countries, a significant ask in a diversifying European Community (El-Khawas 1993).
For over two decades, work has been underway in Europe on value and quality comparisons of the range of qualifications offered across the European Community (Van der Wende and Kouwenaar 1994). Despite the complexity of this task, significant progress has been made both in terms of comparisons and in the underlying concepts of equivalence and of relativities (Brennan et al. 1992). The European Community has taken a community wide interest in QA in Higher Education since initiating a comparative study of methods used in Member States to evaluate the quality of Higher Education in 1991 (Council of Ministers of Education 1991). QA pilot projects were set up across the European Community Member States. The result of the pilot projects was threefold. Firstly, the projects produced a series of informative comparative studies that formed the basis for the planning of European Higher Education integration (Task Force 1993). Secondly, the projects established the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) as lead bodies for future developments and cooperation on QA. And thirdly, the studies uncovered the multiplicity of Higher Education systems and curriculum structures operating within Europe (Haug 1999), thereby defining the extent of education systems integration needed within Europe.

The report on the ‘European Pilot Projects for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education’ was particularly significant in defining the key issues for QA integration in Higher Education. It defined the basis upon which a Europe-wide system might be developed and established the organisational structures and links across Europe needed to facilitate QA cooperation in Higher Education (EC 1995). Progress was also made in defining what is different in Higher Education from other contexts. Teaching and learning in Higher Education is not seen as a consumer service but a transformative process that does something personal and fundamental for the learner, based on a range of effects, intended and otherwise (Harvey & Green 1993). The wider academic QA is situated around this distinctive endeavor. Critical commentators on Higher Education, such as Kathleen Lynch (2012), would reject the notion of a student as a consumer and education as primarily a personal benefit to the learner, used to justify students paying increasing levels of fees for the personal gain from Higher Education. The counter argument acknowledges education as a personal good and as a social good, both of which can justify public funding of education. The debate about student as customer is persistently contentious in Higher Education and strikes at the heart of the academic values and understanding explored in this research. The argument that
students are not customers and that education is not primarily a personal good can be supported by models of academic QA that demonstrate education’s social value to society and to governments who fund Higher Education.

This debate on definitions and processes of quality was explored in my research. A range of definitions and processes was examined and refined through the Delphi methodology for the different identity and role groups operating within the Higher Education institution. In formulating assumptions of quality management, the role of context, identity, values and culture cannot be overlooked, particularly in the distinctive context of Higher Education that is explored in this research, where human factors are central to quality management. These concepts are at the core of the treatment of academic QA in this research.

The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 was an agreement of 29 European states to develop comparability in Higher Education systems and to set up a unified, comparable though not homogenous, European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that supports comparability across the variations in national systems and functions of Higher Education. The Bologna Declaration sets out both an objective and a process for European Higher Education. The declaration has been revised and progressed through the process of ministerial meetings for objectives setting and reviewing.

Milestones in this ministerial process include the communiques of Bologna itself in 1999 which set the agenda for the EHEA. The Prague Communique in 2001 reaffirmed ministerial commitment of each government to the Bologna objectives. The Berlin Communique in 2003 saw the important development of recognizing the role of Higher Education to increase competitiveness, balanced against the more traditional role and need to support research. Having stated the economic function of Higher Education in Berlin, the Bergen Communique in 2005 addressed the balance of recognizing the underlying role of staff and students as stakeholders in the education and qualifications offered and as key to the social dimension and mobility objectives of the Bologna Process. In the London Communique in 2007 the goal of making Higher Education more student-centred was set out, to prepare students for life as active citizens in a democratic society.
The Leuven Communique in 2009 revisited the key functions of Higher Education, defining them as research, education and innovation, acknowledging the difficulties for Higher Education in fostering innovation and creativity while at the same time addressing current needs within the current state of the art in research and development. The Leuven Communique definition of the key functions of Higher Education reflects the Triple Helix model of education, government and industry working together to underpin economic development (Becher and Trowler 2001). At the core of the Triple Helix model is the concept of an Entrepreneurial University, using and creating knowledge within a tripartite interactive process of innovation.

The Budapest-Vienna Declaration in 2010 officially launched the EHEA and recommended increased cooperation through peer learning, study visits and other information sharing. In the Bucharest Communiqué in 2012 the EHEA Mobility Strategy and the four topics agreed in the Third Bologna Policy Forum were confirmed. This communiqué sets out many of the achievements of the EHEA in relation to quality, mobility, widening access, student centred learning, learning outcomes, employability, qualifications frameworks, recognition of professional qualifications, portability of national grants and funding, joint programmes and data transparency.

By the meeting in Yerevan in Armenia in 2015 the EHEA strategy and vision was the subject of praise and reinvigorated effort. New objectives were agreed to:

- Enhance the quality and relevance of learning and teaching
- Foster the employability of graduates
- Make systems more inclusive
- Implement agreed structural reforms

The Yerevan Communiqué agreed the revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA that are the current measure of Higher Education QA in Ireland and across 47 countries within and beyond the EU.

The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) established at Yerevan for the period 2015-2018 had three working groups responsible for monitoring, implementation and new goals. The new goals that led into the Paris Meeting in May 2018 included work on developing Active Citizenship, Training of Higher Education Staff and European Research Area Policy and Reform (BFUG Working Group on Policy Development for New EHEA Goals 2015-2018 – Meeting 4). The European
model of HE may be changing again from the Triple Helix to a Quadruple Helix model, to include
the role of civil society. The definition of key functions of Higher Education changed further at
the 2018 meeting. The Paris Communique of May 2018 concluded that HE is central to the future
prosperity, peace and progress of the EU in an increasingly interconnected and international
context. Innovation, internationalization and increased digitization are seen as the enablers of civic
engagement with economic and social change (Public Policy Exchange 2019).

The development of transparency and compatibility in Higher Education across Europe is an
ambitious vision that is progressing over time. These vision objectives are not explicitly related to
academic quality, though the specific aims of standardised quality processes will over time become
necessary, though not sufficient, components of quality. The European Higher Education Area
(EHEA) vision was motivated as much by the desire to participate in the US dominated
international education market, as by the aim of increased European integration. Quality assurance
via institution reviews, international accreditation and credit transfer agreements remain the
primary instruments of the European Higher Education vision. This vision dates as far back as
1994, long before Bologna, to an OECD project on internationalisation of Higher Education and
quality in Higher Education in Europe (OECD 1999).

3.4 Critical Perspectives on European Higher Education QA

The changes that are taking place at European level and that are impacting on quality management
in Higher Education while incomplete, are progressing rapidly. The European Network for Quality
Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) has mapped out the basis of the proposal for a unified
European quality management system. Their study of ‘Institutional Evaluations in Europe’ set out
at the national level the approaches to Institutional Evaluation as implemented in a selection of
European states (Hamalainen et al. 2001). And the ENQA report on ‘International Initiatives and
Trends in Quality Assurance for European Higher Education’ focused on initiatives and processes
relevant to international quality assurance in European Higher Education (Campbell & Van der
Wende 2000). It was evident when studying QQI and one of its predecessor agencies, the Higher
Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) that both agencies subscribed fully to the ideas
and reports produced by the ENQA.
‘Institutional Evaluations in Europe’ (Hamalainen et al. 2001) addressed questions of objectives, methodology and implementation strategies for Higher Education evaluations in a European context. The report was a distillation of relevant seminar papers. It acknowledged the major changes affecting Higher Education provision in the 1980s and 1990s across Europe, the requirement for greater accountability and transparency of Higher Education to government, the general public and to commercial interests. As such, the report was value laden in support of the changes envisaged in the Bologna process on the narrative of public ownership and accountability and the range of different stakeholders or beneficiaries. The change process in essence represented the challenges associated with the QA debate to determine how QA and QA processes are defined in Higher Education. It starts from the evaluation of universities that began in France in 1984 and spread to the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Finland by the early-1990s.

The political ‘shift to the right’ and the New Economics that formed the backdrop to these evaluations and changes, is not considered or questioned in the Institutional Evaluations in Europe report as to its value or viability for Higher Education. Economic Rationalism is the brand of economic theory espoused by the New Right (Apple 1993; Roberts 1997). The concepts of a market-led approach, accountability for public spending, the quality agenda, the need for deregulation and free competition became the basis for reform in health, education, social welfare and the wider public sector and services (Codd 1997). Perhaps not surprisingly in a Europe striving for cross cultural and cross-country unity, the validity or otherwise of the political and economic philosophies underpinning a vision of globalisation did not figure centrally in the debate.

The ENQA report on ‘International Initiatives and Trends in Quality Assurance for European Higher Education’ is a trend report on European quality assurance in Higher Education, with the emphasis on the international dimension of education (Cambell & Van der Wende 2000). The conceptual link between internationalisation and quality in Higher Education was explored. Internationalisation policies at the national and institutional level abound as a testimony to its perceived importance (Van der Wende 1999). The Sorbonne and Bologna declarations elevated quality and internationalisation to the strategic level in institutional and national development (Barblan et al. 1998). Concern was expressed at the quality of the resulting international processes and policies (Bruch & Barty 1998). Higher Education institutions in countries such as the UK
experienced difficulties in managing quality assurance of international education. Early difficulties with quality of international operations have improved in many countries in European education.

A range of national evaluation procedures was examined within the ‘Institutional Evaluations in Europe’ report. The degree of commonality was emphasised, showing that all national systems include an institutional self-study, an external review team visit, use of the self-study, panel interviews and quality assurance system audits as the basis of evaluation. ‘International Initiatives and Trends in Quality Assurance for Higher Education in Europe’ complemented the ‘Institutional Evaluations in Europe’ report by providing a wider perspective on the political and economic context for institutional evaluations. The fact that Europe had lost out to the US and Australia as the primary destinations for overseas education, that transnational education was growing rapidly and that international competition within Europe was increasing in Higher Education, gave context to the Bologna Declaration and the drive for quality and accountability. Pre-Bologna, the Higher Education structures in Europe were described as being in a state of ‘extreme complexity and diversity of curricular and degree structures’, with the jungle of awards and systems being the biggest obstacle to mobility in Europe (Haug 1999, p.1). The objective of Bologna to bring convergence within Europe has been identified as the source of the move in Higher Education to new structures and systems, external evaluation, greater autonomy and accountability. This objective remains very much alive in Ireland today and is being played out through the HEA Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt 2011). This convergence across Europe is relevant to this research as the European social democracy experiment has a major influence on culture, including perceptions and tensions within the culture of Higher Education organisations.

Despite Bologna Process efforts to bring convergence and coherence, the ENQA’s report identified a range of issues that make cross-culture or cross-country evaluations difficult. It was argued that the evaluations cannot be used at face value because of the range of very different cultural, political and economic environments. Issues of social linguistics, such as the contextual variation in meaning of words like effectiveness and relevance presented another barrier to comparative evaluation. This theme was taken up in other research, which identified the importance of national-level actors and agendas for Higher Education policy in creating a European education area (Beverwijk & Van de Maat 1999).
The Bologna Declaration was premised on the need for supra-national institutional evaluation. However, within different countries it is the regional role of Higher Educational institutions that is emerging as the basis of public financing and national Higher Education policy. There are fundamental variations in evaluations at national level depending on whether the state adopts an administration-based or entrepreneurial approach to university management. Governments also set different aims for QA systems, varying from a control mechanism to a tool of institutional development.

It is interesting to note that in the United States, which has a far greater level of federal integration across states, Higher Education QA has been regionalized under six Commissions for Higher Education. In the preparative phase of this research I undertook a study visit to one of those commissions in Summer 2012, the Middle States Commission for Higher Education in Philadelphia (www.msche.org). Private sector Higher Education institutions were growing in Ireland and were well established in the United States. I wanted to speak with the Middle States Commission about their experience of QA across the public and private sectors, to better understand the importance of different models of staff participation in QA. The information and insights from that study provided a knowledge base for this research, offering a non-European comparator and benchmark of Higher Education QA good practice from the United States. Other Institute specific study visits in 2011 and 2012 to Reed College, Lewis and Clarke College, Portland State University in Oregon and George Washington University in Washington DC were important to understand the complex nature of QA across a sample range of institutional diversity of mission and identity in a United States operating environment that is characteristically more competitive, more liberal and less centrally controlled in Higher Education than in Ireland specifically or Europe in general. A further study visit in 2013 to British Columba Institute of Technology and Oregon Institute of Technology provided a detailed insight into QA operations at two Institutes of Technology across the Canada-USA border. These visits highlighted for me the importance of the institute’s operating environment and staff involvement for QA. British Columbia Institute of Technology was similar to Ireland in regard to staff and trade union participation and influence in Higher Education. American Higher Education colleges were significantly different in this regard. Yet the common thread of staff involvement in and commitment to QA was discernable as a driver and measure of academic quality. Whether based
on staff representation through a trade union as in Canada or staff involvement through a free market model of Higher Education as in the USA, it was this common thread of staff ownership of academic quality that formed the backbone of institute QA. The Middle States Commission for Higher Education in Philadelphia was able to confirm from its statistics that over ninety percent of the quality issues it had identified through institutional reviews over the previous five years related to QA of assessment. The majority of such issues arose in private sector providers, where staff ownership of QA was lower than in public institutions.

QA systems’ comparison suffers from limited availability of comparable data and information to support analysis in an international context (Hamalainen et al. 2001). This, it is argued, coupled with the ‘value-laden process’ of what is evaluated and how, makes cross-country Higher Education institution evaluation difficult. Yet even without precise, measurable comparisons, contrasting QA systems are of interest in their own right as an exercise in reflection on contrasting contexts and cultural values, in shaping the strategic change needed to face the future of Higher Education and in preparation for the predicted new mode of knowledge requiring enhanced social accountability and a more broadly based system of quality control (Kearney 2000). Notwithstanding the challenges above, an attempt at country specific QA comparisons is presented in Section 3.6 below.

Significant progress has been made in Europe in recent years to integrate the systems of QA and evaluation of Higher Education across the different European countries. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, were produced in 2005 (ENQA 2005). The standards and guidelines were updated by the European Network for Quality Assurance and six other European QA agencies in 2009 to provide a QA framework covering seven core areas of academic quality assurance (ENQA 2009):

1. Policy and procedures for quality assurance
2. Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards
3. Assessment of students
4. Documented staff appointment procedures with criteria for appointment and promotion of staff development provision
5. Learning resources and support
6. Information systems
7. Public information
At the Eighth Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area Ministerial Conference in Bucharest in April 2012 the resulting Bucharest Ministerial Communiqué gave notice of a review of the European Standards and Guidelines. The revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area were published in 2015 (EURASHE 2015). The 2015 revised standards and guidelines for institute internal QA have developed significantly from the 2009 standards and guidelines, with the original seven standards updated and changed, plus three new standards:

- Policy for quality assurance
- Design and approval of programmes
- Student-centred Learning, Teaching and Assessment
- Student admission, progression, recognition and certification
- Teaching staff
- Learning resources and student support
- Information management
- Public information
- Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes
- Cyclical external quality evaluation

Reflecting the changing nature of Higher Education operations, new and separate standards have also been defined for external quality assurance and for quality assurance agencies, as QA systems evolve.

### 3.5 Cross-Country Comparisons of QA Systems

Across European countries the drive towards QA systems has often come from the government paymaster. The aim to reinforce a quality culture was in many cases linked to changes in the funding system for education. Hence, national QA systems cannot be viewed in isolation. They occurred within a wider context epitomized by the key terms ‘self-regulation, management and leadership, quality, evaluation culture, and capacity for change’. According to Kells (1992) QA is but one aspect of deregulation that should see power flow from government departments to the education institutions. This is perhaps an overly simplistic view, as both external QA systems and increased financial accountability can substitute alternative control mechanisms to replace direct state agency regulation. It could be some time before judgement can be passed on whether
deregulation of Higher Education has been delivered and if it has resulted in greater academic and organisational freedom.

There are important distinctions in QA systems between process and performance evaluation and between academic and organisation evaluation. It could be argued that an over-emphasis on process and quantitative evaluation over performance and qualitative evaluation is the Achilles’ heel of current QA systems in Higher Education. The unwillingness in many countries to manage the qualitative issues of quality in teaching and research needs to be addressed. Allowing the institutions in many countries to define the focus and to influence the implementation for evaluation has led to variations in QA focus. While this is understandable from a diversity of mission view, it can misdirect attention away from fundamental aspects of QA in Higher Education. The avoidance of aspects of quality that are more difficult, complex or costly to address may not be compensated for fully by a laissez-faire process of each institution putting its best foot forward. QA is inevitably a system of checks and balances between organisational freedom and external QA standards, such as the ESG. Confronting the variance between active participation of universities in evaluation planning and implementation and addressing quality to meet public, corporate, national and international requirements, is an issue that governments have proved unwilling to address, perhaps with the notable exceptions of the United Kingdom and Australia.

Bringing together the learning in this chapter, one is struck by the distinctive dynamics that make for quality Higher Education. Models of Higher Education do not match any one view, often reflected in a subtle mix of autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire leadership and management styles. Similarly, a balance needs to be struck in an integrative approach to QA in Higher Education to support the many areas of contention, including:

1. **Within an academic led quality framework, to address the managerial need for process and quantitative evaluation.**
2. **To support the need for academic and organisation performance and qualitative evaluation of QA.**
3. **To address the interface between university autonomy and self-governance on the one hand and the need to meet external standards and requirements.**

To address these QA objectives Institutional self-evaluation, external peer review and a published review report are widely established as components of European QA systems. Comparative
analysis of institutions via benchmarking has been added over time (FINHEEC 2000). In the case of self-evaluation and peer review it is clear that in practice these ‘softly, softly’ approaches to education quality have not been as effective as one might have hoped. Many of the QA reports produced have ‘rather been descriptive than analytical or evaluative, and only few include conclusions’ (FINHEEC, 2000). The addition of benchmarking to the evaluation process is clearly an attempt to address weaknesses in the evaluation processes of the 1980s and 1990s. To the reader of such reports, evaluations sometimes seemed conflicted between confirming the value and quality of a national system of HE while indicating areas for improvement. In the Irish context, it is only very recently that QQI has exercised its statutory powers to withdraw recognition from a provider, with two such cases in 2016. My study visits to the US confirmed that the US system was far more robust and active in this regard.

Alternative approaches to quality evaluation were set out by Brennan (1998), distinguishing between motivations of language, power, change and conflict of interests underpinning different approaches to QA and highlighting the alternative approaches derived from manufacturing and service industries management theory, QA models and expertise constructed around distinctive terminologies and QA in HE which reflects standards, academic coherence, progression, attainment and understanding. Brennan’s analysis of quality evaluation builds on the enlightenment and surveillance forms of quality evaluation categorized previously by Barrett (1994). The conclusion drawn is that the self-assessment study is the most valuable aspect of the evaluation exercise. So why bother with the external evaluation one might ask? The answer may lie in the political struggle for ownership of education between educationalists and other external stakeholders referred to in Chapter 1. The aspiration for independence from government control of education, to stand above politics, does not always prevail over the power of state funding and bureaucratic influences.

### 3.6 Country Specific Examples of QA in Higher Education

In France Higher Education QA evaluations started in 1984 as a means of granting administrative, pedagogical, research and financial autonomy to universities. It provided the legal instrument for audit and control. Wahlen’s (2001) report on Academic Audit in Sweden in *Institutional*
Evaluations in Europe Workshop Report 1, suggests that this legislative role of quality evaluation may have been limiting, not addressing the need to develop a culture and practice of quality assessments within the universities. Implicit in this assessment by Wahlen is a recognition of the qualitative or soft aspects of QA in Higher Education. Institutional evaluations in France were an early example of state accountability and followed a standard European format of internal and external evaluations. They were subject to peer review and had a published report output. Four types of evaluation had been defined in France: institute, discipline, thematic study and regional. The regional evaluation, assessing the Higher Education network in an area-based study, was an innovative aspect of the French approach reflecting the political division of France into regions called Departments. In fact, the term institutional evaluation as practiced in France is somewhat of a misnomer. “These evaluations actually highlight the fact that many problems are discipline-based problems which cannot be solved or even understood within a single institution” (Hamalainen et al. 2001, p.18). While discipline specific reviews in France transcended institutions, there was no evidence of any additional positive impact on academic QA. If as this research suggests, academic quality resides within the organisational culture and the people involved within the organisation, then cross institutional or regional reviews might well be seen as little more than a political fudge. Generalised reviews of quality at national level or regional level, have a built-in potential to miss the specifics of QA operations, thereby hiding as much as they may reveal.

In Norway quality audit was chosen as the main tool for reviewing quality in Higher Education. This quality audit consisted of “a systematic review of the way in which institutions handle their responsibility for educational quality” (Hamalainen et al. 2001, p.23). The objective of quality audit was limited to assessing the institution’s own quality assurance in the education work of the organisation, but without reference to course quality or research quality. Subject and institution evaluations were intended to play a supplementary role. In practice, institution evaluation came to the fore over time as the primary instrument of quality, offering as it did “a fuller assessment of the institution and a much broader scope” (Hamalainen et al. 2001, p.23). Norway’s institutional evaluations are again somewhat different than in other countries, serving both a control function to inform the public “about the institutions’ ability to solve their societal task” and a development function to “contribute to the institutions’ qualitative and strategic development” (Hamalainen et al. 2001, p.24).
The approach taken to the evaluation in Norway was left to the individual institutions to address six main areas or themes: the institute as an organisation; academic profile and strategy; staff competence; catering for students; infrastructure for work and study; student, research and economic outcomes. As in the institutes of technology in Ireland, the external reviewers produced a report and the institution was required to respond to the ministry with draft action plans. The evaluation reports are owned and published by the evaluation authority in both Ireland and Norway.

In Sweden each institution was responsible for its own quality but had to “demonstrate to the government the standard of its quality enhancement mechanisms” (Wahlen 2001). This was achieved via institutional audit by the National Agency for Higher Education. This audit focused on institutional processes for quality assurance as well as on strategy, leadership and operations. As in Norway, the audit followed the common standard procedure of self-evaluation, peer review and public report. The audit team membership introduced in Sweden was somewhat innovative at the time, including as it did a person from industry and a student in addition to the three academic representatives. This is now common and recommended practice in many European countries. In Ireland, student involvement remains limited in many institutions, with the student perspective largely invisible in the QA of their Higher Education. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, published in 2011, shone a spotlight on the need for greater “involvement of students in course planning, feedback and evaluation” (HEA 2012, p.53). There is little room for complacency in Ireland in this regard, so the student voice was surveyed and captured in this research.

The self-evaluation document in Sweden set out the strengths and weaknesses of the quality processes. This formed the starting point for the visiting panel. The audit addressed quality enhancement strategies, exercise of leadership, co-operation with stakeholders, involvement in quality enhancement processes, quality integration in institute work, systems of evaluation and follow-up and external professional relations. The audit report was issued to the institution for comment before it was published. The chart below on recommendations of audit teams shows clearly that in Sweden, leadership and strategy have been given most attention by audit teams. The dominant focus on assessment quality seen in the USA did not figure in the Swedish process.
A recurring theme across many countries was the conflict between the collegial form of leadership and the emphasis on a more managerial structure, often imposed in the name of efficiency (Deem et al. 2007). New Public Management (NPM) ideology has its roots in the laisse-faire economics of the Thatcher and Reagan era (1975-1990), encouraging government to extricate itself from operational control of public services to strategic management of outputs. This laisse-faire ideology collapsed with the world-wide recession of the mid-1990’s, with governments taking more centralized control of their economies than ever before. However, NPM continued to influence public service management, including state management of higher education. In the late 1990’s ‘Thatcherite-style market-managerialism’ was replaced by ‘Blairist-style modernizing-Managerialism’ in the UK, as NPM grappled with issues of economic development and globalization. Economic realities and global pandemic have forced a return to government operation of public services, state welfare and centralized economic management.

Up to the present day the traditional models of higher education as the bastions of knowledge and communities of free-thinking scholars are challenged by NPM ideology to conform to standardized models of workplaces to be directed by the managerial state, frequently audited and constantly measured. QA was seen an instrument of NPM initially, yet has survived the decline of that ideology.

This conflict between managerial and academic interests continues to co-exist in Higher Education institutions to varying degrees. The ‘professional’ identity created by NPM in higher education managers, services and administration roles has gained traction, with new collaborative models of organisation emergent.

The next greatest concern for quality centred on evaluation procedures and follow-up on quality enhancements. A lack of operational goals or of data in institutions prevented them from interpreting and acting on the results of their activities. If institutional goals and data do not understand the relative importance of different factors within QA their efforts to improve quality are unlikely to be effective.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audit Recommendation Area</th>
<th>No. of Recommendations</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies for Enhancement</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in Quality</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Development</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation &amp; Follow-up Systems</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder Relations</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internationalisation</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 – Types of recommendations of Audit Teams (Wahlen 2001)

In the United Kingdom institutional evaluation took place every six years, with the cycle of self-evaluation report, site visit, review report production and institutional response requiring a full academic year to complete. An interim review after three years monitored progress against the evaluation report recommendations. Responsibility for quality and standards resided squarely with senior management and the evaluation was focused on the effectiveness of the management of that responsibility. There was also an emphasis on evaluating the robustness and security of the computer systems supporting the awards function. Having worked in the UK Higher Education system as well as in the Irish system, I can comment here that the managerial influence over academic matters was greater in the New Universities sector in the UK than in the Institutes of Technology. This higher level of NPM influence with regard to the UK ‘New Universities’ can be attributed to the legacy operation of the former Polytechnics imposed by the CNAA, which was heavy and rigid.

The QAA reviews encompassed management of QA, learning opportunities, standard of awards and enhancement of educational provision. The evaluation of managerial and computer systems was a reflection of a growing managerial emphasis. From 2013 institutions were evaluated against the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, a significant shift in QA orientation. The subsequent widening of the HEFCE funding body’s remit to include QA, has arguably reduced the QAA to an agent or instrument of HEFCE. The methodology and purpose of this research reflects the continuing strength of the academy within Higher Education in Ireland. The research survey included answer options that more closely reflect the UK or French systems, to avoid preconceived assumptions in exploration of the research questions.
Significant emphasis was placed in the UK on the internationalisation of education provision. Delegation of authority to make awards under validation or collaboration agreements also received particular scrutiny. The institutional evaluation was primarily concerned with procedures for approval, monitoring and review of programmes, actions taken on the findings of external examiners and external reviews, management of assessment procedures and credit systems and collaborative arrangements with other institutions.

An institutional evaluation visit used the self-evaluation report and any previous review reports as the source material for the review visit. A visit might vary in length from one day to a full week. The institutional review report, setting out essential, advisable and desirable actions, was published.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QQA) managed the evaluations. QAA provided the institutions with a Code of Practice, laying down the requirements to demonstrate that the responsibility for all awards and for the quality of education provided had been discharged effectively. The institutions were also required to demonstrate that the approach to assuring academic quality and standards met the requirements of the QQA Code of Practice (QQA 2013).

Benchmarking becomes feasible when standards and systems are comparable. Creating and using a benchmarking approach to QA is not without its difficulties, yet some would argue that the potential benefits outweigh any such barriers (Quality Assurance Agency 1998).

Analysis of the literature yields insight that while countries within the European Education Space are committed to the Bologna process of convergence, political and cultural differences continued to run undeclared within the different national QA systems. These cultural and political differences were like subterranean streams that flowed unseen until they unexpectedly emerged and defined the character of the QA landscape. The European Standards and Guidelines that define the cross-country similarities and standards in QA merge with local culture and values to determine the distinctive national QA systems. That Italian, German and Irish people do not think or behave in the same way does not undermine academic quality in any of those countries if the primary
determinant of quality is the organisational culture of the Higher Education institution. The next section explores these questions and their added value for the purposes of my research.

3.7 Current Thinking on QA in European Higher Education

The previous sections of this chapter explored how the theory of QA in European Higher Education evolved in practice across different countries and cultures in Europe. In the Lisbon Strategy the European Council sets the objective of becoming ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ (European Union Council 2000). Quality management in Higher Education is essential to achieving this objective. However, the diversity of political cultures, academic aspirations and market forces at play across the EC mean that different types of institutes have deployed a range of quality assurance systems that have proven difficult to fully integrate in a Europe-wide quality management model. With the inclusion of the EU accession states the number of Higher Education institutions in the EU has increased from 3300 to over 4000, within the EU definition of European Higher Education. The heterogeneity of this Higher Education system is reflected in organisation, governance, operating conditions, status, conditions of employment, recruitment of teaching staff and researchers. Not surprisingly, many of these differences are reflected even within the relatively small Irish Higher Education system. In this complex Higher Education environment the research undertaken avoided the potential for a fudge based on national systems, regional reviews or discipline evaluations to examine QA at the level of the Higher Education institution. It is at this level that QA culture and ownership reside and that the indepth research questions set out in Section 1.4 can be investigated and evidenced.

The traditional models of European universities based on the research led teaching model of Wilhelm Von Humboldt or the bastion of civilization model of Cardinal Newman have given way across Europe to greater differentiation, promoted and indeed lauded at national and at institutional level. Not only does this heterogeneity exist between countries, as exemplified in previous sections of this chapter, it exists also within country and institution. Higher Education institutions have differentiated missions, responding differently and with varied pace to current changes in the system (EC 2003). A relatively recent development in the concept of Higher Education has been
the dominant focus on national economic and business drivers for wealth creation, with engagement labelled the third pillar of Higher Education. While universities have always served business and the economy, the balancing of this objective with other academic, personal, social, cultural and research values has changed. In addition, a stronger focus on regional development and a regional role for institutions has been a challenge for universities with a more global or international focus. With the growth of outward looking demands and influences on Higher Education, maintaining strong core values and a quality culture within institutions has grown in importance so that Higher Education can meet change and new demands from the stability of core values and a robust institutional identity. Answering the question “who are we?” has never been more important to the success of a higher institution. The research questions in Section 1.4 achieve precisely that and from the perspective that matters in Higher Education, academic quality.

In exploring the research questions the research survey instruments acknowledge that quality management has a dual role to play in the Europe-wide shift from the traditional top down, state led, legalistic steering of Higher Education to the market focused and region focused, bottom up, economy driven steering of education based on agreed national objectives to be achieved. Firstly, in a looser model of legal control, quality management provides a mechanism for institute level transparency and accountability. Secondly, quality management systems assist institutes to manage and respond to the nature of their students, the way they deliver knowledge and carry out research, the way they interact with society, business, the region, the state and other universities and the manner in which they manage their human resources (Weber 2004). The research questions explored how actors within a Higher Education institution react and respond to the shifts in purpose and objectives across Europe.

A result of strong quality management is that decision making in Higher Education can be less influenced by government, institutions and faculty and more influenced by students, business, the region and the general public consumer (Bruce Johnstone 1998). For example, during my study visit to Portland State University in 2011 it was stated by a senior representative of the university that the decreasing proportion of funding from the state, coupled with increasing institutional freedom, had resulted in the university becoming increasingly focused on its own strategy while continuing out of courtesy to pay lip service to its political masters, the State Education Board.
Specifically, the variance in funding between in-state and out-of-state students led to a scenario where a state university had decreased the proportion of lower funded in-state students within the total student population in order to make the financial gains necessary for the university’s growth strategy. If state funding of Higher Education in Ireland continues to decrease one can expect to see a slow shift away from adherence to state objectives, with increasing importance placed on the internal strategy and culture of the institutions. The relationships between Higher Education funding, oversight and autonomy that I witnessed in the USA have recently been discussed openly within the Royal Irish Academy (McGrath 2016).

It would be incorrect to paint a picture of European Higher Education as all moving in the same direction. While Germany, France, Belgium, Latvia, Estonia, Hungary, Holland, Denmark and Ireland continue to increase institutional autonomy, governments in the UK, Portugal and Lithuania have de facto reduced institutional autonomy. And with changes in both directions the traditional academic self-governance culture has often lost out, replaced by a less formal system of consensus decision making led by Deans (Schimank 2005). There is little evidence that increased state control improves quality and there is some evidence from the UK university system that quality has suffered from an over dominance of managerial culture and state controls. The ambiguity of Irish social culture in general has included a degree of ambivalence to authority, a dependence culture on authority interweaved with a historic dislike of state control (Dukelow and Considine 2017). It is difficult to predict how increased state regulation and control would improve the quality of Irish Higher Education. This research into institutional culture and operation was more likely to be fruitful for developing a QA system.

Where liberalization of state control brings deregulation, the state often retains influence via performance-based funding contracts. Examples of this control mechanism were operated in Denmark, Austria, France, Finland, Germany and Holland (CHEPS 2005). The HEA in Ireland has dabbled in this funding contracts model, called Performance Compacts, with limited impact. However, in Estonia, Latvia and Ireland institutions were willing to trade additional accountability measures in return for maintaining their autonomy and block grants. This research is valuable in providing an alternative QA model to the state influence or external controls models that can erode academic agency and QA.
To ensure that good practice is evenly spread across institutions and countries, there is value to be gained from shared and international efforts to foster internal quality. All countries seem to be in agreement on common minimum QA standards or reference points. Countries and institutions also need to be free to go beyond these. It has been proposed that in future European Higher Education institutions could choose among QA agencies, perhaps including those outside their own country. Thus, member states would indicate their trust in all agencies and national QA systems in Europe and in the EHEA. ENQA has defined a parallel set of QA standards for QA agencies to ensure clarity of mission, agency independence and a methodical approach to QA of the agencies themselves. On receipt of this QA approval an agency has recognition and official status to carry out QA of Higher Education institutions across Europe. By bringing together national agencies Europe is developing external quality assurance under the management of a European Quality Assurance Committee, as set in train in the Bergen Communiqué of 2005.

While it is now widely accepted to open Higher Education to the outside world, accountability to society can be seen or used as a counterbalance to the need for autonomy in Higher Education. Quality management is acknowledged for delivering accountability. The signal in the Yerevan Communiqué in 2015 that in future Higher Education institutions may be permitted to look to QA agencies in other jurisdictions for QA evaluations and reviews is an indication that the EHEA may in time become a balance to national government desires for control of state Higher Education institutions. It is important that QA models are developed that look beyond the changing state, economic or regional objects to support core values and processes that underpin QA systems within Higher Education institutions.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter examined the European and wider international context of developments in QA in Higher Education, supporting the view that QA at institute level is important. The chapter considered European quality assurance developments in the 1980s and 1990s and presented a critical perspective on European quality assurance in the new millennium. There followed a series of low-level cross-country comparisons that give a sense of the differences that remain within the
programme for Higher Education QA convergence across Europe. This helped me to understand that institute level QA based on organisational culture was a key operating concept behind this research. Differences in philosophy, values and culture at organisation, system and national levels remain to the fore in cross-country comparisons that are best addressed at the organisation level. The chapter ends with a return to the high-level Europe-wide change agenda, offering a view of current developments in the context of participation by the new EC accession states and the consequential need to address QA at organisation level within this growing diversity by addressing the research questions set out in Section 1.4.

The national approach to QA in Irish Higher Education will be examined in detail in the next chapter to identify evidence at national level that supports the institute level approach to QA in this research.
Chapter 4: Quality Assurance in Irish Higher Education

4.1 Introduction

The statutory basis of quality assurance (QA) systems in Irish Higher Education was set down in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. A primary purpose of the act was prepare QA management in Irish Higher Education for the proposals being discussed in moving towards the Bologna Agreement a month later in 1999. Thus, Ireland was well prepared for the introduction of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in 2005, including the Institutional Review model of Higher Education QA emerging in Europe as a response to the Bologna Agreement. This model of periodic Institutional Review against the standards set down in the ESG is the backbone of QA in the European Higher Education Area. The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for quality assurance, drawn up by the European Network for Quality Assurance and chaired by Professor Christian Thune from Denmark, provided the European context for quality assurance in Higher Education in Ireland. The establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) was provided for in the 1999 Act. The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) was established by NQAI in 2001 to implement the statutory requirements set down in the Act. NQAI focused initially on developing the Qualifications Framework, widening access and establishing agencies to manage the QA of Further Education (FETAC) and Higher Education (HETAC). From 2001 HETAC and the NQAI progressed the implementation of the Act in higher education. HETAC took the lead role in the development of QA systems for the management of quality in the Institutes of Technology while the management of quality in universities was overseen by the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). NQAI, HETAC and IUQB merged in September 2012 under a new act, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012, establishing the Quality and Qualifications Authority of Ireland (QQI).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the QA system operating in Irish Higher Education, across the institutes of technology and universities sectors, to provide evidence of the validity of the institute level approach to QA in Ireland. The chapter sets out the evolution of QA systems in Ireland since the 1970s, when the Institutes of Technology were founded in Ireland as Regional Technical Colleges. The chapter then focuses on the more recent HETAC and QQI era from 1999
onwards and its international context. The approach taken by HETAC to QA of institutes of technology and the approach to QA of the university sector by the then Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU), now called the Irish University Association (IUA), are considered. Having outlined the Irish QA systems, this chapter then includes international comparisons to show that the issues that validated Institute level QA at European level have parallels at national level within Ireland. The chapter ends with an assessment of the development of Higher Education QA systems in Ireland from the perspective of this research.

4.2 Evolution of QA Systems in Irish Higher Education

With the establishment of the Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) in the 1970s, a binary system of Higher Education was created in Ireland. The National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) was set up under the Regional Technical Colleges Act 1992 to certify and oversee the quality of provision in the non-university sector. For the Irish universities sector no such quality assurance statute or body was considered necessary at that time. Irish universities were de facto self-regulating at institution level, working examples of the institution-based approach to QA addressed by this research. The involvement and oversight of Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) was strongest in the QA of vocational programmes of study. The continuing statutory control of apprenticeship under the Industrial Training Act 1967 by the lead state agency (Anco, FAS, Solas), merits specific mention as apprenticeship education evolved yet its’ legislative enabling framework remained unchanged.

In the 1980s The European debate on quality in Higher Education, discussed in Chapter 3, stimulated discussion within government and education circles in Ireland. Evidence of the filtering of European ideas into Irish Higher Education can be found in the reports on the National Education Conference held in Dublin Castle in 1993. In the session on Administrative Structures and Quality Assurance, questions of quality assessment methods (self-assessment, peer review, external monitoring), the role of performance indicators and the need for a QA body were discussed. By 1997 the NCEA National Conference was focused completely on ‘Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The Next 25 Years’ (NCEA 1997). Duff, Hegarty and Hussey’s (2000) book on ‘Academic Quality Assurance in Irish Higher Education’ provides a relatively
detailed insight into the process and policy base for the evolution of QA in Higher Education leading up to the Bologna Agreement in 1999. The book also provides a good analysis of the context of Higher Education in Ireland and an interesting forward view of expectations at that time for the future development of QA after 2000 (Duff et al. 2000). The pace and extent of change in Higher Education has in fact proved greater even than that envisaged by Duff, Hegarty and Hussey. The European Union Council had already published its recommendations on ‘European Cooperation in Quality Assurance in Higher Education’ in 1998 (European Union Council 1998). Changes in QA coming from Europe were largely welcomed and embraced in Ireland. They had the effect of heightening awareness of difference and Higher Education institution culture, both at national level and at organisation level.

Since its inception in 1972 the NCEA had been proactive in evolving policy and procedures for QA in the Institutes of Technology. Hence, the NCEA was well placed to endorse and support the EU Council recommendations (NCEA 1998). The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) was established by statute in 1999 and replaced the NCEA in 2001 as the body responsible for QA in the non-university sector under the Qualifications (Education & Training) Act, 1999. In October 2012 the commencement order was issued for a new authority, the Qualifications and Quality Authority of Ireland (QQI). This for the first time included the university sector under a statutory body with full responsibility for QA in all Higher Education institutions in Ireland. Before 2012, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) held limited legal responsibility for QA. The universities were governed by the requirements of the Universities Act 1997, setting out self-regulation requirements. QA was carried out by the universities without being subject to a statutory body, on a voluntary basis through their representative bodies the Irish Universities Quality Board and the European Universities Association. The Irish university sector became subject to statutory QA requirements under QQI in 2012, bring university QA in Ireland into line with the wider European context of statutory regulation set out previously in Chapter 3. While highly protective of their independence, the universities nonetheless embraced the QA institutional reviews model envisaged for Europe as early as 2000. With HETAC developing statutory QA in the non-university sector, it was progressively less logical to operate a separate non-statutory QA model for the universities and the resulting duplication of QA agencies. The 2012 Act created a standard, unified system of QA for all HE institutions in Ireland.
The political and structural aim in Ireland has remained consistently to reinforce the binary divide in Higher Education. This was again stated explicitly in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. However, the QA of the university and institutes of technology sectors can logically be managed by one agency, similar to the cross-sector Commissions for Higher Education approach in the United States. There the same QA standards are applied for different types of education institutions. Yet the QA model is sufficiently flexible to facilitate application to match the differing character and context of the organisations under review. For example, to both underwrite QA and deliver developmental value, the same QA review model can be tailored for review of an Ivy League university, a state university or a for-profit commercial university. The integration of all Higher Education QA under QQI in 2012 brought Ireland into line with this international best practice for QA of Higher Education providers. The 2011 National Strategy for Higher Education stated that Ireland did not intend to follow the UK’s conversion of Polytechnic institutions to universities, the French conversion to IUTs or the Netherlands conversion of the Hoje Schol to universities. However, the enactment into law of the Technological Universities Act in March 2018 raises questions about the continuance of this binary divide. The single QA system now in place at national level treats the five traditional universities, the two new universities (DCU and UL), the recently established technological university and the institutes of technology as similar institutions.

The functions of HETAC were set down precisely under the Qualification (Education & Training) Act 1998 (HETAC 2004a). One of the difficulties faced by HETAC was that its statutory brief went far beyond QA, including a range of activities covering: Awards; Validation of Programmes; Standards of Higher Education & Training; Learner Assessment; Delegation of Authority to Make Awards; Research Programme Registration and Accreditation; Internal QA; Higher Education Research; Higher Education Policy Analysis and Provision of Corporate Services to Higher Education. With such a wide brief, HETAC struggled to keep abreast of all its responsibilities. And yet, unprecedented progress was made in Higher Education QA systems development during the HETAC period up to 2012. In establishing a robust national QA system in the non-university sectors HETAC defined many aspects of QA that transferred directly to QQI and to the university sector.
HETAC had developed the national QA framework around a series of QA policy documents. In 2002 HETAC published two key documents:

- **Guidelines & Criteria for Quality Assurance Procedures.**
- **Policy, Criteria & Guidelines on Delegation of Authority to Make Awards.**

*Guidelines and Criteria for Quality Assurance Procedures* set out the basis on which institutions could apply to HETAC for recognition of their internally defined QA procedures. HETAC’s *Policy, Criteria and Procedures on Delegation of Authority to make Awards* (HETAC 2004b) established the process for institutions whose QA procedures had been approved by HETAC to move to the next stage of applying for delegation of authority to make awards with delegated awarding powers. QA in Higher Education has changed considerably in Ireland over the past decade. A significant change implemented in the Technological Universities Act (2018), gave statutory designated awarding powers as opposed to delegated awarding powers to all institutes of technology, bringing them into line with university sector awarding powers.

In 2003 HETAC developed its QA procedures in greater detail, publishing three further key publications:

- **Criteria and Procedures for the Delegation and Review of Delegated Authority to Make Awards.**
- **Supplementary Guidelines for the Delegation and Review of Delegation of Authority to Make Awards.**
- **Validation Processes, Policy and Criteria for the Accreditation of Providers to Maintain a Register for a Specified Research Degree in a Specified Discipline Area.**

It is reasonable to assert that only with the 2003 publications was it made clear to providers what exactly was required for delegation of authority and the review process for delegation of authority. In 2003 the requirements for delegation of research authority remained abstract and somewhat sketchy. In fact, it was the 2004 revision of *Criteria and Procedures for the Delegation and Review of Delegated Authority to Make Awards* that finally clarified provider requirements. This process of QA system definition continued, with the basis for delegation of research authority finalised in 2005. Following the first round of delegated authority reviews in 2004, a new draft policy titled

The Institutes of Technology developed in terms of quality and quality assurance under HETAC to the point where they viewed themselves as differentiated from, yet equivalent in some ways to the university sector. With this newly found self-confidence came demands for equality of esteem from the state and demands for greater autonomy from HETAC in QA. This development of a more mature Higher Education environment and culture within Institutes of Technology explains best why this research on quality culture is being carried out at this time within that sector.

4.3 Impact of International Developments on Education QA

HETAC defined its approach to QA as to “promote and support continual improvement in the quality and standards of provision” and to “promote provider ownership of quality assurance and learner assessment procedures” (HETAC 2004a, p.8). In this regard the HETAC approach fitted squarely within the international development of QA in Higher Education from its beginnings in France in the 1980s. Ownership of quality assurance was vested in the education institution with external evaluation. This development of education quality could be achieved either through the iterative redirecting of responsibility away from the centre while maintaining strong central control, as in Australia and New Zealand, or as in the USA and Britain by a loosening of central administrative control to introduce control by budget. While HETAC was successful in its aim of supporting continual improvement, it struggled at times to promote provider ownership, particularly in the area of research accreditation and delegation of authority. This issue was alluded to in HETAC’s own international external evaluation or agency review in 2006 (NQAI 2006).

HETAC’s fundamental QA objective was explicitly stated as quality that meets the “needs and expectations of stakeholders in Ireland, Europe and throughout the global community” (HETAC 2004a). Considering the international dependence of Ireland as a small country with an open economy, it is not surprising that national policy and objectives should be driven by international influences and expectations. In the wake of membership of the European Community, Irish industry, financial policy, law and social outlook underwent a slow but significant change to a
more international perspective. Education policy in Ireland has also moved progressively away from the post-independence nationalist upsurge that defined most aspects of Irish life. It could be argued that the international context set out in Chapter 3 became the primary driver of QA developments in Ireland. HETAC engaged actively with Higher Education quality assurance agencies in Europe, such as the ENQA, ECA and INQAAHE, providing the secretariat for the latter network and the vice-chairperson for ENQA. The principle of institute ownership of QA embraced and supported by this research is recognised in principle throughout Europe. Cultural differences at national level in general and at institutional level determine the meaning and degree of this ownership by the academy.

The need for effective and transparent QA procedures in Higher Education was almost universally accepted in Ireland and internationally. In this context, the Irish distinction between the universities and institutes of technology for QA regulation purposes became increasingly difficult to justify. A challenge for QQI was to marry its aspiration to “promote provider ownership of quality assurance and learner assessment procedures” with the university sector practice and institutes of technologies expectation of this principal of QA, as QQI struggled internally to marry its very different further education and Higher Education history and cultures. Based on HETAC’s experience, transfer of ownership of QA to the greatest extent possible to the universities and institutes was most likely as a strategy to bring improvements in organisation level QA.

4.4 Approach to QA for Institutes of Technology

Until the establishment of QQI in October 2012, HETAC was legally responsible for QA in public sector providers such as the Institutes of Technology and within the private sector colleges. HETAC’s approach to QA was to interact with providers on the basis of policy, criteria and guidelines for agreeing quality assurance procedures, with the institutions and colleges developing their own QA procedures for approval by HETAC. Institutional evaluation and review processes were in turn based on the agreed procedures (HETAC, 2002). HETACs international experience in the 1990s on ENQA and other European QA committees had convinced HETAC of the futility of externally imposed QA procedures, the need for institutional ownership of quality and enhancement. HETAC generally accepted that this approach strengthened institutional QA, as long
as stakeholder collaboration in QA was balanced with a sufficient degree of standardization to make meaningful cross-institution comparisons possible. The fact that HETAC’s ‘Guidelines and Criteria for Institutional Quality Assurance Procedures’ were published in 2002 and 2003, more than three years after the first four institutes of technology had agreed their QA procedures and been granted delegated authority to make awards, raises questions about the translation of HETAC’s philosophical approach to QA into practice. HETAC publication in December 2011 of an undated version of the much older NCEA national standard operating procedures for academic QA is indicative at least that they were beginning to rethink the idea that QA needed to be completely internally led. Section 3 of HETAC’s Assessment and Standards set down a range of mandatory Sectoral Conventions to be adopted by all providers (HETAC 2009). This Assessment and Standards document was adopted, with minor revisions, by QQI in 2013. What is evidenced here is that QA agencies themselves evolve and struggle at times to carry statutory responsibility for QA of HE without needing to own or control the operation of the QA at organisation level.

HETAC defined its approach to QA of Higher Education as a paper based agreement by the Council of the documented processes of the Higher Education institution ‘to develop and validate programmes’ and ‘to maintain and continuously improve the quality of those programmes’ (HETAC 2004b). This approach represented the prime criterion for QA recognition by HETAC. For delegation of awarding authority HETAC then took these documented procedures and required the institution to show evidence of their effective operation across the full range of academic operations. It would appear from the above that HETAC did not view QA recognition via approval of QA procedures as particularly significant or robust. Instead HETAC concentrated its efforts on standards for delegation of authority. There is an important philosophical difference between QA based on institute defined policies and procedures and QA based on externally defined criteria for delegation of authority. HETAC claimed philosophically to be operating QA against institute defined policy and procedures. However, some of its criteria for delegation of authority made no reference to institute defined QA. In terms of standards based operations and application of benchmarking, the mixing of these philosophical distinctive approaches to QA may be open to question. For those being audited and quality assured through HETAC, there was occasionally a sense that perhaps the mix of philosophies reflected differences within HETAC regarding the most
appropriate QA model and their operational inexperience in providing a differentiated QA service to multiple types of provider.

So why did HETAC concentrate on delegation of authority rather than definition of quality standards? It could be argued that the statutory obligations and role of HETAC envisaged a policing agency for institutions with delegation of authority rather than a QA agency per se. However, there is little evidence in the literature or in HETAC’s approach to QA to support this view. This reading of the Education and Training Act seems overly selective. It is more likely that HETAC concentrated on delegation of authority because that was the change in QA systems that institutes were eager to progress at that point in time. Though HETAC might prefer to leave the setting of QA standards to individual institutions, in keeping with international practice discussed earlier in this chapter, in law HETAC also carried very specific QA responsibility for awards. How that responsibility was exercised in practice was based on a consultative process with all stakeholders, making no distinction between state backed providers and private providers. This approach matched the model of QA practiced in the Middle States Commission for Higher Education in the United States. However, the Irish model did not make explicit the differentiation between types of provider that the Middle States Commission promoted.

As a new QA agency, HETAC may have lacked the QA expertise and experience to define a standards based approach to QA in Higher Education and to operate a clearly defined approach. Whatever the reason, HETAC chose a light-touch, consultative based approach. However, as all Higher Education institutes defined their own individual QA policies and procedures to attain delegation of authority, it is clear that HETAC’s approach was successful in enabling it to fulfil its legal obligation to ensure general standards of quality. Despite significant variations in policy, standards and approach, HETAC managed to approve such QA policies and procedures for all institutes of technology, putting in place a base line of compatibility with university QA across all institutes of technology and thereby serving as an enabler for the next logical step of statutory consolidation of sectoral agencies and responsibilities for Higher Education QA under QQI.

The change-over of responsibility from the NCEA to HETAC under the Qualifications Act 1998 led to the change from external regulation to a self-regulation philosophy. Institutions were
supported by HETAC to define their own internal QA procedures. And the relevant HETAC QA policy, criteria and guidelines were often defined in close consultation with selected providers and then operated by HETAC for those providers. As indicated earlier in this chapter, in many cases the relevant policy, criteria and guidelines were produced and published by HETAC after the process involved had been operating without a clear policy basis for a period of one or more years. From a provider perspective this meant that early applicants for delegated authority and research accreditation were unclear with regard to requirements, as no guidelines or standards existed at the time the application process went live. HETAC operation of QA was often ahead of the development of QA policy, as they learned by doing. Implementing QA systems in this way permitted HETAC to move forward rapidly with the Bologna process. Yet as a result HETAC had no choice but to adopt a softly-softly approach to QA applications and reviews. On one occasion when HETAC did flex its quality authority muscle regarding research accreditation in Waterford Institute of Technology, the awards council’s determination was overturned on appeal to the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), as there was no documented policy basis on which to uphold HETAC’s determination at that time. That was a wake-up call for HETAC. Its management of QA was on a firmer policy footing by the time it was merged into the new QQI in 2012.

QA systems evolved and developed at national level and within QA statutory agencies, as they embarked on continuous improvement of their processes and services. It is consistent with this view of QA to view internal QA at organisational level also as an evolving and developing process, as organisational culture and values change. It is noteworthy that the one area of its statutory brief that HETAC needed most time to progress was the requirement to review the internal effectiveness of the HETAC agency itself and its process for agreeing quality assurance procedures. Six years after its establishment by statute, HETAC continued to develop its QA framework concurrent with or post operation, placing the agency at some disadvantage when preparing for its own external review in 2006 (NQAI 2006).

With the publication of the Hunt Report in February 2012 the Higher Education Authority signalled a new phase in the development and consolidation of Higher Education and the upgrading to university status of the institutes of technology in Ireland (Hunt, 2012). This strategic
change was further developed in a HEA Landscapes document derived from the Hunt Report and setting out a vision for the development and consolidation of some or all the institutes of technology into Technological Universities. This vision draws also on an earlier 2010 report by Professor Marginson on the concept of a Technological University (Marginson 2010). This research supports the proposition that a Technological University organisation should benefit from the level of independent self-regulation associated with other universities in Ireland and should display the same level of capacity for QA within the organisational culture.

4.5 **Approach to QA in the University Sector**

The primary legislation governing the seven Irish universities is the 1997 Universities Act, which establishes the self-regulatory and independent basis of university operations. Under the Universities Act 1997, the universities made awards independently and were not subject to the Qualifications Act requirements for QA and delegation of authority governing the non-university sectors.

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(Adapted from CHIU – 2003)

Table 4.1 – *H.E. Policy and Legislation 1967-2018*
Under Section 35 of the Act, each university was empowered to manage its own QA through its’ academic council and governing authority, in consultation with the Department of Education. A university was required under Section 35 of the Universities Act to perform a QA evaluation of each department, faculty and section of the university every ten years and to carry out an institutional evaluation every fifteen years. This compares with the quinquennial institutional evaluation required of all non-university providers. The current round of QQI institutional evaluations, started in 2018, includes reviews of the university sector by QQI.

The legislative requirement for QA in the university sector is couched in the language of self-regulation and voluntary observance. For example, the report of a university review for a fifteen year period was written for the university to consider and the university was at liberty to use that report or produce its own report to the Minister as it saw fit.

Notwithstanding the self-regulated legal basis above for QA in the university sector, the universities were conscious of the more stringent international QA principles set out in the Berlin Communiqué and the related QA provisions of the Qualifications Act 1999 that governed the non-university sector. Hence, to protect the status of independence and self-regulation, the universities worked in concert through the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU) to put in place parallel independent procedures. The universities continued to operate this QA system on a voluntary basis up to 2012, through the Higher Education Authority and their own QA body established in 2003, the Irish Universities Quality Board (IQUB). The universities also published their ‘Framework for Quality in Irish Universities in 2003 (CHIU 2003). This framework set down core activities of the IUQB as:

- Conducting regular external reviews of Irish Universities
- Establishing good practice and publishing national guidelines
- Applying agreed European standards and guidelines
- Co-operating with national and international organisations
- Disseminating information to stakeholders

Reviews on quality systems in all seven universities were carried out by the European Universities Association (IUQB 2006). In 2004 the seven universities hosted a group from the European Universities Association (EUA), who carried out a review of the QA systems in all seven
universities. Each review involved a one-day review process agreement visit followed a month later by a two-day review visit and followed five months later by a one day revisit. The review teams reported verbally to the university authorities as the final meeting of their visit. The reports of the seven reviews were presented to the universities to be published on their websites. The reports were also used by the HEA to produce a report to the minister, as required under the Universities Act 1997. What the universities also did was to produce a joint ‘Review of Quality Assurance Procedures in Irish Universities’ as a reflections document on their QA experience (HEA 2005).

As an output from the first ever external review of Irish universities, the document was both informative and more open than one might have anticipated from a self-regulated sector of Higher Education that is highly protective of its independence from the state. The review report reflected a genuine effort to venture into the established European norms for external review. Notably, the report commented on the need for the IUQB to distance itself from the universities to provide a genuine external QA agency for the Irish universities. The reflection document also pointed to the need to embrace the quality culture at senior management level and through ‘real engagement with governing authorities’. These findings may on the one hand reflect a tardiness in the universities in adapting the new international approach to QA set out in Chapter 3 and with which HETAC had been engaging enthusiastically since 2001. However, the report also reflected a growing awareness and willingness among the university sector to take on board the EHEA European process of QA. Serving as a member of the cross-sectoral Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN), it became evident to me that the universities were willing to embrace the European QA processes operational in institutes of technology. Since 2013, the universities have been most supportive with feedback and input to the development of the Technological Universities Quality Framework by Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI 2015). Again we discern characteristics of Higher Education culture within the self-regulated universities that support QA at organisation level.

The strengths and weaknesses of the universities QA systems were documented and published as part of their international review (HEA 2005; HEA 2006a). Detailed analysis by the international review body of the QA systems in each university were also published by the HEA (HEA 2006b). The chairperson of the CHIU, Art Cosgrove, pointed the way for the universities stating that,
“Recent social, political and legislative developments nationally and internationally have changed the context in which the Irish universities operate and signal the desirability of achieving more coherence and greater visibility for the quality systems embraced by the seven universities” (CHIU 2003). The universities were aware that their cooperation with QA standards supported their desire to maintain independence in QA matters. In the research literature they found support for the view that the greater the level of self-management, the more effective, useful and change-orientated QA systems become (Kells 1995; Davies 2002). QQI appreciated this philosophy of self-management of QA, building strong, positive relationships with both the universities and institutes of technology around a self-regulation model since 2012.

4.6 Irish QA Systems International Comparisons

Referring back to the international comparisons in Chapter 3, in Ireland the use of Institutional Evaluation carried out by the state up to 2012 was restricted to the Institutes of Technology sector of Higher Education. The European University Association provided non-statutory Institutional Reviews of the university sector. In the past, NCEA reviews were distinctive in being at a lower level. They concentration on course evaluation, course validation and external input into course assessment. The higher aspect of Institutional Evaluation, more common across Europe, took a more strategic perspective or an enhancement perspective, concentrating on mission, management, policies, procedures, resources and planning. In contrast to France, Ireland’s Institutional Reviews focused on the institute level, not extending this focus to the regional, national or international perspectives.

As a norm, evaluation reports in other countries had always been public. In Ireland reports in the non-university sector were published, with the university sector reports remaining private to the institution. Only selected sections were copied to the evaluation authority and the funding agency. Until 2004, University College Dublin was the only university in Ireland that participated in a European style evaluation, and that was on a voluntary rather than on a statutory basis. The 2004 Institutional Evaluations by EUA of the Irish universities were non-statutory in character and without mandatory published reports (CHIU 2003). Nonetheless, the universities chose to publish a sectoral report with very useful comparative data and insights.
It could be argued that at a general level the approach to Institutional Evaluation used across member states in Europe has evolving to be similar, if not identical. The approach taken in all countries consists of self-evaluation, peer review, a review team site visit and a review report. But within this general approach there are significant differences in focus and procedure. The purpose of Institutional Evaluation also differs from country to country, from an emphasis on accountability to one of institution enhancement. In the Irish context it is now possible to see which focus or purpose will be adopted by QQI as they move away from the earlier HETAC focus on accountability to the newer QQI focus on enhancement. The Irish university approach was ‘self-regulatory’ in character, with each university free to operate QA as it saw fit, with little reference to national or international norms. Nonetheless, the universities as a group voluntarily and enthusiastically, embraced the EHEA standards and best practice for QA.

The evolution of the approach to QA in Ireland bears a striking similarity to Finland. The Finish tradition was of low-level reviews and changed focus to organisation improvement and change, with a high degree of flexibility in evaluation content depending on the needs of the individual institution. In contrast to the early stage of QA development in Irish Higher Education, Institutional Evaluation in France was more focused on improvement in education and research to meet national goals. The French have pioneered the idea of area based review of all education institutions in a particular city or region, emphasizing cooperation between institutions as the basis of achieving added value in education and research provision. Despite the Hunt Report focus on Regional Clusters, the QA process in Ireland has not caught up with this development in the National Strategy for HE. It would be more consistent with the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 to adopt the French area and regional evaluation models. One could evaluate the quality of provision across a Regional Cluster. For example, the Mid-West Regional Cluster or Shannon Consortium (University of Limerick, Limerick Institute of Technology and Mary Immaculate College of Education) could be reviewed as a regional cluster of Higher Education provision, rather than the current approach of being treated as unrelated institutions for QA purposes. In this regional cluster all three institutions already operate under a combined postgraduate QA system and operate under a Federated Limerick Graduate School, with doctorates across the regional cluster subject to QA by and awarded by the University of Limerick. A similar process of integration was considered at undergraduate level, so the example above is feasible.
Within the non-university sector in Ireland the HETAC evaluation proved multi-functional and multi-faceted. It helped improve the institutes’ QA systems, enhanced quality, and provided accountability through a range of different programme and institutional reviews in the technological sector. The university sector in Ireland was slow in the change from internal control of QA under the 1997 Act to a greater level of external accountability under the 2012 Act. While the university sector de facto took the lead in publishing QA review reports, in 2012 it remained the last country in the EU without a statutory requirement to publish the university evaluation reports. Placing QA of universities on a statutory body reporting basis under QQI in 2012 brought the already transparent QA practice in the university sector fully into line with the European model. By moving to publish QA review reports from 2000 onwards and full embracing QA transparency, the Irish university sector transition to the European approach was exemplary and seamless in its execution.

As Irish QA systems evolved Irish Higher Education has embraced international trends and norms. However, there continues to be a degree of distinctiveness relative to the national strategy and each institutions culture and objectives. In Norway for example, evaluation has a high-level focus on overall strategy and qualitative development, while in Sweden the aim has been to enhance education and, to some degree, research. The UK has focused on accountability and evaluation of quality assurance measures, with an early emphasis on research quality that was later rebalanced to take greater account of teaching quality also. It is likely that QA systems in Irish Higher Education will make similar choices and will change iteratively based on experience and changing demands. The establishment of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Ireland has refocused QA more on the quality of teaching, learning and provision, as these impact directly on the student and learning experience. The Forum has encouraged academic staff to engage more with the scholarship of learning and teaching. It encouraged national agencies to consider the importance in Higher Education QA systems for teaching, learning and provision. In line with the approach taken in this research, QA is seen as more than document trail evidence, including yet transcending the classroom boundaries to the wider operation and engagement with QA that are part of the student experience.
While in Norway, Finland and Sweden a degree of freedom is afforded to the institution in choosing the approach to self-assessment, none permit the degree of self-regulation that operated in the Irish universities up to 2012. This independence of Irish universities was underpinned in the Universities Act (1997). With the establishment of QQI came the statutory requirement for greater public accountability for Irish universities. Public interest cases brought before the Public Accounts Committee in recent years are resulting in further tightening of self-regulation and accountability. In contrast, the HETAC approach in the non-university sector was more top-down than in many other European countries. In many countries the peer review team consisted solely of academics. Ireland, Sweden and Finland included industry representatives on evaluation panels. Sweden used to be distinctive in including a student representative. Finland was for a time unique in requiring an international representative on its evaluation panels. These additions to review panels are now established norms within the standard European approach (ESG 2015). In addressing the research questions, light will be shed on how staff in Institutes of Technology responded to changes in accountability, external control and self-regulation.

4.7 Influences and Trends in Irish QA Systems

By the 1990s it was evident in Ireland that international developments in Higher Education generally and in QA specifically would bring about ‘not evolutionary, but revolutionary change’ in Higher Education teaching and learning and in Higher Education relationships with the state and society (Casper 1995). The result was new legislation for Institutes of Technology by 1998, the setting up of HETAC and vigorous engagement of Irish state agencies with the new EHEA. What was not clear in the 1990s was whether a system of quality improvement or a system of public accountability would be the main driver of change (Vroeijenstein 1995). The self-regulated Irish universities were aware of these changes, choosing to work collaboratively with the European University Association. The division of legal responsibility and influence between QQI and HEA is complicated. QQI has responsibility for QA good practice, self-regulation and institutional ownership of QA. HEA exercises responsibility over system performance and funding. The two agencies continue to function as a balance between quality improvement and public accountability requirements of the HE system.
Studies in the 1990s indicated clearly that ‘sufficient, though not exclusive ownership of the process’ by academics was the key to effective leveraging of change from QA processes (Green 1994; Fraser 1996). This question of ownership therefore features in this study to address the research questions. As the components of self-study, peer review and published reports of findings are central to the European QA process, confidence has grown that the QQI process is quality improvement led, with public accountability a legitimate outcome of that QA enhancement philosophy. Stakeholder views on this question also feature in this study. The HEA declaration that it did not see a link between quality assurance process and university funding did much to allay university fears of a covert financially driven attack on the independence of Higher Education (Lindsey 1996). The Irish universities have by choice followed the Institutes of Technology lead in adopting a QA culture that fully meets European requirements.

The conversion to a QA culture in Irish Higher Education has not been completely based on a sense of benevolence and public service. The outcomes of QA supporting new funding models for part-time education and lifelong learning have proved an incentive (MacFarlane 1997). Equally, the outward visibility associated with QA reviews has lent support to academics campaigning for education by making explicit the link between investment in people and industry performance (Gollan 1997). As academic institutions became less afraid of or more adept at exploiting the brave new world of Higher Education QA, they turned their considerable skills and knowledge towards identifying and embracing new opportunities through QA processes.

As the Irish and European QA systems changed, new benchmarks were formulated based on new indicators and key competencies, such as learning-to-learn, ICT systems, mobility, adult education and vocational education (European Commission 2004; ESG 2015). The former EU Commissioner for Education and Culture, Viviane Reding, summarised the future direction as:

“Let us not be afraid of learning from the experience of these best member states. Let us use benchmarks and benchmarking as a tool for initiating dialogue and learning processes among policy makers and the education community,” (EUROPA 2003, p.1).

Despite all its flaws, international benchmarking is very much established in Higher Education for marketing and reputational purposes and for research. It seems a natural development that in-state and cross-state benchmarking will follow.
Quality assurance in Higher Education has reached a stage of development and international connectivity whereby it is inextricably linked with policy and developments in the wider European Higher Education environment. The European Standards and Guidelines provide the criteria and framework for external Institutional Review of both the institutes of technology sector and the university sector in Irish Higher Education (EURASHE 2015). Similarly, the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice provide the reference framework for quality across a range of specific areas, including research (www.inqaahe.org). The Irish Higher Education Quality Network, a joint body representing a wide range of cross-sector stakeholders in Higher Education in Ireland, also developed a series of good practice guides and a series of common principles guidelines that were considered as best practice guidelines across Irish Higher Education (www.iheqn.ie). Similarly, the European University Association developed guideline documents that provided a reference point for Irish Higher Education, in particular their Salzburg Principles on Research (www.eua.be).

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter examined the evolution of QA systems in Irish Higher Education in the context of QQI’s central and statutory role. The impact of international influences on Higher Education QA in Ireland was considered as the backdrop to the QQI approach to QA in the institutes of technology and university sectors. Comparisons were drawn between the approaches to QA in the institutes of technology sector and in the university sector in Ireland and in Higher Education across Europe. The chapter culminated in an examination of the influences and trends in Irish Higher Education QA systems. The participant views and attitudes from this study to the QQI system could inform the development and operation of QA in the Institutes of Technology.
Chapter 5: Identity Nexus in Higher Education

5.1 Introduction

It was valuable in itself to document in the literature the different staff identities, perceptions and tensions at play in Higher Education. Yet documenting the issues does not seem sufficient. This research explores these issues in-depth and seeks to find a process for addressing the different perceptions and tensions.

This chapter explores evidence in the literature for the assertion in this research that there are differing professional identity groups extant within Higher Education. The thesis here is that the existence of these groups gives rise to different perceptions and tensions within quality assurance in Higher Education. The chapter sets out the previous research in relation to management, academic, administration and student services perceptions in Higher Education, how these relate to QA and the tensions that arise. The chapter ends with some initial reflections on policy and practice in QA in Higher Education as they relate to the management-academic nexus with its characteristic perceptions and tensions. Consideration of the research conceptual framework in Chapter 6 flows from the identity nexus documented in this chapter.

Group identity impacts on organisation operation and organisation culture. In the past, group identities of academic and non-academic were sufficient in Higher Education. However, this binary model has evolved over time, with changing roles and changing mission of Higher Education. The need to organise Higher Education institutions for the future behoves consideration of identity in Higher Education (Twomey 2019, Twomey 2020). Bang (2004, p.2) argues that “culture governance identifies a new connecting problem between system and lifeworld, which compels actors within both domains to orient each other towards mutual dialogue and cooperation.”
5.2 Perceptions and Tensions

The interplay of management control, autonomous academic culture, institutional administrative accountability and student services staff commitment to the student experience presents a complex organisational environment specific to Higher Education. Daly (2014) interpreted relationships as macro level engagement with formal organisation and policy messages in policy documents and micro level values, beliefs and judgments expressed by the policy recipients. The implementation of QA in this complex environment needs to be informed by research-based understanding. Michael Lipsky’s work on ‘street level bureaucracy’ provided a phenomenological insight that raised questions regarding the effectiveness of QA policy and implementation in Higher Education (Lipsky 1980). Lipsky focused on the mediation of policy by front-line workers who interact directly with clients, students in this context. The levels of autonomy and discretion among staff in many Higher Education contexts supports the assertion that Lipsky’s research is relevant if not compelling in the study of quality assurance in Higher Education. The nature of the academic endeavour to nurture a critical and questioning frame of mind in academics is also applied to organisation and government policy by academics. Ball, Maguire & Brown (2012) coined the term “policy enactment” to explain “how policies are interpreted, received and put into practice.” They described professional cultures as having four aspects: values; philosophy; experience and management.

The problem for accountability in light of Lipsky’s analysis was examined by Hudson (1989). Hudson details four main types of accountability to law, the consumer, the organisation and professional norms. He concludes that “if we wish to understand policy implementation, we must understand the street level bureaucrat” (Hudson 1989, p.402). By investigating the perceptions, tensions and possibilities extant at ‘street level’ or on the front line of operation in Higher Education, this research aims to formulate a collaborative, integrated approach to quality insurance that addresses the research question. In this research this is achieved by investigating QA through the lens of four Higher Education cultures: management; academic; administration and student services, with the student lens used to crosscheck different staff group views against those of students. Collaboration and integration around QA has significant value in terms of ownership, exploiting the street level bureaucracy for the good of the organisation and leveraging staff
involvement and commitment. In his study of internal governance and management Middlehurst reminded us that Higher Education organisations are places where ideas and values are deeply integrated with structures, functions, roles and cultures. In Middlehurst’s view, “change processes must address the socio-emotional and symbolic aspects of institutional life as well as the instrumental aspects of the business” (Middlehurst 2004, p.278). By investigating underlying group cultures within Higher Education this research aims to establish a better understanding of how quality assurance is viewed by different cultural constituencies so that the aspects of Higher Education institutional life identified by Middlehurst are taken into account in QA.

Perceptions and tensions are at the heart of staff group identity or culture in Higher Education. Overlaps and conflict in roles within Higher Education make the traditional labelling of staff as management, administration or academic increasingly problematic (Lambert Report 2003). Variations in definitions or identity of staff groupings in the literature reflect this growing complexity (Whitechurch 2004; Hassan 2003). For example, Shatlock (2002) argues for the importance of management in its broadest sense, including administration. To determine how the range of management and administrative activities in Higher Education operate beyond the staff groups with those management and administration designations could be the subject of a future study and is beyond the requirements of this study specific to QA. Given this complexity in staff cultures and identities, it was proposed for the purposes of this research that staff respondents self-identify within the four identity groupings. The student cohort was identified by their registered status within the institution as students, though some students may carry out limited work roles also.

5.3 Academic Perceptions and Tensions

Newton’s (2000) study of academics’ perceptions of quality assurance set out clearly the differences between academic and management perspectives, without flinching from the depth of feeling and tensions which these differences in perceptions can generate. Newton confirmed that the managerial requirement for accountability can be perceived by academics as intrusion or scrutiny by management of their work. High-level academic endeavour normally operates on the basis of a self-motivation to achieve. Academics can view management objectives around change
and accountability as little more than low level technical-rational interference. And few are more capable than academics to exercise Lipsky’s ‘street level bureaucracy’ as front-line implementers of policy. Trowler (1998) provided a further insight into the operation of organisational culture in the three arenas characterised as the front of stage public forum, back of stage dealings and under the stage rumour. Trowler’s analysis provided greater clarity on what is happening within the street level bureaucracy. The growth in internal and external QA has the potential to move the focus and control of quality process away from front-line academic staff towards managerial preoccupations (Harvey and Knight 1996). Newton’s research used interviews to explore specific tensions identified between management and academic perspectives over a longitudinal five-year study. My study applied the Delphi Approach, a combination of questionnaires and interviews, to explore these tensions identified by Trowler.

Following on directly from Newton’s research, Cartwright (2007) carried out a detailed study of the views of six academics, two of whom held quality management roles and responsibilities at institute level. This study considered the question of academic and management engagement with the ‘quality discourse’, the extent to which quality systems enhance education provision and links between quality procedures and other procedures. In the intervening period between the Newton and Cartwright studies, other significant studies by Blythman (2001) and by Carmichael (2001) confirmed the negative attitudes of academics to QA previously identified by Newton. Cartwright’s research concurs, revealing “a considerable amount of scepticism among academic staff who formed part of this research about the quality processes operated by their respective universities” (Cartwright 2007, p.299). His research confirms a mismatch between institutional QA rhetoric and the operational reality of QA that merits exploration through examination of the perceptions and tensions relating to the staff groups involved. In exploring the research questions, my research addressed the need for individual depth studies by carrying out individual depth interviews with senior institute managers and senior QA managers, similar to Cartwright and to Newton, to explore management and QA professionals attitudes to academic or other staff group perspectives.

This current study tests a number of the perceptions and tensions identified by Newton, with reference not only to academic’s perceptions but to the perceptions of managers, administrators
and student services staff as distinct identifiable group cultures or identities within Higher Education. It is noteworthy that studies such as Newton’s and Cartwright’s, which predominantly represent an academic as opposed to a managerial perspective, tend to employ a phenomenological over a positivist view and qualitative methods such as interviews over quantitative methods. By using mixed methods, surveys and interviews, the current research addressed the potential impact of methodological imbalance on the research. Use of a large-scale survey questionnaire supported quantitative analysis of views expressed qualitatively in previous studies and also removed some of the over emphasis on the individual views of small numbers of research subjects so that the findings of the research are more representative within the Irish context. It is noteworthy that the studies quoted above were carried out in response to the government agenda for fiscal and educational reform of Higher Education in the UK, an agenda that progressively figured more in the thinking of the HEA and figured less in the thinking of QQI in the Irish context.

5.4 Management Perceptions and Tensions

Deans of faculties and Heads of academic departments represent a grouping whose culture and identities fluctuate at the margin of academic leaders and corporate managers (Harman 2002). The resulting impact of divided identities and divided loyalties on values and attitudes have been well documented (Moses & Roe 1990; Tucker 1992; Wolverton et al. 1996; Sarros et al. 1998; Winter 2009; Whitchurch & Gordon 2010). Harman confirms that despite the changing context and roles, the background of deans and heads changed little from 1977 to 1997, except for a declining research track record of occupants of those positions. Rather than being seen as a weakness, QA in Higher Education requires this bi-focal ability in management to see through a management and an academic lens simultaneously. By facilitating research participants to self-identify this research avoided assumptions regarding attitudes and identity solely based on job title.

5.5 Administrator Perceptions and Tensions

Considering the importance of the support roles played by administrators in Higher Education and the impact they have on organisations, research in this area is scant. Wienke (1991) argued that this lack of research itself reflected the “underlying tension between academic staff and non-
academic staff in Higher Education institutions. Lindsay (1995) posited that strengthening of the administrative structures in Higher Education created a rival source of power to academic authority. Kogan (1999) contended that there is a fundamental tension between the intellectual non-conformity culture inherent in the collegium model, which prioritises the search for truth, and the conformist administrative culture concerned primarily with operational efficiency and public accountability. Differences in progression systems, conflicting identity with institution or discipline and differences in work patterns and workplace expectations all serve to create distinctive administration and academic identities or cultures within Higher Education.

Whitchurch (2004) spoke of a “repositioning” of professional administrators in the United Kingdom to regard themselves not as administrators but as managers. A similar evolution in administrator identity was noted in the United States, with Rhoades and Sporn (2002) coining the term “managerial professionals.” One needs to be aware when reading American research literature that the same word administrator is sometimes used in that research to identify both what European researchers designate as management or administration. The research question in this research study explores this question of administrator or manager identity, through self-verification of identity.

Administrator perceptions and tensions in Higher Education were the subject of a paper by Dobson (2000), an academic administrator from Monash University in Australia. Dobson wrote of the perceptions and tensions of a binary divide in Higher Education staffing between academics and administrators. Speaking from the perspective of the administrator, Dobson referred to the antipathy many academics appear to have to administrators and other general staff, a ‘them and us attitude’. Administrators and general staff account for more than a third of the staff in Higher Education (DEETYA 1997). Yet analysis of the Dawkins White Paper on Higher Education and other government publications confirmed that academic staff were the focal point and other staff “may be taken for granted or may not be viewed as critical to the work of their employing organisations” (Dawkins 1988; Conway 1995). Dobson’s paper provided insightful international comparisons that identified cultural distinctions in the relationship between administrators and academics and confirmed corresponding perceptions and tensions.
A questionnaire-based study of 1,281 administrators by McInnis (1997) explored the perceptions and tensions between administrators and academics from the administrators’ perspective in more detail. McInnes confirmed a perception among administrators of a lack of respect from academic staff for the work of administrators and a lack of acknowledgement, as the most prevalent source of tension and potential for everyday conflict. A second source of tension documented by McInnes “concerns differences in attitudes towards control and regulation of work,” (McInnis 1997, p.9). This helps to explain a tendency among administrators to favour more accountability and performance measurement of the work of academics. McInnis (1998) used a follow up survey to examine differences in values, perceptions and tensions between academics and administrators.

My research took cognizance of these finding and included administrators and student services staff in the collaborative, integrated QA process that acknowledged the different groups working and contributing to QA within Higher Education, including academic quality.

A quote from Dobson summed up an administrators’ perspective succinctly:

“It is probably fair to say that most general staff both ‘know their place’ and realise that their role is not the ‘main game’, but perhaps some academic staff haven’t caught up with the fact that a professional general staff does much to support and to enhance the student experience at university,” (Dobson 2000, p.210).

Clark (2004) posited a new role for administrators as “professionalised clusters of change-oriented administrators working in partnership with academics and not at their service as in the past” (Clark 2004, p.176). Clark argued that “maturing entrepreneurial universities develop a bureaucracy of change as a key component of their character” (Clark 2004, p.176). This research defined that bureaucracy of chance as a collaborative, integrative force that supported QA and the central academic endeavour of Higher Education.

### 5.6 Student Services Perceptions and Tensions

Student Services is an aspect of Higher Education provision that grew significantly in Ireland in recent years. Growing staffing in this grouping reflected changes in public policy on access, increased competition, requirements of international students and growing consumer expectations. Policy objectives to widen participation rates generally and among specific target groups created
a growing need for student supports and services. As a relatively new grouping in Higher Education there is as yet limited research available on this student services group culture and identity. However, the importance of student supports and services to differentiation of Higher Education offerings was increasingly evident.

The policy support for access is embodied in the student services identity. Tension between this access agenda and the primary academic agenda can be challenging. For example, additional learning supports for access must address disadvantage without providing advantage over other students. Equity and inclusion suggest that the rich student or academically capable student is no less entitled to support than any other student. Supporting access works when mainstream programmes, awards and opportunities become accessible, not when tailored learning journeys are constructed that lead nowhere beneficial for the learner. Finally, even within the access agenda the norms of social prejudice, such as prejudice against the Travelling Community and refugees, do disappear because the policy alone says so.

### 5.7 Tensions in Policy


Perceptions and tensions are informed by the broader context of policy and practice in Higher Education. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 was of primary importance as a roadmap of policy and determinant of future practice (HEA 2011). It proposed transformative changes in Irish HE, particularly through the creation of a new sector of Technological Universities.
(TU) to replace the Institutes of Technology. At the time of writing this transformation is ongoing, with significance for public perception of the HE system, tensions around the funding model for universities going forward and concerns with regard to the capacity of the new TU sector to fulfil the wide-ranging functions set down in the Technological Universities Act (2018), particularly in relation to research, academic regulations and QA. Also relevant to the tensions in policy was the work of Gidley et al (2010) on quality in Higher Education spanning the theory and practice divide and the wider education debate about Higher Education policy and practice (Coolahan 2003).

5.8 Administrator-Management-Academic Nexus

The interface between administrators, managers and their academic colleagues has been described as a delicate social contract of the type espoused by the 17th century philosopher Locke and by Rousseau in the 18th century (Locke 1690). Whitchurch’s (2004 & 2005) seminal work confirms that there has been considerable attention to academic culture and identity in the literature. Three paradigms in Higher Education management defined by Susan Weil (1994) remain relevant. Managerialism in Higher Education has been well documented in the literature (Deem, 1998; Middlehurst, 2000 & 2004; Prichard 2000). Harman’s (2002) study across the binary divide of academics in Australia is relevant to this research, located as it is within a technological university type institution. Dobson (2000 p204) wrote about the “them and us attitude”, further reflected in Conway and Dobson’s (2003) conclusion that the administration and managerial cultures realise that they are not the main game (Conway and Dobson 2003). Dearlove (1998) reflected on the traditional perspective of the Don and collegiate control. Research papers by Lockwood (1996), McInnis (1998), MacMaster (1999), Newton (2000), Cartwright (2007) and Lipsky’s (1980) classic work on street level bureaucracy also support the relevance of the collaborative approach to QA proposed in this research.

Higher Education in Ireland has transitioned to the ideas and practices of “New Public Management”, changing the relationships between different constituencies within the Higher Education environment (Exworthy and Halford 1999; Broadbent et al. 1997). Pollitt (2003) studied this change through international comparative analysis and set out the key elements of New Public Management (NPM). Underlying this change in internal governance and management of Higher
Education institutions was the external influence to “bring industrial and business management structures and decision-making processes into the Higher Education sector in order to create greater efficiency and effectiveness in the operation of universities and colleges” (Middlehurst 2004, p.264). Resource constraints management provided a range of tools that can effectively leverage control and power away from academic managers and academic units towards centralised control. Negative perceptions of a growing “managerialism” can precipitate trust issues between the centralised management and the academic community they manage (Deem et al. 2001). McNay (1995) provided a compelling analysis of the change process in organisational cultures, with the pendulum swinging from the traditional collegiate culture, through a more bureaucratic culture, towards an executive led corporate culture and ultimately towards an enterprise culture. This topology of organisation change culture still provides a useful filter through which to understand Higher Education organisations and was reflected in the categorisation of staff roles used in this research. Clark’s (1998, p.xiii) conclusion that Higher Education “has entered a time of disquieting turmoil that has no end in sight” supports the value and validity of McNay’s earlier research. Clark went on in later work to espouse the entrepreneurial model of Higher Education, pointing out the importance of “transforming elements and sustaining dynamics to create a steady state of institutional change” (Clarke 2004, p.178). While academic culture acknowledged this steady change and pointed out its overburdening consequences for academics, there remained a reluctance to devolve tasks and delegate responsibilities to administrators and managers (Henkel 2000; Prichard 2001). Similarly, from the manager perspective both Scott and Clark have commented on the cultural identity issues relating to supporting corporate and academic interests, irrespective of the legitimacy or logic in the response. Lauwerys (2002) argues that the dilemma of working in environments and roles that are both cooperative and competitive between internal constituencies needs to be resolved, suggesting a break with the traditional administrator identity in favour of a clearer professional manager identity. Whitechurch (2004) supported the argument for needing to change language to reflect changing reality. She suggested language change from Collegium to Community, Bureaucracy to Service, Corporation to Reputation and Enterprise to Partnership. Bassnett (2004) contended that cultural change was already taking place at the administrative-academic interface, with increased dialogue across this traditional boundary.
5.9 Conclusion

This chapter explored the identity nexus in Higher Education. The perceptions and tensions extant between the different cultural identities in higher experience were set out through the literature review. This literature formed the rationale behind the research questions and the approach to answering those research questions. The research aimed to move beyond the values, perceptions and tensions in the literature to consider a cooperative approach to this reality.

Reflecting on the identity nexus in the literature and from my research it was evident that the different staff identity groups needed more opportunities to work collaboratively than the structures and processes in many Higher Education organisations currently supported. A widening remit for enterprise, community engagement, online provisions and internationalization require the identity nexus in Higher Education to change to better support cooperation, integration and participation by the different staff groups.

Over the course of the last three chapters and this chapter four key subsets of literature relevant to this research were reviewed. In broad terms, this literature review spanned:

- Literature on quality management in general
- Literature on quality assurance in Higher Education
- Literature exploring the management-academic nexus in Higher Education
- Literature on policy and QA practice in Higher Education.

In the next chapter, Chapter 6, the conceptual framework that underpinned the research approach is delineated.
Chapter 6: Conceptual Framework, Epistemology and Ontology

6.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the conceptual framework underpinning understanding of the research approach and data. Consideration is also given to epistemology and researcher ontology. The emerging recognition of organisational culture as a central concept of organisation operation is considered. Culture itself was too broad a concept to provide a supportive conceptual framework for this research. Yet I was able to build my conceptual framework around culture, without ignoring other components of organisation, such as power, authority, hierarchy and structure. The focus is on the less formalized culture aspect of organisation.

An initial examination of organisation culture enabled me to focus on staff group subcultures. I discerned managerial culture, academic culture, administration culture, student services culture and student culture influences within the HE organisation. These subcultures were used to interpret and understand the differences in articulation of quality assurance by the different groups. The subculture interpretation in turn helped explain the differences in behaviour that I was experiencing at organisation operations level.

The framework of staff group subcultures was still not sufficient to explain all the perceptions and tensions I witnessed in the organisation. Two further components were needed to make the conceptual framework complete. Firstly, I needed to distinguish the behaviours within the organisation between explicit and implicit aspects of culture. Arendt (1998) refers to the objective element of culture and the subjective orientation of culture. I needed a way of capturing the difference between formal and informal behaviour in order to be more explicit regarding “the social and cultural activity of the process” (Berman and Smyth 2015). Secondly, I found it necessary to separate a managerialist interpretation of organisation from the experience of working autonomously, collegiately or through a group identity that was closer to the day to day experience of many staff than the formalized managerial perceptions of the organisation, its values and how it worked. The diagram below captures these aspects of the organisation culture. Acknowledging
different aspects of the organisation, the organisation culture diagram draws a perforated line between the objective elements of organisation culture that compose the formalism of a managerial perspective and below the line the more subjective orientations of culture that are more intrinsic to the organisation and more persistent over time.

![Diagram of organisation culture](image)

**Figure 6.1 – Formal and Intrinsic Aspects of Organisation Culture**

The conceptual framework chosen supports the research and the research methodology set out in Chapter 7 and helps to derive meaning from the data analysis in order to address the research questions. It aligns with my ontology and epistemology and my research questions addressing different staff groups, the process of quality assurance and the approach taken through my research methodology to ensure the QA system reflected a collaborative approach that bridged the aspects of separation identified above in the conceptual framework. Alternative conceptual frameworks were also considered (see section 6.10).
6.2 Organisation & Culture

Gerstner (2009, p.161), CEO of IBM, asserted that:

“Until I came to IBM, I probably would have told you that culture was just one among several important elements in an organisation’s makeup and success, along with vision, strategy, marketing, financials and the like……I came to see, in my time at IBM, that culture isn’t just one aspect of the game, it is the game. In the end, an organisation is nothing more than the collective capacity of its people to create value.”

Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks, concurred with Gerstner’s view and stated that “The relationship we have with our people and the culture of our company is our most sustainable competitive advantage,” (Harris 2013, p.5). David Cummings, Co-Founder of Pardot, echoed Schultz’s words, stating that “Corporate culture is the only sustainable competitive advantage that is completely within the control of the entrepreneur,” (Paton 2015). Jack Walch, CEO of General Electric, was of a similar view, stating that “Soft culture matters as much as hard numbers” (Welch & Welch 2012). Organisations that look for more than the general norms of “performance to standard” and “fit for purpose” definitions of quality and strive for “excellence” or high performance, understand the importance of engaging their people.

Himsel (2014, p.165) defined organisational culture as norms and values manifesting as “the way things are done around here.” According to Himsel, “cultures aren’t dictated from above, nor do they just mysteriously emerge. Instead they arise as employees have common experiences and develop a shared view” (Himsel 2014, p.165). This reflects my experience that while organisational culture is formed around organisation leadership, strategy, values, vision and mission, the subcultures within the organisation form around role identities and staff group identities that are captured in the framework for this research.

Risk management frameworks, such as ISO31000, have until recently ignored culture risk. Wasserman and Sibold (2017, p.526), suggested that “one risk that goes unnoticed within organisations is organisational culture risk……the risk that an organisation’s culture and subcultures pose to the entire organisation.” The culture risk is most evident in organisations which descend into disfunction. These organisations continue to hold a stated vision, mission and values, which are at odds with behaviour and values operating within staff groups in the organisation.
Wasserman and Sibold confirmed that Congruence Models and Design-Align-Manage (DAM) Frameworks within business consultancy are evolving specifically to address the growing recognition of the centrality of organisational culture to high quality performance. The conceptual framework for this research, embracing culture, subcultures, the managerial divide and encompassing the objective, formalised elements and the subjective or informal orientations of an organisation, aids our understanding of how the human-organisation interface functions in HE.

Actors and actions within organisations are complex, a combination of serving organisation interests and actors own interests. There is an interplay of interests between organisation structures, governance, culture and processes on the one hand and staff actors, agency, values and perceptions on the other. Similarly, there is complexity within organisation management and a balance to be maintained between top-down management, self-organisation and consultation. This is particularly the case in the context of Higher Education management culture and collegiate culture. Examining the language used in the organisation, through discourse analysis, can help one to appreciate the different understandings of norms and competing ideas. However, the complexity of the social process in organisations cannot be reduced to understanding at the discursive level only. Organisational culture is intrinsically political. What is said in or by an organisation rarely captures the importance of informal processes, personal relationships and departmental influences within the culture of the organisation.

6.3 Dimensions of the Conceptual Framework

Becher and Trowler (2001) examined Academic Tribes and Territories in great detail to document academic culture, how academics identify with disciplines and how within disciplines further identity characteristics are defined within even more defined academic interests. By looking beyond these academic tribes to include other staff identities one gets a more holistic view of the organisation. Subculture was a useful concept for explaining many aspects of organisation and staff behaviour.

At a philosophical level, Max Weber, Antonio Gramsci, Clifford Geertz, Theodor Adorno and Stuart Hall all explored the interconnectedness of society and culture. Each of these social thinkers
worked within a framework of thought that focused their ideas to a greater or lesser extent on the industrialization, secularization, urbanization, individualization, control or power lenses on society and culture. Their philosophical views on culture are discussed in more detail in Section 6.4 below.

In his seminal work on economic sociology Weber (1904; 2011) addresses a number of these perspectives in his study of the protestant ethic and capitalism. Weber attributed the emergence of capitalism to the protestant development of secular values that influenced trade, wealth and investment. Schmitt (2011, p.11) developed “a specific concept of cultural governance as a research concept for the humanities and social sciences” that supports culture as a concept for research. A reaction in the academy to the growing influence of positivist epistemology on research activity in the 1970s resulted in the ‘Cultural Turn’, a movement supporting culture and meaning as the focus of research.

The theoretical framework as it emerged from this study and the relevant literature required a formal definition of culture to support the approach taken to engagement and collaboration. Best (2007 p.2) offered a starting point for this definition as, “the social process whereby people communicate meanings, make sense of their world, construct their identities, and define their beliefs and values.” This definition was appropriate to the research and the research questions, in exploring perceptions, opinions, values, beliefs and tensions. However, my definition also needed to capture explicitly the behavioural consequences of “beliefs and values.” General references to “social process” and “their world” are vague. A definition of culture that more closely addressed my research context was “an interpretive framework through which individuals make sense of their own behaviour, as well as the behaviour of collectivities in their society” (Scott and Lane 2000, p.49). This definition captures organisation behaviour and work group behaviour. However, this latter definition does not explicitly reference to beliefs and values referred to in the former definition. I have constructed the following precise definition of culture specific to this research to capture the pertinent aspects of both Best’s and Scott and Lane’s definitions:

*Culture is the social process and interpretive framework through which individuals and groups communicate meanings, make sense of their world, construct their identities, define their beliefs and values, make sense of their own behaviour, as well as the behaviour of collectivities in their society, organisation or identity group.*
The importance of organisation culture as a determinant of perceptions, tensions, interpretations and behaviour was clarified within this framework. Organisational culture is “a complex set of values, beliefs, assumptions and symbols that define the way in which a firm conducts its business” (Barney 1986, p.656). Exploring the expression of this culture in an academic setting is the subject of this research. Poole (2010, p.6) identified “a culture divide between QA specialists and academic staff with regard to what is understood as quality. With the exception of the studies referenced here, there have been few studies on student perspectives on QA and no such studies specific to Ireland (Sarrico & Rosa 2014; Jungblut & Vukasovic 2013; Wiers-Jenssen et al. 2002).

6.4 The Conceptual Depth in Culture

Marianne Weber (1988) relays Max Weber’s view that culture from the perspective of man is a finite segment filled with sense and meaning of the meaningless infinity of world affairs. People bestow sense and meaning within a culture, applicable to a range of changing contexts (Weber 1988). The organisation is one such changing context where people operate as sense makers, responding to regularly changing power dynamics, changing organisation objectives and changing structures from a sense culture that persists through change.

Gramsci considered culture as something that is developed by people. He rejected the notion of social norms or the natural values of society and espoused the making of alliances and compromises as a basis of consent to a specific social order. We can apply this view in the case of this research to the social order making of an organisation. Gramsci held that in society “the struggle between contradictory social and political projects takes place” (Dore 2009, p.719). He postulated two dimensions of the exercise of power by the dominant group, repressive power and seeking consensus of the subordinate groups (Gramsci 1977, p.1576). Gramsci’s views speak to the Higher Education context of competing management and collegiate cultures and of staff groups with competing roles and identities. Understanding the cultural context supports appreciation of the power dynamics at play within the Higher Education organisation.

Adorno saw culture as expressing and reflecting social tendencies and also the preserve of individual subjectivity (Slomski 2016). This duality of social tendency and individualism speaks
to my research, as when staff groups engage with the views of other groups their individuality moved to the foreground and group identity softened. “For Adorno, modern culture is a mass culture, characterized by a socially imposed symbolic unity that obscures class differences behind a facade of levelled democracy,” (Gartman 2012, p.42). My exploration of staff group views sought to explore this symbolic unity of the role group as individuals engaged with the views of other groups.

According to Adorno (2005, p.107) “Whoever speaks of culture, speaks of administration as well, [...] as philosophy and religion, science and art, forms of conduct and mores” are conjoined with the word culture and under “the administrative eye.” Because they engage primarily with people rather than robots or systems, culture and administration are intrinsically linked with administration, described by Adorno as “the inhibited development of culture itself” (Adorno 2005, p.130). Those who administer culture are in a position also to realise something different. So administration is part of culture through reification, the Marxist concept by which social relations and culture are perceived as inherent attributes of the people involved in them. This view supports the thesis of my research that the participants and participant groups in the organisation are intrinsic to quality and QA, the embodiment of the culture and administration of an integrated QA system.

Culture in Higher Education is not singular or uncontested. A paper by Shore and Wright in Strathern’s (2000) edited collection of papers contends that Higher Education collegiate values and negotiated meaning challenge the hierarchical relationships and coercive practices central to managerialism. There is a potential and often real conflict between the concept of academic freedom and the control imposed on academics through audit and accountability culture (Strathern 2000).

Geertz (1973; 2000) supported the focus in this research on organisation culture and subculture, as they shape meaning and values at the individual and group level. Geertz's thick description approach, analysing multiple levels of meaning, has become increasingly recognized as a method of symbolic anthropology, enlisted as a working antidote to overly technocratic, mechanistic means of understanding cultures, organisations and historical settings. Influenced by Ryle (1949),
Wittgenstein (1921), Weber (1904), Ricoeur (1973) and Schutz (1967), this method of descriptive ethnography that came to be associated with Geertz is credited with resuscitating field research from an endeavor of ongoing objectification - the focus of research being ‘out there’— to a more immediate undertaking, where “participant observation embeds the researcher in the enactment of the settings being reported” (Geertz 1973, p.19). Geertz’s view of the researcher as participant is now an established perspective with the “growing recognition that the ethnographer is the scribe as well as the explorer and quasi-insider” (Emerson et. al. 2001, p.352). Within the conceptual framework to support my chosen methodology and research questions, I fully acknowledge my ontology and epistemology as influences of objectivity/subjectivity through anonymous surveys used to quantify cross-organisation views and through qualitative depth interviews used as part of the triangulation of research findings against expert views.

Philosophically, I lean towards a post-modern perspective. There is a need to maintain an openness within our definition of organisation culture that can embrace change and complexity. Because it is so central to human experience, new perspectives on culture arise continuously. Appadurai (1996, p.13) argued for an “adjectival approach to culture, which stresses its contextual, heuristic and comparative dimensions and orients us to the idea of culture as difference”, consistent with the idea of academic tribes and territories. The adjectival descriptors of culture position, cultural norms and beliefs within a spectrum are explored through this research to identify the dominant views on QA as well as the range of views. Mitchell’s (2000, p.16) statement that “culture is politics by another name” is not sufficiently rigorous for this research. It does not capture the mutual respect and natural tension between management, academic and other staff groups.

Organisation culture is contingent on context, events and history and is therefore malleable within a management context. It lends itself well to research in the Higher Education context, where change is constant yet measured. Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, as well as action and practice theories, provide the sociological support for this view. His theory addresses the interface between the seemingly incompatible views of the structuralists, who explain social behaviour in terms of structures constraining behaviour, with phenomenology which focuses on human agency influences on social behaviour. Gidden’s theory “seeks to show how the knowledgeable actions of human agents discursively and recursively forms the sets of rules, practices and routines which,
over time and space constitutes his [sic] conception of structure” (Rose 1998, p.2). This research reflects Gidden’s theory by engaging role groups within Higher Education in the process of defining the QA rules, practices and routines that define the structures within the work environment.

The malleability of culture was examined by neo-institutionalism (Hall & Taylor 1996; Scott 2008). Conformity, routine and institutionalization are characterised as supporting persistence rather than change and reducing the impact of values and norms of human actors within the organisation. Neo-institutionalism seems to dismiss the conflict of interests between organisational actors that is addressed directly by this research as a feature of Higher Education organisations. Not only do these conflicts of interest exist between role groups in Higher Education, their study provides a basis for a more integrated approach to QA.

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, dating back to 1926, sets out the significance of ideas in influencing the way social classes and groups interact. Unlike many other Marxists of his time, Gramsci put culture alongside economics and politics as decisive in class struggle (Coutinho 2012). The hegemony of one group over others has to be considered in the Higher Education context, where the academy has been viewed in the past as holding the dominant position, more recently challenged by managerialism. The neo-Gramscian perspective does not view the power of ideas and concepts as a one-way influence over people and actions, as ideas and institutions mutually frame each other (Boas & McNeill 2004). This interplay of ideas, people and actions presents an opportunity in organisations for collaborative approaches, particularly well-suited to collegiate contexts.

In the Post-Modern era management is challenged to find new ways of engaging with people who work within organisations. Rosenau (1992, p.4) and others help us to see that “governance is a more encompassing phenomenon than government”, moving beyond an exercise of power model to “a communal system of rule on the basis of common convictions.” Government is more closely associated with regulatory powers while governance focuses consciously on negotiating and the “steering of situations by actors” (Hyden et al. 2004, p.12). While acknowledging the continuance of a power dynamic in all but the most idealized, hierarchy-free contexts, we can none the less
continue to strive for Habermas’ ideal of communicative action (Habermas 1981). Communicative action is based on a deliberate process of Communicative Rationality which considers the subject, objective and social to reflect on the language used to express subjective self-expression, propositional truth, or normative value. The conceptual framework of this thesis argues for an important element of collaborative or communicative action within Higher Education as a basis for achieving an integrated approach to Higher Education quality.

Though power and structure are undeniable as socio-cultural drivers and influencers, there is an alternative philosophy of individuality which points to the influence of shrewd individuals and thought leaders in shaping cultural norms and thereby reshaping the dominant structural and power dynamics (Ryde 2007; Prince & Rogers 2012; Atkins 2015). This research is premised on the understanding that in Higher Education in particular power and structure driven perspectives and people driven perspectives have a role to play. A managerialist view of Higher Education emphasises administrative power and control structures as key requirements of efficiency and effectiveness. An academic collegiate model of Higher Education emphasises a people driven perspective. There is potential in the interplay between these two views for adversarial positioning or a more reflective understanding that supports the need for both. The later understanding is at the centre of the integrated approach to QA proposed.

Organisation culture is both tangible and intangible, laden with undercurrents and complexity. In exploring the underlying characteristics of culture, Hall (1997) emphasised the centrality of culture and the cultural revolution of our time. Five central cultural processes were identified: representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation. My research was cognisant of the actors in the organisational context and the interplay of organisation, group and individual values, assumptions and beliefs within the culture. It acknowledged the layering of culture as expressed over the five processes identified. As a study of academic quality assurance, regulation cannot ignore the influence of culture. Hall (1997) concluded that while cultural forms of expression are regulated by other social factors (government, industry) and by different groups of actors, the daily practice of individuals is steered by cultural norms. This underpins the view that individual answers to the research questions arise in a context of organisational and group culture.
Thompson (1997) explored questions of cultural policy and politics, involving struggles over meaning, values, forms of subjectivity and identity that link with this research.

6.5 Culture and Higher Education

This research examined the integration of the collegiate led model and the management led model. That could be construed as enlightened or manipulative dependent on one’s viewpoint and how decision making within this approach operated in practice. The philosophical views on culture in the previous sections of this chapter supported focusing largely on collegiate culture based on inclusion, collaboration and participation of actors within the organisation. Collegiate culture places high significance on equity, academic freedom, flexibility and professional growth (Gappa, Austin & Trice 2007). It supports freedom of thought and expression unencumbered by authority and hierarchy. Value is placed on intellectual authority as much as on the traditional hierarchical authority based on position or role. The researcher was cognizant of the need to be self-aware, recognizing the hierarchical, authoritative and managerial influences in organisations. According to Bang (2004, p.157) “Cultural governance is about how political authority must increasingly operate through capacities for self and co-governance and therefore needs to act upon, reform, and utilize individual and collective conduct so that it might be amenable to its rule.” Hierarchical and managerial authority can in fact be reinforced by a communications strategy of inclusion, and collaboration.

The views and decisions of front-line staff are nuanced beyond visions and objectives espoused and articulated by management. Organisation culture and governance are too multi-layered to be reduced to neat, simplistic models of positive or negative interpretations. Hall (1997) explored the depths of the congruence-complementary and difference-opposition values within regulation and cultural governance.

Operating within ‘strong’ leadership or managerialist paradigms, one might understandably expect a struggle with representative, inclusive, collaborative and participative processes. The vision of strong leader and control culture within managerialism are established norms for arriving at what may appear to be a ‘shared’ sense and meaning within an organisation. Inclusive and representative
cultural models are valuable not just for arriving at shared sense and meaning. They support a plurality of views and expression that help to curtail the extremes of toxic leadership, unfettered managerialism, staff militancy and other self-destructive imbalances within organisations. Maintaining the balance of steering and self-organisation within an academic organisation can be observed in many of the very best Higher Education establishments globally and is often synonymous with attainment of academic quality. Participative decision making has a “positive impact on job performance of academic staff” (Akram & Perkasa 2015; Carroll, Dickson, & Ruseski 2017).

6.6 New Public Management (NPM)

This research examined the social context of culture in managing at the operational or organisational level. The way the research was constructed made it appropriate to reflect on the cultural influence of the doctrine of New Public Management (NPM) in Higher Education. NPM is a doctrine motivated by efficiency and effectiveness that attempts to superimpose or graft a market logic and business paradigm (strategic planning, globalisation, decentralisation, privatisation and partnerships) onto a traditional culture of public service. Aspects of NPM have benefitted public services, such as separation of governance and management to reduce political interference and corruption. A less favorable effect of NPM in Higher Education has been to widen the gap between managerial and organisation level policy making and the operational level. Some academics are sceptical about the role attributed to NPM by management, in governance and in public, seeing culture and power as intrinsically and invisibly connected (McGuigan 2004 & 2009). There is a danger in managerialism of assuming that organisational culture is the reserve of management, “an affair of experts, with citizens at a distance” (Adams & Hoefnagel 2012). Organisational culture exists within and without management, as wherever there are people there will be culture. Similarly, Holden (2006) argued that more research on culture needs to take the voice of the “public” into account. He postulated a tripartite model setting out the different interests of the public, professionals and policy-makers. This research addresses Holden’s call for further research and takes on board Adam’s proposition that the experts, management in this case, need to take a step back and recognise cultural differences and understand the foundations of these differences.
This inclusive approach to QA in Higher Education enabled me as researcher and the organisation to look beyond the immediacy of managerial concerns to question perceptions, values and norms within the organisation so as to develop a more diverse view from within the organisation. Public organisations benefit from acknowledging trends and ideological positions while striving towards more balanced and analytical viewpoints. It is difficult to see how large public sector organisations and services can develop the ‘adaptive resilience’ and ‘resilience thinking’ that are now called for in public accountability, if the underlying diversity of subcultures in the organisation and service are not supported to be collaborative and resilient (Robinson 2010).

Emerson et al. (2012) offer an integrated framework for collaborative governance, elements of which support the framework underpinning this research. Emerson identifies the components of collaboration as system context, external drivers, collaborative dynamics, actions, impacts and adaptation, operating in complex multi-level systems. The difference in this research is that I focused not on the complexity of why people hold differing attitudes, opinions and values but rather what attitudes, opinions and values were held within an organisation and how these differences can be managed within the need for a corporate vision and coherence through a collaborative management process. I moved beyond Ostrom’s (1990) broad definition of governance as a dimension of jointly determined norms and rules to regulate individual and group behaviour by defining that joint determination process in a way that legitimizes differing views. The conceptual framework of this research is consistent with O’Leary’s (2006, p.7) stronger view of governance as the “means to steer the process that influences decisions and actions” and is precisely aligned with Bryson’s (2006, p.49) espousing of “a set of coordinating and monitoring activities” that enables “collaborations to survive” in institutions. Furthermore, the research took on board the formal, consensus-oriented and deliberative criteria of governance espoused by Ansell and Gash (2008).

6.7 Culture and Collaboration

The literature on public administration often espouses collaborative governance as ‘the new paradigm for governing in democratic systems’ (Frederickson 1991; Jun 2002; Kettl 2002). This view is currently playing out in civic society and public administration through the Deliberative
Democracy movement (Fund & Wright 2001; Torres 2003; Sirianni 2009; Nabatchi 2010). Ireland, like many other countries, has seen a shift in public policy towards what Emerson (2012, p.4) terms “governance systems and institutions with greater levels of transparency, accountability and legitimacy” (Henton, Melville and Kopell 2005; Bryson, Crosby & Stone 2006; Nabatchi 2010: Emerson et al. 2012). Despite the relatively widespread enthusiasm in Ireland for such values, it is arguable that the state has not seen the return on investment and improvements in public services that these NPM and collaborative values were headlined to deliver (O’Leary & Vij 2012).

Values of openness, transparency and accountability are at times confused with values of needing universal agreement or the denial of power as a social construct. Studies of collaborative public management enlighten contemporary management practice on the need to strike this balance as sensitively as is practicable (Wright 1988; Agranoff & McGuire 2001; Kamensky & Burlin 2004). In this study I conceptualize the collaborative management paradigm in a process that is cognizant both of the requirement of management in Higher Education to consult and to manage. I propose that this balance can be achieved in ways that “illuminate the drivers, engagement processes, motivational attitudes, and joint capacities that enable shared decision making” (Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh 2012, p.4). My novel approach to collaborative integration is to use the Delphi Method, discussed in detail in the next chapter, to address the role identities, perceptions and tensions that impact collaborative management. In this way my research complements the literature on collaborative processes (Daniels & Walker 2001; Thomson & Perry 2006) and the literature on collaborative public management (Agranoff & McGuire 2001; Cooper, Bryer & Meek 2006; Leach 2006; Emerson & Nabatchi 2015).

What is important from the research perspective is that on the one hand the process is sufficiently detailed, practical and understandable to be useful to the organisation. On the other hand the process needs to be sufficiently generalisable to be of use at least across the specific education sector and ideally to be beneficial across different Higher Education systems contexts, collaborative governance regimes and collaborative dynamics or actions (Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh 2012).
The Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance offered a collaborative process that did not match yet generally mirrored the conceptual process in this research. It provided “a conceptual map by which to navigate the various dimensions, components and elements of collaborative governance” that I could use as a touch point for the research theoretical framework (Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh 2012). By employing the structure of Emerson’s Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance I was able to model my framework with a sufficiently robust Diagnostic Model that can be used to analyse the organisation for the collaborative QA process developed here. If that process were for any reason proving difficult, then my Diagnostic Model provides a checklist of factors effecting drivers, values, beliefs, perceptions, tensions and possibilities that feed into the QA system.
By adapting the collaborative governance framework I was able to document my conceptual framework heuristic and provide a clearer understanding of the dynamics at play within the integrated approach to QA.
Schmitt’s (2011) analysis of governance points to the importance of trust between actors, different actor points of view and views of the process, the degree of orientation towards normative goals and procedural rules. It was important to examine the dimensions and components of my

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<tr>
<td>Elements within the Quality Conceptual Framework:</td>
<td>Organisation Context</td>
<td>Drivers</td>
<td>Group Values &amp; Beliefs</td>
<td>Organisation Values &amp; Beliefs</td>
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<td>· Mutual Trust</td>
<td>· Language</td>
<td>· Securing Endorsements</td>
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<td>· Consequential Incentives</td>
<td>· Mutual Understanding</td>
<td>· Procedural Arrangements</td>
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<td>· Legal Frameworks</td>
<td>· Interdependence</td>
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<td>· Organisation History</td>
<td>· Uncertainty</td>
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<td>· Levels of Conflict/Trust</td>
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<td>· Inclusion &amp; Diversity</td>
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Table 6.1 – Dimensions and Components of the Integrative Conceptual Framework for QA
conceptual framework to understand the elements that comprise the different aspects of my model. Table 6.1 above sets down the elements that one must take into consideration to understand each dimension of the model.

Ansell and Gash (2008, p.550) remind us that “conditions present at the outset of collaboration can either facilitate or discourage cooperation among stakeholders.” Emerson (2001, p.11) asserts that increasing participant diversity “can generate higher levels of conflict and erode principled engagement”, a view that aligns with those of Korfmacher (2000), Steelman and Carmin (2002) and Schlager and Blomquist (2008). Principled engagement to support openness, inclusiveness and representative of relevant interests, is supported by the proposed process (Innes & Booher 1999). If I had included only staff and not students in this research it could be argued that I had not fully embraced Emerson’s advice (2001, p.11) that collaboration be “informed by the perspectives and knowledge of all participants (Ansell & Gash 2008; Carlson 2007; Leach 2006; O’Leary, Bingham & Gerard 2006; Henton 2005). So, there is a conflict between the two principles on managing participant diversity and full participant inclusivity. A sample size of 500 staff within the same organisation provided diversity and inclusivity. Adding the views of 7000 students to ensure full inclusiveness at the cost of over diversification and sample coherence, was a decisive consideration. There is general agreement in the literature that getting the right people involved is key to collaboration (Emerson 2009; Ansell & Gash 2008; Carlson 2007). Whatever hope one might have of cross-institute staff collaboration between staff group identities and cultures, including the views of 7000 students in the formulation of QA policy would have been a challenge. Nonetheless, the principle of full participant inclusivity dictated that the student voice needed to be included. This was achieved by selecting the group of students who had spent the longest time within the organisation and who had the best understanding through experience of the QA processes in operation. That group self-identified as the postgraduate students who had come through the organisation at undergraduate level over four years of study and who were, at a minimum, in their fifth year of study within the institute. Of the seventy postgraduate students surveyed, twenty-two (31%) contributed to the research.

Bardach (2001) explores in more detail the ranges of attitudes, values, interests, knowledge, culture missions and mandates within an organisation that individuals carry with them into collaboration.
One could plumb the depths of these human factors through psychology, psychotherapy, anthropology, cultural studies or organisational behaviour. I used deliberation or candid and reasoned communication as the basis for engagement across group cultures. This approach has been endorsed by the National Research Council (2009, p.35) as “analysis and deliberation.” It provides a mechanism of giving voice across and between group interests to arrive ideally at a shared vision or at least a public judgement on what is common understanding, thus moving towards or arriving at decisions or determinations that are organisation wide (Dukes 2004; Emerson 2009).

Bingham and O’Leary (2008) pointed to the dearth of research on the quality of collaborative determinations. However, the many other documented positive outcomes of collaborative determination, such as shared motivation, trust, mutual understanding, legitimacy and commitment, are arguably a sufficient justification for this type of decision making (Agranoff & McGuire 2003; Leach & Sabatier 2005; Fung 2006; Bryson, Crosby & Stone 2006; Thomson & Perry 2006; Emerson et al. 2009). The Higher Education context had the added advantage of working with a knowledgeable population where collegiality and group empowerment are often pre-established norms. Saint-Onge and Armstrong (2004) underline the importance in high-performance organisations of the ability to effectively transmit high-quality knowledge within and across the organisation.

Innes and Booher (1999, p.415) rightly pointed out that “processes and outcomes cannot be neatly separated because the process matters in and of itself and because the process and outcome are likely to be tied together.” Similarly, one cannot ignore the different organisational and individual agendas that are ever present though not necessarily central to organisational culture (Huxham 2003). By defining common practice and common wisdom as the aims of the collaborative process it is more likely to reach agreement and easier to surface agendas within the collaborative context. It is important to be clear about the intended impacts of the collaborative process and to avoid the confusion identified in the literature when impacts, effects, outputs and outcomes are conflated (Thomas & Koontz 2011; Lubell, Leach & Sabatier 2009). In Higher Education the output may be an agreed set of QA policies and procedures. However, the greater impact of the QA process may be the transformation of the context and complexity by removing uncertainty and aiding the
organisational culture towards a stronger sense of community or collegiality operating within a higher order social and learning ecosystem that supports development and growth at all levels, personal, group and organisation.

Working within a collaborative framework enables the development of innovative learning systems and reflective practice (Argyris & Schon 1974; Schon 1971). The central importance of innovative learning systems and reflective practice to the quality of Higher Education is well established. Argyris and Schon also talk about ‘theory in use’ versus ‘theory in action’ which is relevant in the context of this study.

### 6.8 Innovation and Collaboration in Irish Higher Education

The impact of the external environment on Irish Higher Education institutions in recent times has been considerable. The EC-IMF-ECB Troika Bailout of the Irish banking system was followed by the 10th December 2010 agreement that included Higher Education in the austerity plans. Higher Education saw the Employment Control Framework imposed under the National Recovery Plan 2011-2014, with the loss of 2,246 staff (12%) and a reduction of €1.5bn or 25% in funding, as well as the Public Service Reform Plans for 2011-2014 and 2014-2016.

![Figure 6.4 – Public Service Reform Plan 2014-2016 (Department of Public Expenditure & Reform 2014)]
The January 2011 reforms were set out in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt Report). These reforms included plans for significant system changes, such as the introduction of Technological Universities and Regional Clusters within the Higher Education system. As a result, some of the drivers of organisational culture in Irish Higher Education entered a state of enforced change. New demands for innovative and specific types of developmental engagement with industry, state agencies and communities proved challenging (Turro, Urbano & Peris-Ortiz 2013).

Jassawalla and Sashittal’s (2002, p.43) define an innovative-supportive culture as a “social and cognitive environment, the shared view of reality, and the collective belief and value systems reflected in a consistent pattern of behaviours among participants.” If one accepts this definition then the value of this research in deriving a process for collaborative QA becomes clear. Why, one might query, would we ask everyone in the Higher Education organisation for their input, views and ideas on defining the QA system? A prerequisite for the innovative culture now envisioned for Irish Higher Education is that it “elicits people’s innovation capacity, tolerates risk and supports personal growth and development” (Menzel, Aaltio & Ulijn 2007, p.2). The framework and process proposed here is a Higher Education and collegiate appropriate framework, just as the Competitive Values Framework is appropriate to commercially motivated organisations (Quinn & Rohrbaugh 1983; Helfrich et al. 2007; Martin 2012; Cerne et al. 2012).

Conceptual frameworks do not always transfer comfortably from the commercial sphere to the academic sphere. It was important to be discerning of the fundamental differences. For example, a 2014 survey of innovation in Irish Higher Education institutions, using the Rao and Weintraud (2013) framework designed for commercial firms, found that Irish Higher Education institutions were not generally very innovative and that the Institutes of Technology in particular were lacking in this regard (Zhang, Larkin & Lucey 2015). These findings were at odds with the 2015 HE-Innovate study of Irish Higher Education institutions by the OECD, which used an evaluation framework specifically designed for Higher Education. The relative importance placed on basic research and applied research, on autonomy and external control, on teaching and research for personal development or economic development, impact significantly on an evaluation framework for Higher Education. There is need for checks and balances in the application of social and
economic models, such as the application of a Triple Helix model to government, education and business in Ireland (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff 1997).

Though research models can capture aims, objectives, process, outputs and outcomes, it can be more difficult to define precisely the less tangible context and environmental factors that play a significant role within the organisation. The literature abounds with indepth descriptions of the deified attributes of leadership. Yet there is limited research on some of the less attractive aspects of organisational culture and the effects of power dynamics. Outside the military and political context, the realisation has come late to leadership research that strong leadership can seamlessly mutate to destructive leadership when the personality of the leader becomes less balanced or unconstrained by appropriate governance. Toxic leadership research in Higher Education is very recent, certainly post Enron. The 1990s economic crash, recent rape or consent issues and college admissions corruption in top universities in the USA (Thoroughgood & Padilla 2013) are changing the understanding of leadership to take greater cognizance of power dynamics, corruption and the need for regulation. There is evidence that the adage that power corrupts may indeed be more than cliché.

The context within which this research was carried out was both public sector and highly unionized. So there were multiple regulatory systems in place to mitigate against abuse of power at any level. The significance of trust and positive working relationships between management and staff in such an education environment cannot be overstated (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy 1998). Collaborative processes can support healthy organisation relationships and management.

Trust is often an implied notion in the literature (Pope 2004). It needs to be explicitly stated here as fundamental to a collaborative culture. Justification for this managerial stance is extant in the literature. Coleman (1990) found that organisations that develop positive relationships between management and staff benefit from outcomes such as decreased costs and increased risk-taking behaviour. There was also evidence in the literature of increased motivation from collaboration and more generally for improved communication (Ghoshal & Bartlett 1996; Kouzes & Posner 1993). The importance of trust specifically in Higher Education has been established (Carlisle & Miller 1998; McCormack & Pope 2000).
Trust in this context was defined as “willingness to be vulnerable” to the actions of another party based on the expectation that party will perform an action of importance (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt and Camerer 1998, p.394). Mishra (1996) identifies the specific components of trust as competence, openness, benevolence and reliability. The relationship between administrators and academics is considered to be particularly vulnerable to lack of trust and the resulting effect this has on organisational culture (Deshpande, Farley & Webster 1992; Moorman, Deshpande & Zaltman 1993). On a positive note, in a large scale study of 750 education institutions in the United States by Tierney and Minor (2003), 77% of respondents commented that they believed enough trust existed on campus for decisions to be made, offering faculty voice around decisions on curriculum, general education, admissions and academic standards.

6.9 Checks and Balances in Higher Education

An analysis of Higher Education from a critical perspective might focus only on power, interests and tensions. Over the centuries power within Higher Education has shifted progressively from control by religions to academic guilds, to trustees, to all-powerful presidents, to faculty, to government and recently to include students. Different interest groups at particular points in time decry the dominant power structures in Higher Education as disenfranchising their constituency or interest. Such claims are often couched in the language of not serving the interests of the institution, education or research. As stated somewhat cynically by Kerr (2001, p.134), “the status quo is the only choice that cannot be vetoed.”

Another view of how Higher Education institutions operate would attribute value to their longevity over centuries and their ability to evolve with society and knowledge. Indeed it may well be what some perceive as problematic checks and balances that lends strength to survive, resist or adapt, whichever is most appropriate at the time. Complex cultures and layered structures coupled with the marrying of sectional interests seem to have helped the concept of the university to survive what Birnbaum (2000) described as management fads in Higher Education. Similarly, public policies for Higher Education often tended to be low on consensus and public good interests and high on political ideology and expediency (Taggart & Mingle 2002). The federal principle of subsidiarity, decision making at the lowest possible level consistent with expertise and
accountability, is at the core of a collaborative culture in Higher Education. By supporting change in an orderly manner subsidiarity in decision making strengthens change management.

The need for Higher Education to continuously change and evolve is a given. What can be queried however is the direction of that change and the glorification of change as good in itself (McGuinness 1997; Ashworth 2001). Leadership in Higher Education requires the political savvy to balance the interests and demands of public policy with faculty and organisational culture in a way that achieves for the organisations’ interests as a whole (Trombley 2001).

The literature is rich with case studies on how centralised policy, political and economic pressures brought to bare on Higher Education to force change, have not produced the positive outcomes intended (Pierce and Hagstrom 1983; Berdahl & Schmidtlein 1996; Peterson & McLendon 1998; Greer 1998). For all its apparent flaws and weakness, the concept of shared governance involving academic and administrative leaders, with faculty participation, has often served the Higher Education system well. It is arguable that a system that balances external pressures and internal pressures, faculty and governor interests, public policy and institution interests is a balancing formula that ensures longevity, quality and continued success.

A shared governance model is open to criticism with regard to expertise, discipline, authority and accountability. Yet proposals to replace shared governance with hierarchical leadership or centralised control models of governance would do well to examine the issues of dictatorship, toxic leadership and blind adherence to ideology and strategy that have proved the downfall of many a fine organisation, company, public institution and government. The culture of strong leadership brings its own issues without the checks and balances of participative governance and collaborative behaviours. While there is facility for variations in organisational culture, structures, leadership styles and operating models, the underlying principle of collaboration is central to quality assurance in Higher Education. Tripartide models of governance that provide balance and avoid negative extremes, can work in the positive through participation and collaboration across interest groups. These models, reflected in the IOT system of management and governance, are designed to encourage compromise and collaboration.
Collaborative culture is in itself a change agent, balancing the changing interests of faculty, management and administration with the demands of governance, public accountability and public policy (Keohane 1998). As social institutions serving public needs, the strength of the culture and values of the Higher Education institution influences the extent to which it is equipped to meet those public needs (Zemsky & Wegner 1998). The integrative approach proposed in this research based on collaboration clarifies organisation values and underpins academic quality systems.

An organisational culture based on collaborative or joint effort and shared governance might seem somewhat antiquated since it was first muted by the Association of American University Presidents in 1966 (AAUP 2001). Yet the governance of Higher Education is too important to individuals, society, business and nations to “become an issue rich in confusion, controversy and consternation (Chait 2002). Increased complexity, competition, aspirations, strategic planning and proactive management have complicated the collaborative or shared effort culture (Keller 1997). Add to this the growing demands for accountability, oversight and surveillance of academia from government, courts, public interests, industry, professional bodies, national and international agencies and more recently students and student bodies (Poskanzer 2002; Kors & Silvergate 1998; O’Neil 1997). There is limited space left within Higher Education organisations for the free-flowing autonomy and participation that underpins collaboration.

As the collaborative culture and collegiate approach in Higher Education is eroded, faculty opt out of institution administration and the social contract to focus on taking care of their own interests first (Kennedy 1997; Rosovsky & Ameer 1998). Academic culture is then charged with “rampant individualism” (Taylor 1992; Putnam 2000). The collaborative approach proposed in this thesis helps the organisation guard against the demise of the corporate interest.

The Irish Higher Education academic environment is highly unionized. This may present a difficulty or an opportunity for a collaborative culture, depending on the stance taken by management, unions and staff. Collaboration normally operates through committee structures and through the academic board or senate. The union-management negotiating process runs parallel to this staff-management collaboration, adding to the collaborative culture. Fogg (2001) tells how this duality of representation was debated in Washington State, where it was suggested that
academic staff be asked to choose between collaborative participation in a collegiate structure represented at the academic board or a unionized collective bargaining structure. While this dual representation is not an insurmountable complexity, it raises its head from time to time as a feature of the collaborative culture extant in Ireland.

The views of staff on the strength of collegiate culture in their organisation merits consideration. The Institutes of Technology evolved from Regional Technical Colleges that were formed from component schools of the local Vocational Education Committees (VECs). The VECs were predominantly secondary education providers. Similarly, the academic staff trade union in institutes, the Teachers Union of Ireland, was and remains primarily a second level teachers union. Coming with this pedigree, the evolution to a third level, academic culture has proved challenging for Institutes of Technology. The terms and conditions of employment are commensurate with second level and do not recognize key dimensions and activities of third level work, such as research and scholarship.

Tierney and Minor (2003) report that in a survey of over 3500 senior academics across the United States, nearly 80% confirmed that “shared governance is an important part of my institution.” They identified the “lack of a common language about the role of different constituencies in decision making” as the greatest barrier to collaborative culture. The challenge they identify is how to create a culture of shared governance that enables the institution to compete successfully in the current environment, while holding onto the collegiality and collaborative decision making. Tierney and Minor conclude that the “interaction of individuals and structures can be oriented towards improvement and high performance when an institution’s leaders utilize strategies aimed at organisational redesign rather than structural arguments over one or another decision-making apparatus.” This research does precisely that, defining a cultural strategy and process for collaborative engagement across the organisation, taking account of role group differences to arrive at a common vision and collaborative decisions based on widely held views within the organisation. The four conditions necessary to ensure a collaborative process works are defined in the literature as trust, a common language, walk the talk and developing a core identity (Tierney 2005; Tierney & Minor 2003; Tierney 1999; Clark 1998; Tierney 1998).
6.10 Alternative Conceptual Frameworks

It took time to settle on the conceptual framework above for this research, with alternative conceptual frameworks being considered and important philosophical questions to be answered. At times this journey was like engaging in the debates of Victorian Salons, full of dialogic ideas and frissons of intellectual connectivity. Below I share my struggle to arrive at a conceptual framework for the study of role-identity based on group lenses through which individual views and opinions on quality assurance can be analysed at group level.

In defining a conceptual framework for this research I was intellectually exercised by a basic epistemological question regarding the reliability of social research generally. I needed convincing to the extent that I can argue the objectivity of social sciences research and my study. From a science or engineering paradigm perspective, social science research can be viewed as such a dubious enterprise that my philosophy of knowledge was challenged. How can one justify organizing principles that belong to collections of objectified subjects? There were answers to that question, but the constructs they led to appeared tenuous. Analysis of thinking relies on working to uncover 'who is thinking what and when', a unique person with unique thoughts on unique occasions. Arriving therefore at universality based on thought has a surprising aspect, not one reflecting the kinds of static generalisations of science and the scientific method. While accepting the epistemology and ontology of qualitative research, contemporary critical theory provides a justification for the range of qualitative research methods that is also reflective of the context and limitations of knowledge and the research endeavour (Kincheloe, McLaren, Steinberg & Monzó 2017).

In addressing this epistemological concern I looked to French, German and Anglo-Saxon philosophical perspectives. The French philosopher Deleuze offered helpful insights on examining differences and repetition in data (Deleuze 1990; 1994). Foucault was suggested to me as a way of focusing on power and how it is exercised through structure (Olssen 1999). However, from the viewpoint of this research the “power” analysis can lead to an over rationalisation of organisational and participant behaviour. It is certainly a factor, but not the only consideration and not necessarily definitive where the context or environment may be less contested in terms of power. Foucault
held that structure was central in framing reality (Gutting 2005). My research does not support this view completely, as the data indicates that informal staff groupings as opposed to the formal, recognized, organisational structures also define the basis of identity, opinion and attitudes. The difference in views here stems from one’s construction and interpretation of structure as formal. Foucault also argued that, what can be shown is different to what can be said. My research confirms this view to the extent that it indicates a difference in reality from the formal understanding of the basis of the organisational culture as a single shared viewpoint, often encapsulated in a supposedly shared vision or strategy. This research also uncovers specific views and opinions that one would not have expected from general observation of the coherent operation of the organisation. Within the general semblance of coherence I found contrary and even disruptive views.

Among the German philosophers, Habermas and the School of Critical Theory is often seen as anti-bureaucratic. Yet his focus, as in my research, was on the interface of Knowledge and Human Interest, which was reassuring at least. His work on deliberative democracy is directly relevant to the approach to QA proposed in this study (Fishkin 2011). Heidegger’s ideas on ontology are also relevant as a basis for collaboration between people. Heidegger’s philosophy draws heavily on the work of Dilthey on Hermeneutics and Husserl’s work on Phenomenology. While underpinning this philosophical view, these sources were not particularly helpful as a conceptual framework. Arendt was insightful on the human condition, power, authority and direct democracy, which connects well with my research (Arendt 1998). Her concepts of Communicative Action and Natality are important to the idea of potentiality among people. There are echoes here of the Greek philosophy notions of labour, work and action and how they change at the personal level as they change socially or in the social context. These ideas in particular resonated with this research. Husserl’s Phenomenology addresses this question of the primacy of potentiality or actuality.

Among other perspectives on culture, Hooks (2003; 2014) provided a distinctive social perspective, a multi-faceted critique addressing power, democratic participation, critical pedagogy, feminism and racism. Arendt’s philosophy and political thought offered the distinction between the objective element and the subjective orientation of culture (d’Entrèves 2002; Gottsegen 1994). What these theoretical perspectives had in common was their acknowledgement that culture plays a pivotal role in how people think, behave and interpret their experience.
I found it most natural to approach conceptualization through the work of the Anglo-Saxons, perhaps reflecting my own epistemological heritage. Whitehead’s speculative approach was for a time my favoured theoretical framework, as it sits well with my epistemology and ontology (Whitehead 1985). The reader may have already discerned an overtone of objective realism in my ontology. As a subjective realist, Whitehead (1985) speculated similarly on how we overcome the dualism of subjective and objective. His position is relevant to my findings and whether they are arguably a subjective or objective study, in this case of academic quality.

As a speculative philosopher Whitehead (1985) reframed the subjective so that it is objective in itself. As alluded to above, this is an important question for social sciences research generally. Social sciences research by its nature assumes that an action or utterance at a point in time has persistence and objectivity. Thus, it ignores the experiential issues of change and becoming that are central characteristics of the human condition and that lead to relatively rapid changes in action and opinion. My research indicates that identity, by role and group in this case, may provide one source of objectivity for data and knowledge that otherwise exists in the ever changing subjective.

As an objective realist, I was researching from an ontology of reality as it presents itself to us, as we experience it. At the same time, I am aware of the philosophical views of Barthes (1977) and Foucault (1979) both of whom questioned subjectivity and how through author function I might project subjectivity onto the study. While acknowledging the subjective authorship at its core, I claim a sufficient degree of objectivity through the stability of role identity and experience. While subjective views invariably change, role identity views and experience prove more stable or objective over time.

Intrigued by my affinity to Whitehead I was pleasantly surprised to learn that he practiced at executive management level in UK Higher Education before moving to Harvard as a philosopher. Perhaps his speculative philosophy is easier understood when seen in light of his earlier experience as an academic and senior administrator at the University of London. This existential experience provided another level of consistency with the research I have undertaken. Having worked in the UK university system for a period of seven years my ontology is influenced by seeing the shift to managerialism and undermining of the collegiate in the UK, with negative effect on Higher
Education quality. The importance of the underlying culture in the support of QA should not be underestimated.

6.11 Conclusion

In this chapter, Chapter 6, the conceptual framework for the research study was considered. The difficulties in choosing a conceptual framework were discussed. Reasons for opting for a multifaceted conceptual framework were explained. The framework was then examined in greater detail for its conceptual and philosophical depth. Organisational culture in Irish Higher Education was given further consideration, in particular as it relates to innovation, collaboration and change management. The chapter ended with an in-depth discussion of the epistemological and ontological issues relating to my research and conceptual framework.

Having articulated the conceptual framework that speaks to the research questions of the study, in the next chapter, Chapter 7, the research methodology is set out in detail.
Chapter 7: Research Methodology

7.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the methodological considerations underpinning the research. The application of research methodology in educational research and management research is examined. Theoretical issues pertinent to the choice of research methodology are explored to establish a firm basis for the research design.

While the central focus was on educational management research methods, many of these methods have their origins in the social sciences. Having established the theoretical basis of the research, this chapter applied these considerations to the research design and choice of research methods. The structure and content of the research were matched with the researcher’s approach to understanding and knowledge. Operational decisions on the research process were also set out in this chapter.

7.2 Methodology Debate

For many years there has been a debate within the research community regarding questions of the relative value of quantitative and qualitative research. The ontological position taken in this research is that while “qual-quant” arguments raise significant compatibility questions, the arguments have tended to become absolute. It seems both possible and reasoned within research to acknowledge the continuum of research methods across the semi-pervious divide between interpretivist and positivist approaches. Conceptions of social reality can be objectivist or subjectivist, resulting in different paradigms or ways of looking at the world. Hammersley (2013) details the rationale of a positivist, objectivist view supporting quantitative research that employs hypothesis testing, numerical data, generalization, identification of association and isolation of variables. Cohen et al. (2017, p.14) warn that the notions of “objectivity and objective knowledge are beset with problems” of being a subjective construct, of being a scientific mentality with a restricted view of humans and of ignoring social facts.
This research takes the view that though reality may objectively exist, experience of that reality is subjective, a product of consciousness. I employed this phenomenological approach to examine the QA systems in operation in Institutes of Technology within the statutory Higher Education QA system. Brannen (2017) provides a detailed exposition with examples and cases that support the successful integration of qualitative and quantitative research paradigms into a mixed methods paradigm. Brannen’s inclusion of frank discussion by experienced researchers of their research practice and issues with mixed methods is both illuminating and convincing of the viability of this paradigm.

Creswell and Miller (2000) consider the validity of qualitative research. They define validity of qualitative research as “how accurately the account represents participants’ realities of the social phenomena and the credibility of them” (Creswell and Miller 2000, p.124). Moreover, they clarify that “validity refers not to the data but to the inferences drawn from them.” Hence, the researcher must choose the perspectives or lens through which to validate the study and clarify the paradigm assumption. I was conscious that this case study required appropriate validity procedures to confirm the viewpoints I might take. Creswell and Miller’s table of validity procedures below sets out the options I considered as validity procedures for this study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradigm Assumption /Lens</th>
<th>Post-positivist or Systematic Paradigm</th>
<th>Constructivist Paradigm</th>
<th>Critical Paradigm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lens of the Researcher</strong></td>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>Disconfirming evidence</td>
<td>Researcher reflexivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lens of Study Participants</strong></td>
<td>Member checking</td>
<td>Prolonged engagement in the field</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lens of People External to the Study (Reviewers, Readers)</strong></td>
<td>The audit trail</td>
<td>Thick, rich description</td>
<td>Peer debriefing</td>
</tr>
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Table 7.1 – Validity Procedures Within Qualitative Lens & Paradigm Assumption (Creswell & Miller 2000, p. 126)

In terms of paradigm assumptions or lens, for validity I positioned the research lens firmly in the Post-positivist or Systematic Paradigm above. This then dictated the validity lenses to be used for
the case study, namely triangulation, member checking and the audit trail. By using the Delphi Method I was able to search for convergence between different staff groups and between their views and those of the expert group to achieve two separate stages of triangulation. The repeated rounds of questionnaires allowed, member checking, where the data and interpretation were returned to the participants for them to confirm the information. Finally, semi-structured interviews with an expert group provided an audit group validity procedure, as individuals external to the study itself were formally brought into the study to examine the narrative data and provide feedback on its credibility.

Yardley (2008, p.250) argues that “the key reason for taking all steps suggested above to show that your research is valid is so that it can have an impact” such as direct practical application or providing a theoretical and better understanding of something. In evaluating the complex QA system I chose to study a well-defined community within one organisation. This Higher Education organisation community had immediate knowledge of the QA system referred to in the study and were typically well informed on the subject matter of the research. The system of QA in the subject organisation was already inclusive to some extent of all staff groups, through an extensive subcommittee and working group participative structure. While there were variations in the individual level of staff interest and involvement in the QA system, all staff surveyed had more than a superficial understanding of the QA systems and operations under review. A comprehensive study of the aims, objectives and research questions set out above for all thirteen providers throughout the Institutes of Technology sector would be an interesting further development of this study. However, it was important to establish a baseline study that would facilitate this widening in scope across institutions with different QA systems and organisational cultures. Limiting the scope of this study to one organisation facilitated a more indepth analysis of the chosen organisation context that was inclusive of all participants within the organisation who engage with the QA system. This integrative process developed by this research is an output that is transferable to different contexts. While the specific findings of the study are limited in their strict generalisability beyond the case organisation and wider validity for the IoT sector, the study could be replicated in other Higher Education institutions to provide a system wide study.
The Delphi process findings of this research were tested against the views held by QA experts and management through in-depth interviews. An informed student community view on the QA findings was more difficult to capture, yet essential to ensure that all internal stakeholder groups had been consulted. While the expertise of the student community in Academic Quality Assurance (AQA) might be challenged, it would be insufficient to exclude the student voice based on an employee/non-employee distinction where all other internal stakeholders had been included. As the postgraduate students had the most experience and knowledge of AQA among students of the institute and had proven academic ability, this group was selected to represent the student voice and viewpoint.

The research topic and approach were chosen to take full advantage of my ease of access to the QA expert community and the staff groupings. The importance of this research rests in the context of the re-visioning and restructuring of Higher Education and in an effort to strip away QA assumptions and rhetoric to establish the fundamental principles, beliefs and values at play among the different identity groups within Higher Education.

To justify the limitations of this study, I would draw attention to the context and pace of change in Irish Higher Education and particularly in the area of quality systems. In this regard, it is worth noting that the five-year institutional review process operated in Ireland and Europe runs on a ten-year cycle in the United States of America. In light of the pace of change in Europe it might be argued that a series of snapshots of specific QA system operations are more valuable than a longitudinal study as assessments of ongoing developments at a point in time during the rapid and systemic levels of change envisioned in the 2011 National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030.

Ragin (2014) proposes an alternative approach for using mixed methods in the social sciences, the Comparative Method. This approach seeks for a greater degree of formalising the use of mixed methods using an algebraic, boolean-based approach to qualitative analysis. Ragin critiques traditional variable-oriented comparative studies in social sciences research because the resulting comparisons can disguise historically defined, culturally defined or geographically defined limitations, particularly in international studies. I found Ragin’s arguments for the reliability of a locally based case-oriented approach convincing. He confirms the potential
strengths of combining qualitative and quantitative data.

The above paradigm analysis influenced my research design supporting an exploration of differing managerial, administrative, academic, student support and student views on how QA systems operate in practice and the operation of the statutory QA systems in a single Institute of Technology. The research included the application of the survey approach early in the study to establish the thematic areas for investigation later in the semi-structured in-depth interviews for deep exploration. The Delphi method was used to research QA expert, management and participant communities’ perceptions of QA management, measurement and performance. Analysis of the surveys demonstrated that there is a significant level of agreement across all staff sub-cultures and role groups with regard to QA and QA Systems. These findings from the surveys were explored in the semi-structured depth interviews with expert informants. The interviews confirmed general consensus on academic QA (AQA) and revealed where current QA and management thinking differs from the staff views discerned through an integrated AQA process. Student views were also surveyed to calibrate their level of agreement with staff views on AQA. This is discussed in detail in the conclusions in Chapter 10.

7.3 Issues in Research Methodology

The appropriateness and validity of the transfer of methodology across disciplines between social sciences and management is justified below. The research methodology employed could draw on a positivist or a phenomenological approach. Alternatively, the research could be supported by a mixed methods paradigm. These philosophical underpinnings of research methodology were compared to confirm the epistemological world-view assumptions on which the research is based.

Management theory is founded on the application of research methods adopted from scientific and social research. The validity of method transfer can be justified where the general conditions of the research areas involved are comparable (Berg 2004). Where the content and nature of the research varies from the original discipline in which the method was developed, the transferability of methods requires justification. For example, the case study method that was established in medical science was later transferred to human sciences such as educational research. The validity
of a further transfer of the method to corporate comparison studies is not self-evident. Thus, research and this study must begin from the point of methodology justification.

A difficulty for education researchers is that as new methods have established and strengthened their claims to validity, education research has simultaneously experienced a ‘fragmentation into factions and specialisms’ (Tinker & Lowe 1982). Even in defending the validity of education research, experts in the area acknowledge the negative effect of this fragmentation (Gill & Johnson 1997). At the EuroSoTL Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Conference in Cork University in June 2015, the keynote speaker and President of ISSOTL, Professor Kathy Takayama, shared the concern that after decades of educational research and development it remained challenging to be definitive regarding the nature and scope of research on teaching and learning, with many competing perspectives, theories and methods. Yet education researchers can justify claims to scientific validity when their research is based on ‘the systematic and objective process of gathering, recording and analyzing data’ (Walker 1996). This point further emphasizes the importance of a clear and robust research methodology to underpin educational research.

7.4 General Methodology Considerations

Though aiming to be as objective as possible, researchers hold a subjective epistemological viewpoint and make assumptions about the nature of the world. Such fundamental decisions as the subject matter to be investigated and the methodology to be employed are linked to the researcher’s viewpoint or ontology, discussed in Section 6.9 of the previous chapter. Core beliefs regarding the best means of uncovering evidence vary. Researchers can employ qualitative or quantitative methods to explore research questions, define research objectives and arrive at conclusions. As a mature researcher I am distinctly aware of the influence of thirty years working in Higher Education on my views and its influence on my choice of research methods relevant to this experience. As an “insider” or endogenous researcher I was conscious of the need to be conscious of subjectivity and bias, while also appreciating the benefits of researcher access to data and respondents and being culturally literate about the organisation. There was also the benefit of the research having impact, with findings that influence both organisation policy and practice (Trowler 2011).
The choice of research methods depends not only on the nature of the study and discipline, but at a more fundamental philosophical level on whether the researcher adopts a positivist, objectivist, empirical approach or an interpretive, phenomenological, subjectivist approach (Easterby-Smith 1997; Gummesson 2000; Cresswell 1994). A researcher may have an intellectual preference for ‘hard facts’, orderly procedures and measurable data on the one hand (positivist approach) or may take a holistic view including subjective experience data and imprecise data in the study in order to reveal deeper truths (phenomenological approach). The main characteristics of the two paradigms at their point of extreme contrast can be summarized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positivist Approach</th>
<th>Phenomenological Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Core Values/Beliefs</strong></td>
<td>• The world is external &amp; objective.</td>
<td>• The world is socially constructed and subjective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The observer is independent of the world.</td>
<td>• The observer experience is part of what is observed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Science is value-free.</td>
<td>• Science is driven by human interests and involves subjective judgements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Focus</strong></td>
<td>• Focus on facts.</td>
<td>• Focus on meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Generalisation and abstraction from facts.</td>
<td>• Study the specific and concrete, with some generalisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Seek causality and fundamental laws.</td>
<td>• Seek to understand and interpret what is happening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reduction of phenomena to elements or components.</td>
<td>• Examine the totality of each situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Deduce hypotheses from the literature for empirical testing.</td>
<td>• Draw conclusions by induction from data and observations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Methods</strong></td>
<td>• Measurable data from experiments, surveys, interviews, archives and databases.</td>
<td>• Using multiple data methods to identify different perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Large data samples.</td>
<td>• In-depth or longitudinal study of small data samples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Statistical Analysis.</td>
<td>• Qualitative methods that address the meaning, not frequency, of phenomena in the social world.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.2 – *Positivist and Phenomenological Paradigms in Contrast*  
*(based on Easterby-Smith 1991; Gummesson 2000; Hinfelaar 2004)*
Decisions on research strategy relate the philosophical perspectives above to considerations of the nature of the problem to be investigated. In this meeting of theoretical underpinnings with research process logistics, the objectives of the research need to be defined as explorative, descriptive or explanatory (Burns et al. 1995). Exploration of new ideas and insights may result in grounded theory explanation (Glaser & Strauss 1987) or well-defined hypotheses (Yin 1994). A descriptive study may be used for statistical analysis, for pattern analysis (Strauss & Corbin 1990) or for case studies (Yin 1994; Stake 1995), to establish understanding without aiming to generalize or define a model. Explanatory research aims to determine cause and affect relationships in statistically significant correlations between variables. The context of the data is removed to concentrate on the research questions (Miles et al. 1994). These three differing types of research can be used with both philosophical approaches, whether the aim is positivist, quantitative measurement or phenomenological deepening of insight (De Ruyter et al. 1995).

An alternative view argued by some methodologists was that it is possible “to construct a continuum of research methods, as a heuristic device, that initially allows us to differentiate between different methods in terms of the various philosophical stances and logics they bring to bear in conducting research” (Gill & Johnson 2010, p.64). The continuum ranges from the nomothetic methods associated with the natural sciences that emphasise systemic protocols and techniques, to ideographic methods that emphasise the analysis of subjective accounts. While Gill and Johnson have identified that this continuum aligns well with the positivist and phenomenological approaches, what is less clear is how a distinction holds for human sciences such as educational research, where combining the application of qualitative and quantitative methods in what are termed ‘mixed methods’ is widespread. In thinking about the research questions set down for this study it was evident that a mixed methods approach was needed. As my research outputs quantify perceptions and tensions, the deeper meaning of the quantities reflect the experiences of staff groupings within a qualitative Higher Education context and culture.
7.5 Choosing a Research Strategy

“Science (is) rigorous observation and conceptualisation – thinking,” (Pascale 1986).

In developing a research strategy, I made choices between theoretical work based on ideas, concepts, reflection, study of the literature, desk research and discourse or empirical study based on observation and data collection. Theoretical work relies heavily on empirical data. The empirical approach is in turn based on a theoretical foundation of positivist, quantitative research or interpretive, qualitative research or on a critical thinking approach such as is derived from the work of Habermas and the Frankfurt School of Critical Sociology (Murphy 2013).

The appropriateness to the study of the phenomenological approach in dealing with data of a qualitative nature using questionnaire and interview techniques within the Delphi Method needs explanation. Applying the paradigm characteristics framework in Table 7.1 required a core beliefs assessment. My choice was between a positivist objective, external world view, with the observer independent of the observation and values-free research or a phenomenological socially constructed, subjective world view driven by human interests and the researcher as party to the observation. The later philosophical perspective seemed a better description of the research context and my role within the research. Similarly, the research focus was not on causality or the testing of hypotheses. The focus was on shared meaning and uncovering what happening by developing ideas through induction from the totality of the research context. Within the range of research methods the theoretical divide between positive and phenomenological paradigms did not hold completely, resulting in mixed methods being used. On the one hand the research needed measurement across a large sample size. On the other, I needed to use multiple methods to establish the different views of the role groups within the organisation (Easterby-Smith 1997).

A review of the philosophy of research is set out in texts by O’Connor (2003), Myers (1997), Neuman (1997; 2003), Walsham (1995), Lincoln (1994). If the decision is to adopt a qualitative approach to a research study, then Marshall and Rossmann (1999) provide a comprehensive exposition on the design of qualitative research methods. By collating the requirements of this research with the ontology of the researcher it has been possible to decide on a predominantly phenomenological perspective for the research, with consequent choices of research methods to
be employed (Maykut et al. 1994; Quinn Patton 1990). The comparison of research philosophies set out below has assisted the decision on research strategy.

The strategic objectives of this research are best described in terms of a descriptive study leading to critical analysis of the data. Rather than attempting to ‘prove’ a set of predetermined hypotheses, the research takes a phenomenological approach to deepen insight into the operation of QA systems in Irish Higher Education, with specific reference to QA in the Institutes of Technology. The strategy is distinguished by the nature of the above problem statement. It adopted a loosely coupled approach to research control and focused on current rather than past events (Yin 1994; De Ruyter 1995). Having established this theoretical basis for the research, decisions on research design and methodology could be addressed.

Brown and Lukenchuk (2013) offer explanation of how different theoretical interpretations provide the justification for using particular research methods. Empirical studies lend themselves to experimentation, uncovering causal relationships that support prediction and control based on quantitative analysis. This was not a good match for the research questions I was addressing. Pragmatic research focuses on what works, trial and error and supports practitioner research. While closer to my research context and supporting mixed methods, I was seeking more to understand than to manipulate staff behaviour. Interpretive research focuses on hermeneutic and existential understanding, is phenomenological in nature and supports qualitative studies aimed at meaning-making, a perfect fit for the research questions I was exploring. Critical research support studies of power and ideology, is political in nature and strives to advocate, transform or emancipate. In my context of a conservative, public sector, higher education establishment, a critical study was somewhat of a mismatch for the organisation and for research that aimed to explore integrated, collaborative behaviours. Post-structuralism lends itself to discourse analysis and textual interpretation in qualitative studies. My study was more focused on staff behaviours, belief and tensions than policy, textual or formal positions. It was important to consider these alternative research strategies to confirm that the phenomenological approach was the best fit.
7.6 Research Design: Participants

The view that “quality is everyone’s business” (QIEB) is a view derived from a quote originally attributed to Deming. The QIEB principle is well established in the literature, but rarely extending to QA systems ownership. QA needs to be structured within Higher Education to enable this QIEB desirable attribute of organisation. For QIEB to be a reality organisations’ QA must extend beyond outputs to QA of systems and processes.

In moving from research strategy to research design, one is progressing from theoretical underpinnings and conceptual decisions to operational questions. In a phenomenological study one of the first research design questions is to determine the limits of what or who is to be investigated (Sanders 1982). The ‘what’ question has been defined in general terms in Chapters 1 to 4 as a study of QA systems in the Institutes of Technology. In determining the people to be investigated the selection criteria centred around identification of those who could be expected to hold information on the phenomena being researched. Having determined the research strategy to facilitate loose researcher control and focus on currently evolving events, the importance of identifying the appropriate participants to be investigated cannot be over stated. In this context a targeted sample of 500 who can provide reliable data is preferable to a larger sample with less reliable information. As is often the case in phenomenological studies, it is the quality of the information rather than the quantity that determines the reliability of the study, as “more subjects do not yield more information” (Sanders 1982). Sanders suggested a minimum sample size of six people to be sufficient for a study. This recommendation has been noted in determining the number of needed in the final verification or triangulation stage of the research. this smaller sample of interviewees was convenient for informed consent procedures, maintaining confidentiality and avoiding undue intrusion in the organisation. Beyond these methodological concerns, the wider ethical issues of relationship and rigour, central to personal data interviews, did not apply in this study (DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019). The reliability that the interview questionnaire measured the concepts it was intended to measure, was tested in the research instrument through the inclusion of a repeat question with different wording. The content and construct validity of the interview questionnaire was supported by using questions arising from the online pilot study questionnaire, that has been pilot tested before being deployed. Dikko (2016 p.523) suggests “that in case studies,
particularly where knowledge and perceptions form parts of the points of interest, the interview which entails the extraction of information using guided conversations with respondents plays an important role in data collection”.

As discussed previously in Section 5.3, Cartwright’s (2007) detailed study was based on interviews with six academics, two of whom held quality management roles and responsibilities at institute level and Newton (2000) also used interviews as the research method for his study. Two groups were identified as holding reliable information on QA systems in Institutes of Technology, while acknowledging their vested interest and identity bias. Firstly, the QA expert community attached to the Academic Affairs & Registrar’s Office of the Institutes are the upholders of the QA policies and procedures of Academic Council. They were a source of verification of the research, combining both knowledge of QA systems with experience of the end-user perspective. Secondly, the academic staff for whom the QA system provides Standard Operating Practices for their work and who operate the system on a daily basis. It is unlikely that one would take issue with the above determination of participants in a study of QA in a Higher Education institution.

What is less obvious and is critical to this research is the recognition and inclusion of management, administration, student services and students as stakeholders in the academic QA system. This is where issues of ownership and power within the organisational culture and group culture come to the fore. There are often none or very few non-academic staff and students represented on the Academic Council of Higher Education institutions in Ireland. Management, administration and student support staff who operate the institute’s QA systems as their full-time role or as part of the duties of their work, rarely have input or voice within the QA system. It is surprising that in Higher Education institutions the divides between academic and management or academic and administration are so pronounced that they are the subject of separate research literatures. Similarly, those most effected by the operation of academic QA, the students, have little or no voice in the QA system. This research study provides a starting point to address these documented issues through a collaborative, integrative approach to QA that gives voice to a wider view of stakeholders than is customary (Winter 2009; Bunce 2017).
The participant numbers in this multi-perspective sample were determined by the selection criteria in the previous paragraph. All participants work or study within the same institution across different roles and groups with their own group cultures. The issue facing the institution was the importance of developing an organisational culture to support its mission and vision. This research strives to address all staff groupings and cultures and the student voice, as all are vital links in the QA systems knowledge to which they contribute or in which they participate. The profile of participants in the case study was:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Identity</th>
<th>Number of Participant Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Services</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Responses</strong></td>
<td><strong>290 (24 declaring dual identity)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.3 – Role Identity Analysis

I aimed to work with a whole-institute perspective, while conscious that other perspectives may currently be the norm. This innovation in approach to QA is an important aspect of where this study adds to current knowledge and practice. One might argue that the failure of quality philosophies, such as 6-Sigma, to translate to Higher Education is due to their over emphasis on staff development in the methodology and the under estimating of the importance of staff input to the methodology. The symbolism of black belt QA expertise that holds sway in manufacturing industry in particular has little impact on operations quality in HE. In the HE context of knowledge workers and knowledge development participant input to QA is at least as important as QA outputs.

**7.7 Research Design: Methods**

A range of data collection techniques is available to the researcher, from interviews and case study methods to document analysis. Document analysis and the case study method lend themselves well to qualitative research (Remenyi et al. 1998). Case studies are recognized for their suitability to
qualitative research and thereby to mixed methods research (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). Where the researcher has indepth knowledge and experience, the case study method can prove a rich source of insight (Cohan et al. 2017). Other more quantitative methods were applicable to undertake this research. Statistical methods were particularly useful for data analysis. The nature and size of the sample and the subject matter in this study required descriptive analysis to support determination of statistical validity. A mixed methods approach was most suitable for the study.

This research began from document analysis and literature review of QA systems with the aim of building on existing work to create a new understanding of the issues and relationships involved in the specific context of the study. The critical analysis approach in the study was defined as ‘a theoretical exploration of a specific topic….by a thorough review of the relevant literature’ (Waterford IT 2000, p.12). A critical analysis approach is well suited to this descriptive aspect of the study, as its strength as a research method lies in supporting deep questioning of first principles underpinning commonly held views or beliefs. It aims to strengthen decision making by challenging accepted beliefs (Alvesson & Deetz 2000). I justify my position taken here by reference to the tradition of critical analysis in the literature dating back to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Wodak and Meyer (2009, p.7) suggest that “Nowadays, this concept of critique is conventionally used in a broader sense, denoting, as Krings argues, the practical linking of ‘social and political engagement’ with ‘a sociologically informed construction of society.’” A critical analysis approach facilitated my exploration of interconnectedness and difference between staff groups and role identities. As a critical analysis based on participant views, this study offers an opportunity to examine common assumptions underpinning the approach to Higher Education quality management in Ireland.

7.8 Research Strategy

In light of the methodological considerations above it is reasonable to conclude that identification of education research with either the positivist approach synonymous with natural sciences or the phenomenological approach associated with the social sciences is an over-simplification. There are research strategy and design decisions to be made in terms of philosophy, discipline and objectives, which affect the nature, quality and value of the research outputs. ‘Research designs
are about organising research activity, including the selection of data, in ways that are most likely to achieve the research aims’ (Easterly-Smith et al, 1997). According to Easterly-Smith the criteria used to choose a research design are:

1. *The personal preference of the researcher.*
2. *The aims or context of the research to be carried out.*
3. *The validity, reliability and generalisability of the results.*

This view concurs with my experience in regard to this research. It is clear from study of the literature that qualitative and quantitative methods can be combined to suit a wide range of research objectives (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011). Furthermore, analysis of research literature provides substantive evidence that matching of method to research purpose is across the philosophical divide and the full continuum of methodology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Problem</th>
<th>Type of Study</th>
<th>Relevant Methodologies</th>
<th>Possible outputs of the study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unexplained social phenomena.</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>Qualitative, using open coding.</td>
<td>Model or theory, hypotheses or propositions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypotheses or models exist or unique situation.</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Qualitative ethnographic study. Quantitative, statistical study.</td>
<td>Single case study. Tests or replications of hypotheses or models.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypotheses or models exist. Causes and effects are sought.</td>
<td>Explanatory</td>
<td>Qualitative using standard coding.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.4 – *Relationship Between Research Objectives and Methodology (Hinfelaar 2004)*

**7.9 Choosing Research Methods**

My research design decisions reflected the research strategy chosen in Section 7.4 above. The design decisions also took into consideration the research objectives and practical constraints on the research. Moreover, these decisions aimed to reinforce the validity, reliability and
generalisability of the research. For example, a purely scientific experimental approach to QA systems was eliminated from this study on the grounds that the researcher cannot control the aspects of QA systems that have been specified in line with statutory provisions. And because my study adopts a focus on current events, a historical perspective was deemed inappropriate. The research results reflect an example of QA process in operation internally. This offered greater insight than a purely theoretical cross-system or cross-sector perspectives. It is acknowledged that this study might form a basis for further research following the format of this study in other institutions, thus adding potential for cross-institutional and cross-sector generalisability of the research in the future.

As I chose my study site and by default the pool of participants in the study, generalisability does not feature in the research. In order to manage the size of the study it was decided to restrict the study to addressing the research questions within the constraints of one institution, where research data was more easily available to the researcher from staff and from key decision makers in the Institute. By restricting the study to one institution I was able to protect the research from risks associated with comparative studies, where multiplicity and variation in factors influencing an organisation can undermine the integrity of the comparison. Studying a single institution supported the qualitative nature of the research on a defined population. Managing the population size and single institution focus of the case study supported the construct validity and maintained the face validity of the research.

From the literature review it became clear that the value of the study outputs would depend on ensuring that the right questions were being asked of the right participants to elicit the required information. It was decided therefore to employ a phased approach to data collection and review both the data and process on completion of each phase to inform the process for the following phase. A phased study was needed to gain understanding and insight into group perceptions of the QA systems being studied. The phased study was also considered necessary to determine the range of QA system aspects to be studied and the related subsets of questions to be asked in each phase. I was interested in the phenomenological perspective of individual and group consciousness within work roles and the issue of how staff personal identities could be defined through their relationship to the QA system.
To address the above, Phase 1 took the form of a broad online survey using a structured questionnaire to elicit the perceptions, tensions and possibilities of the QA systems operated by the institution. This online mode of delivery provided the sense of anonymity, important for a survey within the workplace. Questions were kept short and grouped under headings to provide clarity of intent. The survey questionnaire was presented in five sections, with each section addressing a high-level question area explored in more detail by the specific questions within that section and consistent with the types of questions being asked in relevant literature. A sixth section of the survey provided the opportunity for open comments from respondents. Filtering and branching the questionnaire was not necessary for the different role groups as the purpose was to discover how the role groups engage with the totality of the QA system. To allow for different role group experiences I made extensive use of choice selection type questions, so that the choice range provided an indication of the standard range of answers. Inclusion of “Other please specify” and “none of the above” type choices ensured that respondents were not restricted to the limited choice range provided.

Because Academic QA is jargon ridden it was necessary occasionally to use technical terms in the questionnaire. These technical terms used were widely understood within the organisation being studied. Rattray and Jones (2007) work on questionnaire design was useful as a reference point to a logical, systematic and structured approach to questionnaire design. While their framework was not adhered to completely, it provided guidance on the validity and reliability of questions. Fowler (1995) was used as the guide for wording and formation of survey questions. An advantage of using questionnaire was to facilitate collection of responses from a wider participation and to provide anonymity within the organisation under study. The later was important for ‘insider’ research, where ethical and practical consideration must be considered. A covering letter, setting out the right to withdraw from the research at any point, accompanied the questionnaire. Questionnaire design was influenced by practicalities of data reduction and analysis. The ordering of questions into sub-topics, beginning with less demanding topics was intended to support the response rate and maintaining participant interest to complete the questionnaire, using an optimal sample size (Rowley 2014).
The aim of the pilot survey (Phase 0) was to gain an orientation for the researcher on areas and issues to pursue with participants. In addition, Phase 1 was considered necessary to avoid hasty selection of study themes according to the researcher’s frame of reference or disposition. Care needed to be taken with the questionnaire design to ensure that questions did not predicate outcomes.

A pilot survey of eleven QA experts across different institutions was carried out to test the survey questionnaire and seek views on the methodology and phasing of the research. The pilot achieved both of its stated aims. Following the pilot survey, it was decided that the phased approach should adopt a format as follows:

**Phase 1:** Delphi Round 1 (Baseline Data): Online survey of all 500 staff across the four staff groups (academic, administration, management, student support services) consisting of a structured questionnaire to evaluation perceptions, tensions and possibilities of the QA systems in operation in the Institute.

**Phase 2:** Delphi Round 2 (Socially Constructed Meaning): Online follow-up survey of the same 500 staff across the four staff groups and the student group, consisting of a structured questionnaire sharing the different group views resulting from the Delphi Round 1 survey questionnaire and seeking participants to confirm or clarify their views in light of their new knowledge of other groups’ views. This follow-up survey looked at the level of agreement when survey participants were made aware of other participants choices. It considered how people’s choices were influenced by their role group’s views and by the changes in ranking of choices. Students were included in the Delphi Round 2 survey to check the alignment of their views with those of the four staff groups.

**Phase 3:** Following critical review of the results of the two questionnaire surveys from Delphi Round 1 and Delphi Round 2, I was able to compile the collaborative profile representing an integrated view of all four staff groups, based on levels of consensus identified in Phase 1 and constructed in Phase 2. I was also able to check if the student view was consistent with that of the staff groupings.
Phase 4: Delphi Round 3 (Expert Verification): Individual structured interviews with six QA experts and key decision makers verified that the QA outputs of the collaborative, integration process were robust in terms of QA and organisation management. These interviews took the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews (Stone 1978). This interview phase was a variation on the standard Delphi Method forming of itself a Delphi Round 3 input to the research.

7.10 The Delphi Method

The Delphi approach facilitates the exploration of views by presenting those knowledgeable on a subject with the views of others or other experts on that subject, through an iterative process of opinion sharing and refinement. Because the community of participants was within one organisation it was deemed critical to their full participation in the study that they would not be identifiable on an individual basis. This was achieved through the anonymity of an online survey. Using the online survey, individual participants did not need to meet. Six senior staff met with me on an individual basis at the interview stage (Phase 4), without being known to each other, a feature of the Delphi Method.

The Delphi Method, using repeated refined surveys, facilitated participants to “systematically combine expert knowledge and opinion to arrive at an informed group consensus” (Hinfelaar 2004, p.93). The Delphi method was developed as a social sciences research strategy in the 1960s as a means of combining expert knowledge and opinion to arrive at an informed group consensus on current problems or future events (Weaver 1969). Anonymity of participants is guaranteed by avoiding group discussion and establishing the researcher as the sole contact person. This is a proven method for research within communities of knowledge. The method is ideal for the early stages of research, where few empirical facts are known (Denzin et al. 1994). The method aims to systematically combine expert knowledge and opinion to arrive at an informed group consensus about, for example, solutions to specifically identified current problems or the likely occurrence of future events (Swanborn 1991). It offers an ideal method for preparing the ground for developing in-depth qualitative studies by providing the researcher with a level of insight into the subject so as to decide the right questions to ask or the criteria for selection of respondents or cases. The survey process from Round 1 and Round 2 surveys provided this insight to compile a
collaborative or consensus-based view in Phase 3. This was then tested against QA expert views and the academic management expert responses in interviews.

Building consensus around complex questions can be problematic. The standard Delphi method is to seek the opinions of experts by means of questionnaire, then to send the same experts a summary of the responses and ask for a reaction in some specified way to elicit if the experts view has changed in light of learning the views of other experts (Skulmoski, Hartman & Krahn 2007). A sample size of not less than 15 respondents is recommended to ensure the validity of the method and a stated disadvantage of the Delphi method in the literature is that for varying reasons participants often quit the process after one or two rounds of the method (Miller 1991). Experienced researchers who use this method recommend two rounds of questionnaires as ideal and not more than three rounds (Sumsion 1998).

This study was structured into two full Delphi rounds leading to semi-structured individual interviews with a small number of participants. In Phase 2 (Round 2 survey) the student group was added to the staff groups to check if student views were consistent with or different from those of staff. Phase 1 and Phase 2 took the form of a structured Delphi Method questionnaire round. Delphi Phase 1 provided the summary input for the Delphi Round 2 survey. Delphi Round 2 took the form of a survey setting out responses to Round 1 grouped by role identity from all four staff groups and the same survey completed by the student group. The participants then responded anonymously to the group findings, having drawn their individual, socially informed conclusions from the findings of Delphi Round 1. The result was separate participant group conclusions based on access to the views from the other groups in Round 1. These findings thus lent themselves to comparison of perceptions, tensions and possibilities based on a group analysis and full population analysis, as well as confirming any changes in view based on learning from other group views.

While the Delphi method is normally applied as a questionnaire-based approach, interviews can be used to support surveys, because of the strength and efficiency in information gathering from interviews in phenomenological research. Individually constructed meaning and significance attributed by individuals to explain their experiences can be captured more comprehensively through the flexibility of interviews than by paper-based studies or surveys (Greenbaum 2000). In
the context of the novel, inclusive approach to QA in this study it was considered essential to verify the findings with the QA expert community and institute management through an individual interview process to consider those findings. A limitation of this methodology and study could be that it differs from the approach in business or industrial quality research of viewing quality primarily from a senior management perspective. Such a criticism would itself signal a bias in favour of a managerialist position. Nonetheless, my research countered this potential criticism through verification of research findings with the senior management group and quality management group.

7.11 Delphi Round 1: Survey Questionnaire

The survey design related directly to the context of the research, different aspects of which have been considered in earlier chapters. I refer firstly to the problem of defining QA set out in Chapter 2. Accepting Tam’s (2001) conclusion that “there are contested views over quality and its measurement which inform the preferences of different stakeholders in Higher Education”, Section A of the survey instrument addresses research questions R1 and R2. It seeks to establish the meanings of quality held among the different cultural subgroups and the potential for agreement on the process of QA. Tam (2001) goes on to assert that “to understand quality it is necessary to recognise that it has contradictions that can lead to different assessment methods and thus to different practical outcomes.” Section B of the survey instrument explores these contradictory processes for QA, again addressing research questions R1 and R2 in a manner that requires the different culture groups to reflect on alternative views and priorities in QA. Section C of the survey instrument addresses research question R3, exploring the differing views of the QA system in operation, its strengths, weaknesses and potential for improvement. Sections D and E of the survey explore the research questions further with regard to the management and focus of QA respectively. Section F of the survey seeks any further reflections and thoughts from participants, having completed the survey.

The purpose of the Round 1 Survey Questionnaire was to gather source data and information on the issues around QA to address research questions R1, R2 and R3. The Follow-up Survey addressed research question 4 specifically, offered an opportunity for consensus building around
shared values and views, using the Delphi method. Both surveys provided a basis for detailed analysis in the semi-structured interviews to confirm the viability of the integrative QA process envisaged in research question R4 and to further clarify the research questions set out in Chapter 1.

My questionnaire design was influenced by its application to support the Delphi method, the research questions to be answered and the objectives of the research set out in previous chapters. From the literature review it was clear that the questionnaire design needed to facilitate logical progression through the questions and ease of use by the research participants (Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink 2004). The questions were designed to take account of contributions in the literature in the context of the Higher Education quality debate and to address issues of concern to the Institutes of Technology. For example, the range of definitions of QA in the questionnaire was a collation of the different definitions found in the literature. Similarly, the answer choices for specific question were either transposed from a question in another study or combine a range of answers from across the literature on that specific question.

The questionnaire consisted of 5 core sections providing a logical separation of the topics (see Appendix A). It was designed to be relatively simple to complete while encouraging participants to yield sufficient information on their views. Questions were presented in different formats, such as assertions of a particular point of view, with participants required to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement using a Lickert scale of five choices or a range of possible choices. Participants selected a particular choice or a number of choice options in some cases. This highly structured approach ensured that the responses were clear and comparable. The questionnaire ended with an open question to elicit if the participant wished to expand on any point in free text response format. Questions were prepared with extreme care and a pilot questionnaire was used to eliminate design errors and redundancy.

Questionnaires were distributed electronically to participants using Survey Monkey, for self-completion. Two hundred and forty-four (244) of the 500 staff participants responded and over half of the respondents submitted the fully completed survey or almost fully completed survey within five working days. A follow-up email reminder each week for three more weeks produced
a reducing yet significant return each time to attain a 48.8% total response rate before the survey was closed. This high response rate across all staff groups provided a valid sample on which to evaluate the survey data.

Details of the questionnaire responses are presented in the next chapter on research findings. The survey research findings are presented as an analysis of the response to each question and topic area. This data formed the input to the Delphi Round 2 Follow-up Survey.

A number of considerations fed into the data analysis strategy used. The Round 1 survey data was analysed using the data analysis tool built into the Survey Monkey surveying tool, thus avoiding the data transfer errors associated with loading data to the SPSS or MSExcel tools. As a likert scale had been used wherever possible in the survey questionnaire this data format lent itself to scoring and analysis of response frequency. While the research was qualitative in nature, coding of the data by role identity had been built into the questionnaire design to support statistical analysis of the data. The focus was on descriptive statistical analysis to match the qualitative nature of the data and provide summary analysis. Univariate analysis of frequency of responses as well as dispersal of responses across the range were the main types of data analyses undertaken, along with cross tabulation of data responses. It was not appropriate to the qualitative nature of the research data to include inferential statistical analysis, such as chi square, t-test and ANOVA that signal probability and prediction validity. I was looking for ratio data and patterns in the data that evidenced thinking within the different groups within the institute. Where possible, this data analysis was also presented using data visualization techniques.

The analysis of data within the survey tool facilitated comparison of group perceptions, identified areas of tension between different groups and gave an initial impression of the level of possibility for collaboration and consensus on development of an integrated QA system in which all group views had been considered. This critical analysis formed the basis of the Delphi Round 2, with reported finding from Round 1 providing the input to the Round 2 survey.
7.12 Delphi Round 2: Respondent Reactions

The Follow-up Survey (see Appendix B), summarizing and codifying the outputs from the Survey Questionnaire in Delphi Round 1, was sent to all participants for their reaction and response to the findings. It was also sent to a student group of experienced students. All of the student group sample were postgraduate students and most were students in the institute for a minimum of five years as undergraduates and postgraduates. With each recipient continuing to operate anonymously and independently, all research participants were invited to respond by email to the Round 1 critical analysis of the Survey Questionnaire. The structure of the Follow-up Survey was closely linked to the Round 1 Survey Questionnaire, with content ordered in corresponding Sections A to F. The questions in Round 1 were numbered by section following the numbering format A1, A2... to F1, F2. The numbering of follow-up questions in Round 2 used additional letters after the number. So, Round 2 follow-up questions to Round 1 question A1 are numbered A1A, A1B, A1C and so on. This labelling of questions supported multiple follow-up questions to each question in Round 1 and maintained a clear link back to the original survey questionnaire. Round 1 had a predominance of open questions with multiple choices to draw out different views. In contrast, Round 2 made extensive use of closed questions, requiring respondents to make up their minds with binary answers (yes/no, agree/disagree). For Delphi Round 2 all respondents received an email requesting the Follow-up Survey again be completed through Survey Monkey. The same process of three email reminders over three weeks was used.

As indicated in the literature, the response rate to the Delphi Round 2 Follow-up Survey decreased from 48.8% of the total population to 25% of the total population. Decreasing response rate in each round is common when using the Delphi Method (Hsu & Sandford 2007). The 25% response rate achieved in Round 2 provided enough responses to be statistically meaningful and representative of the total research population. The student group (n=80) response rate was 27.5% (n=22), again giving sufficient responses for comparison to other groups. The responses to the Delphi Round 2 Follow-up Survey are also included in the next chapter (Chapter 8) research findings discussion.

Interview questions were developed from the Delphi Round 1 and Round 2 responses as the basis of discussion in the individual structured interviews (Appendix C).
7.13 Delphi Round 3: Structured Interviews

The original Delphi survey technique did not include the use of expert interviews. With the emergence of mixed methods, the use of research techniques that cross the qualitative and quantitative research divide and complement traditional Delphi surveys is more common. Research techniques such as interviews, case study analysis and focus groups can be used to validate and interrogate the traditional Delphi questionnaire findings (Hinfelaar 2004). In this research the structured interviews served this function.

The structured interviews provided both a Delphi Round 3 and a triangulation process for the research findings. To encourage respondents to express views freely, the Delphi Method maintains the anonymity of respondents throughout the research. This requirement is often difficult when working with small numbers of respondents or with integrated communities or groups. Anonymity and participation were a consideration for the Round 1 and Round 2 surveys and were protected. Respondents were more willing to participate in interviews, where participation and anonymity could be protected. The expert nature of the participants in the interviews and the small number of experts (n=3) and managers (n=3) required was helpful in ensuring that they would respond and provide verification of the earlier survey findings (Sarantakos 1988).

The six interview participants were selected for interview either on the basis of their QA role and expertise (n=3) or on the basis of their senior academic management roles and lengthy HE career experience in senior management roles. These interview participants were specifically chosen as offering scope for further exploration and discussion as well as verification of the wider survey findings based on their extensive, senior experience of HE and the organisation being researched. They were contacted individually. Individual meetings were held at locations and times convenient for them. It was agreed that the interviews would be structured according to the interview questions and that confidentiality of participants and responses would be maintained. While the participants were not given the interview questions in advance, they were familiar with the original questionnaire and response process around which the interviews were structured.
The decision to use semi-structured interviews stemmed from the advice in the literature that free-ranging interviews are more likely to lead to poor quality data (Easterby-Smith et al. 1997). However, considering the high calibre and expert nature of the interview subjects, the benefits of a wider discussion around the subject areas was also invaluable to the research. The interviews are described as semi-structured in that questions were prepared in advance as a topic guide (Jones, 1985). The advice in the literature on recording of interviews is indecisive. For many years it was considered best practice to record all interviews, while more recent research cautions on over reliance on tape recordings as diminishing the interviewer listening effort (Sanders 1982; Greenbaum 2000). For this study interviews were recorded as an aid memoir, but contemporaneous notes with also taken by the interviewer.

The interviews took the form of a question and answer session lasting 50 to 60 minutes, with follow up questions and discussion included as appropriate. The interview questions sought to explore areas that had been identified in Round 2 as a basis for consensus on QA and also areas that proved problematic or controversial in the earlier phases of the research (see Appendix C). The qualitative nature of semi-structured interviews served to deepen understanding of the opinions on QA collected previously, by checking participants’ attitudes and ideas with the two key constituencies for acceptance and implementation of a collaborative, integrative approach to QA.

7.14 Limitation of the Research

A limitation of the research was that it was based on one institute and cannot be deemed generalisable to the sector or HE institutions in general. Replicated research in a number of other institutions and different types of institution could address this limitation. In working with focused communities this limitation is mitigated somewhat by the high levels of community participation and the availability of expertise within the community to verify finding from a broader perspective.

With 244 of the 500 staff participating, the study had a strong participation rate for the Delphi Round 1 survey. Participation reduced to 125 respondents or 25% of the total staff population in Delphi Round 2. There might have been some benefit in further building a QA consensus by
offering a third round of surveys. However, if the rate of fall off in response was similar to the previous rate, then an anticipated total sample response of 12.5% could not have been justified as representative of the total population or as representing the spread of population across the different identity groups.

Notwithstanding the support for the research evidenced by both the quality of responses and quantity of respondents, the research would have benefited from a larger response from the identity groups who are not normally invited to respond on matters of QA. Both in terms of response volume and consensus the academic staff remained dominant in defining the consensus, despite the inclusion of other voices in the academic QA system. This again is a natural limitation of the research as the academic voice is central to academic QA.

Finally, it was interesting and beneficial to include student input into this research on QA systems. The logistics of managing a large-scale survey of the total student population (7000 students) and the scale of post survey analysis then required was beyond the scope and scale of this thesis. I opted therefore to survey the most knowledgeable and experienced student group, the postgraduate students.

7.15 Conclusion

This chapter explored issues of first principles in research methodology to establish the validity of the research. The chapter also addressed more general methodological considerations of research objectivity, research philosophy and research strategy. The questions of choosing a research design were addressed. The appropriateness to the study of the phenomenological approach in dealing with data of a qualitative nature using questionnaire and interview techniques within the Delphi Method were explained. The quantitative analysis aspect of the research, helped by the statistical analysis tools in Survey Monkey, explains the extent to which the research may be described as adopting a mixed methods approach. Logistical operations of the study were also set out, including the limitation of the research.
Chapter 8: Analysis of Surveys

8.1 Introduction

The research methodology to underpin this research was set out in Chapter 7. Findings from the surveys in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the research using the Delphi method are considered in this chapter. Analysis of the outputs of Phases 1 and 2 of the research and methodology are presented. This research analysis was structured around the areas for research identified, with comparison across the four survey staff groups and the student group. At the end of the analysis of responses to each question we find the change on reflection after the Follow-up Survey. This change confirmed the assertion in the literature that meaning is in fact socially constructed and supported the central thesis of this research that a collaborative process across all identity groups can deliver an integrated approach to QA (Ormston et al. 2014). The change in the responses of the role identity groups in light of being informed of other group views boded well for a collaborative, integrative approach to QA in Higher Education.

8.2 Survey Analysis

The purpose of the Round 1 Delphi survey was to examine staff subgroup identity across the four main categories of staff within a Higher Education institution. The four employee role categories were academic, administration, student services and management. The hypothesis is that organisational culture is heterogeneous in character, built around sub-culture identities within the different role groups of an organisation. By investigating these role identities a better understanding can be gained of the underlying culture. The study of organisational culture specifically in this instance is framed around staff views and attitudes to quality assurance within the organisation, as it reflected the four staff role identity subcultures. A value of this approach to organisation subculture research is that the data can be read from the perspective of each subculture or from the perspective of wider organisational culture, rather than through the lens of a dominant subculture such as management or academic. As mentioned previously, the collaborative approach facilitated staff groups who would not normally have a say in academic QA, without taking away from the academic staff expression of their views and their dominance in academic QA matters.
Academic staff are well equipped intellectually to formulate and express their views coherently. The collaborative approach did little to undermine a dominant academic view, while facilitating other staff groups and students to input to the academic QA system.

The quality assurance Questionnaire Survey was issued to 500 staff, with 244 responses giving a response rate of 48.8 percent. Table 8.1 shows the response rates across the different staff groups. The high response rate was significant in that sample size and response rate adds to the integrity and validity of research findings. The level of agreement with the rubric in the survey questions tells us explicitly of the level of support for different aspects of the QA system across the organisation. This research facilitated drilling down beneath this organisation wide view by analysing the data by staff role identity grouping. Where levels of agreement were low across staff role groupings this is indicative of strong interest group subcultures below the surface of the organisational culture and level of agreement. Similarly, where levels of agreement are high across staff role groupings this is indicative that a strong organisation wide aspect of culture is supported by all subculture groups within the organisation. Thus, I gained a deeper and more fine-grained insight into the different views and attitudes defining the perceptions, tensions and possibilities for QA within the subculture groupings that combined lend coherence or incoherence within the organisational culture.

Having gathered a wide range of views and attitudes across the four staff role groups the survey provided sufficient data to establish and define the different group viewpoints or subcultures within the organisation in relation to quality assurance. These conceptual viewpoints or subcultures were then tested in Round 2 Delphi to determine how the different staff groups and an additional student group would respond when presented explicitly with the views of other role groups and with binary choice or limited choice type decisions of agreement or disagreement. Round 2 Delphi might be characterised as a less open survey representing a decision point or “make up your mind” scenario on issues previously identified as important by different groups.
8.3 Research Findings: What is Academic Quality Assurance?

The Delphi Round 1 survey, questions A1 to A6, explored the different staff groups’ views and attitudes to quality and to the academic quality system in operation within the higher education institution.

Respondents were asked to identify their role in the organisation. This question was key to the research in providing a basis for coding and cultural categorisation based on staff role identity. All 244 respondents answered this question. Only 11 of the 244 respondents chose to add information to the “other please specify” option to expand on their response within the four categories provided. This is seen as confirmation that the four categories within the research survey are indeed a valid representation of roles and identity within the Higher Education organisation. The percentage response rates from the four staff groups were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Round 1 Response Rates</th>
<th>Round 2 Response Rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>68.9% (n=168)</td>
<td>72.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>23.0% (n=56)</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Services</td>
<td>9.4% (n=23)</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>8.6% (n=21)</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.1 – Round 1 and 2 Group Percentage Response Rates

Figure 8.1 confirms that these percentages were proportional to the respective staff group sizes within the overall organisation population. In this round (1) survey respondents were permitted to self-identify with more than one role group if they so wished. Over 90% of respondents identified with one of the four role groups, with 9.9% indicating a dual role identity.
In **Round 2** there were 124 responses to the survey (244 in Round 1). Round 2 required more decisive responses, removing ambiguity by not permitting multiple answers. The respective group percentage response rates changed slightly between rounds because of this. Respondents in Round 2 were required to return their primary group identity for their role in the organisation. This facilitated a more precise definition of the staff groups, requiring a clear identity decision to understand better the ten percent of staff that had chosen more than one primary role in the Round 1 Delphi survey.

**Role Influence Upon Views of QA**

Respondents were asked directly if their views on QA were more influenced by their work staff group identity or by their personal opinions. Sixty four percent (64%) confirmed that their work staff role group was the major influence, confirming the existence of the subculture groupings postulated in this research. Furthermore, 83% of respondents considered their views to be consistent with the views of others within their role group.
Understanding of Academic QA

When asked about their level of understanding of academic QA (AQA), two members of Academic staff (1.6%) claimed they had no understanding. All other respondents from all staff groups claimed some level of understanding, with 47% claiming an experienced or expert level of understanding of AQA. Within the Student Group 41% of students claimed no understanding of AQA, 41% claimed some understanding and 18% claimed to be experienced in AQA. It is most interesting and perhaps surprising that the only staff claiming “no understanding” of AQA should be academic staff. It is equally interesting and reaffirming for the approach to QA proposed here that all non-academic staff and 59% of the Student Group claimed some level of understanding of AQA. This confirmed the loss to an academic organisation whose AQA processes exclude staff and student input to QA based on specific role identity group assumptions.

Responsibility for AQA

Respondents were asked for their views on primary responsibility for academic quality assurance in a Higher Education institution. Figure 8.2 shows the five options provided, generating the following Round 1 views on responsibility for academic quality assurance: Academic Staff 71.2%; Administration Staff 5.9%; Student Services 4.2%; Management 41.5%; and External Quality Body 10.6%. 236 of the 244 respondents to the survey answered this question (96.7%). It is clear from these survey results that some respondents experienced difficulty deciding whether primary responsibility for AQA rests with Academic Staff or Management Staff, with 33% of respondents selecting both, explaining the choice percentages adding to 133% in total. To facilitate the exploration of tensions the opportunity to choose more than one option was allowed across a number of questions in the Round 1 Survey Questionnaire.

The responses to this question were interesting in three regards. Firstly, 41.5% of staff who answered this question identified management as primarily responsible for academic quality assurance. Considering that management are not directly involved in teaching or assessing students, this result is a relatively strong statement of organisational culture. The collegiate academic model that is widely regarded as underpinning excellence in Higher Education would appear to be weak within this organisational context. The second important observation reinforced
this concern about referral of responsibility to other parties, with 10.6% of staff designating responsibility for academic QA to external quality bodies.

This result reinforces a concern regarding the level of maturity in accepting responsibility for academic QA within the organisation. There was a lack of agreement on responsibility for QA, with different groups referring to other groups. The fact that nearly 90% of staff saw responsibility for AQA as internal rather than external was somewhat reassuring. The most widely held views were that responsibility for QA rests with Academic Staff or with Management or with both these groups with Administrative Staff and Student Services playing a minor role.

Figure 8.2 – Primary Responsibility for AQA in Higher Education

A third significant observation was that 168 of the 236 respondents to this question (71.2%) said that responsibility for academic QA rests with academic staff. In a mature Higher Education institution one might expect responsibility for academic QA to rest firmly with academic staff,
with support from other staff roles within the organisation. As 168 staff, the exact same number, had identified themselves as academic staff in question A1 it was worth performing a cross tabulation between the response of “academic” in these two questions. This confirmed that 76.5% of respondents with a role identity of academic confirmed academic responsibility for academic QA with 23.5% of academic staff attributing responsibility for academic QA either to management or to external awarding bodies.

Further cross tabulation confirmed that the majority of administration staff (62.5%) viewed management as holding primary responsibility for academic QA. This view conflicted with the majority academic staff view that academic staff hold primary responsibility for academic QA. Of the 56 administration staff, 4 (7.1%) attributed primary responsibility for academic quality assurance to their own administration grouping, while 2 (3.6%) of the administration staff saw student services as holding primary responsibility. When I cross-checked the administration staff views on management primary responsibility for academic quality with the management view, I found the majority of management (80%) believed that primary responsibility for academic quality rests with academic staff. There was certainly a requirement here for clarity within the organisation with regard to responsibility for academic QA.

An additional layer of ambiguity was added to the views on responsibility for academic quality assurance from the student services staff group. In the student services staff grouping, with 22 of the 23 respondents answering this question, 15 (68.2%) attributed primary responsibility for QA to academic staff and 9 (40.9%) looked to management. Twelve of the 22 respondents chose two of the five options available in reply to this question. Interestingly 3 of the student services staff viewed their own group as holding primary responsibility for academic quality assurance, while also choosing another option. I had initially discounted the smaller numbers of administration staff and student services staff who attributed primary responsibility to their own group or outside the management and academic groups. However, it is in this analysis that the complexity of the group culture interactions and variations in views and beliefs within the organisation are best demonstrated. My ontological bias as an academic and manager had initially enabled me to airbrush out contrary views from my thinking. Looking more closely at the data and the profile of the respondents I could see how a small number of the people who self-defined as Student Services
Staff might have some overlap in their role and identity with Administration Staff or with Management Staff. It was clearly important at this stage to consider my identity as researcher in reading the empirical data coming from different staffing groups and reflecting an organisational culture that is more multifaceted than the role and power identities of any one group. Within identity groups based on function (administration, management, student support) there are overlaps in function that are not as clearly in view or not as willingly accepted (academic-manager, student support-administrator, student support-manager).

**In Round 2** the percentage of all staff attributing primary responsibility for AQA to Academic Staff was more decisive, rising from 71% to 78%. Management were the only other group who continued to be attributed with primary responsibility and this decreased from 42% to 19% among the staff groups when a single choice was required. The Academic staff group attributed primary responsibility to themselves in 77% of their responses, with 21% of Academics maintaining that Management carry the primary responsibility for AQA. In contrast to this, 88% of Management staff attributed primary responsibility for AQA to Academic staff, with 0% of Management attributing responsibility to its own staff grouping. The Student Group were somewhat more ambiguous about responsibility for AQA, with only 41% of students attributing responsibility to Academic Staff and a higher 45% attributing responsibility to Management.

The low-level conflict in views of responsibility for AQA could have reflected a number of underlying realities. Nearly two-thirds of all staff (65.5%) explained the difference in views to the “Overall Organisational culture”, while one-third of staff attributed the difference in views to the “Staff Group Identities.” The Student Group view was very similar (66.6%). Only the Management staff group differed from this consensus around “Overall Organisational culture”, responding that 63% of the difference in views was due to “Staff Group Identities.” Exclusion of specific group identities from the QA processes may also have an impact that an integrated approach would help address.

A total of 72% of all staff expressed the view that referencing Management or External Bodies responsibility for AQA indicated a weakness in the collegiate academic culture in the organisation. Only 45% of students saw referral to Management or External Bodies as indicating a weakness in
collegiate academic culture. One might assume that the Student Group could have missed the subtlety of this question or this response may be a valid expressing of the student interest beyond the internal operation of the organisation. However, if we consider the Student Group response as a norm for disinterested parties in AQA, then the much higher percentage of staff concerned about collegiate culture and the role of management may disguise wider issues of trust between staff and management.

A more detailed analysis of responses confirmed that 57% of all staff held that Management referral of responsibility for AQA to Academic Staff indicated a strength in collegiate academic culture in the organisation and a strength of Management culture (55%). Administration staff expressed contrary views from all other staff groups, seeing Management referral of responsibility for AQA to Academic Staff as indicating a weakness in collegiate academic culture (58%) and a weakness in Management culture (67%). Administration staff would appear to hold attitudinal positions in relation to Academic Staff and Management that influence their particular group perspective. Similarly, the Student Group saw referral of responsibility for AQA by Management to Academic Staff as a weakness both of Management (55%) and of Collegiate Culture (55%), confirming a consumer perspective that Management should carry overall responsibility and leadership of their education quality experience.

Perceptions of AQA as Measurement

**Round 1** asked for respondents’ views on the importance of academic quality as a measurement of a HE institution. 233 of the 244 respondents answered this question (95.5%), with 5 responses choosing two of the four options. Figure 8.3 shows that academic quality was acknowledged by 129 respondents (55.36%) as the primary measure of a HE institution. Another 94 respondents (40.34%) expressed the view that academic quality is “just one of many measures of a Higher Education institution.” The other two response choices returned marginal percentages. The binary contrast in the responses may be an indication of the current debate and uncertainty in Irish HE on the identity of an Institute of Technology.

The difference or distinctiveness between a traditional university and the newly envisaged Technological Universities has yet to be defined. The many and varying demands being placed on
Institute of Technology can give rise to a conflict in identity and purpose. Specifically, there would appear to be organisational culture and identity implications in defining an Institute of Technology as primarily an academic endeavour or as having a wider remit for enterprise development, business support, community involvement, access and mass education, addressing social disadvantage, and so on.

What was clear from this question was that for academic quality to be achieved it should be considered important by the organisation. If it is valued as the primary measurement or key performance indicator within a HE institution, then academic quality is more likely to be supported and achieved. A weak score on this question metric would be a cause for concern for quality assurance.

In this case study the evidence was that quality assurance remains the primary measurement within the organisational culture, particularly among management. However, this was being challenged for academic and administration staff by other considerations and performance requirements as reflected in staff views.
Detailed analysis confirmed that 83 academics (51.9%) saw academic quality as the primary measure and 69 academics (43.1%) viewed academic quality as just one of many measures. A similar proportion was evident among administration staff with 52.7% attributing primacy to academic quality and 47.3% considering it just one of many measures. Management views in this regard differed from the views held by academic and administration staff. 70% of management placed primacy with academic quality, while 30% viewed it as just one of many measures of higher education. This management view is closely reflected among the student services staff. While the number from this group who completed this question was small (20), 70% of the group also viewed academic quality as the primary measure of a Higher Education institution.

From the point of view of consistency across the organisation it was noteworthy that all four groups of staff surveyed identified academic quality as the primary measure of their organisation. It was surprising that the management and student services staff placed a stronger emphasis on the importance of academic quality than the academic and administration groups. There seemed to be a level of ambiguity within the organisation regarding the acknowledged importance of and deference towards AQA (Question A3) on the one hand and a seeming unwillingness by the different role groups to accept responsibility for AQA.

In Round 2, an interesting contrast arose between staff groups that work directly with students in student facing roles and those staff groups in Management and Administration. The majority of Management staff (62.5%) and of Administration staff (64.3%) continued to hold “Academic Quality as the primary measurement of a Higher Education institution.” The majority of Academic Staff (53.4%) and of Student Support staff (63.6%) switched to a majority view that “Academic Quality is just one of many measurements of a Higher Education institution.” The Students agreed strongly (73%) that “Academic Quality is just one of many measurements of higher education.”

There was limited agreement (57.7%) among all staff groups on the definition of academic quality. Management Staff and Student Services Staff placed a stronger emphasis on the importance of Academic Quality than Academic Staff or Administration. A lack of clarity on the meaning of AQA and the lack of emphasis on its importance must be seen as a negative finding. Most Students
(73%) saw a lack of emphasis on the importance of AQA among Academic Staff and Administration Staff as a negative finding.

**Underlying Basis of AQA**

**Round 1** explored staff views on the underpinning logic and definition of the academic quality system, based on a schema of definitions from a study by Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi and Leitner (2004). The definition of quality was an important consideration for this research project. For this research to be compatible with previous studies it was considered valuable that the definition of quality reference that research.

The first definition of academic quality as “a fuzzy social consensus” indicated the percentage of the staff population who might describe the academic quality system as unclear or as unsystematic. In this study 9 respondents chose this definition (3.83%), indicating a low level of fuzziness within the organisation thinking on academic quality. This view was however consistent with the definition of quality offered by Gummesson (1990) in responding to the more industrial and technical definitions available.

The organisation views of academic quality in Figure 8.4 are significant. When asked about the AQA systems in operation, 64.7% (152) defined it as “Operational policies and procedures” and 53.6% (126) viewed it as “A collegiate system of excellence”. There were the two most widely held views. The definitions, “A system of public accountability” (34.9% - 82) and “Control by External body” (26% - 61) were seen as a basis for academic quality by significant cohorts of staff. Academic quality was viewed as “a system of measurements” by 31.9% (75) of staff and as “Best practice benchmarks” by 46.4% (109) of staff. Only 14.89% (35) saw academic quality as representative of the “Top-down interests of Management.” This perhaps reflects the different political and industrial content impacting on HE relating to the Irish HE public policy content.

Cross tabulation analysis was used to examine the responses of each of the four staff role groupings. The academic staff group scores show that their views are in line with the scores across the total survey population of 244 staff. It was interesting to note that all 9 respondents who
supported the “fuzzy social consensus” definition of the academic quality assurance system are members of the academic staff group.

![Figure 8.4](image)

**Figure 8.4 – The Academic Quality Assurance System is Based On…**

The management role group were strong in their view of the AQA system defined as “a collegiate system of excellence” with 66.7% management support and as “operational policies and procedures” with 71.4% management support. Management were ahead of the total staff population support for these viewpoints. What was also interesting was that only 14.3% of managers viewed AQA as “a system of measurements” compared with 31.9% across the total population.

The administration staff group were strongest in their view of AQA as “operational policies and procedures” (76.4%) compared to a general population score for this definition of AQA of 64.68%. Administration staff were also strong in their view of AQA defined as “a system of public
accountability” (47.3%) compared to a score of 34.89% for this definition across the total survey population.

The administration staff group defined AQA as “a system of public accountability” (47.6%). Student Services staff differ significantly in their view of AQA as “best practice benchmarks” (61.9%). While it may be questionable in a Higher Education context how healthy these views of AQA are, what was important here was the insight gained in understanding how the different sub-culture groups define and understand AQA.

The Round 2 survey brought greater clarity to the definition of the AQA systems in operation. The support for the definition of AQA as “A collegiate system of excellence” rose from 53.6% to 57%, while a further 38% continued to support the definition of the AQA systems in operation as “Operational Policies and Procedures.” However, the number of participants who defined AQA as “The top down interests of Management” dropped from 15% in the Round 1 survey to 4% in Round 2. This view was held solely within the Academic staff group. All staff groups confirmed their understanding that “A collegiate system of excellence” and “Operational Policies and Procedures” were the view of AQA held by Management within the organisation. The Student view was divided equally between these two views of AQA (48% for each). The Students were not surprised that these two views of AQA are held by Management within the system.

**Views on Improving AQA**

Round 1 explored views within the different staff groupings on possible improvements to academic quality and the impact of the QA system on quality. On the positive side, Figure 8.5 shows that 62.72% of all staff responses (236 respondents overall answered this question) either agreed or agreed strongly with the effectiveness of the academic quality system. It was a matter of concern that one in four staff (25.42%) opted for the “neither agree nor disagree” option. And 11.86% of staff expressed a view that the academic quality system does not help to improve academic quality.
Considering the dependence of the organisation on this academic quality system and the level of resources invested in the system, the issue of over 25% of staff not having a view on the efficacy of the academic QA system needs to be addressed within the organisational culture.

![Academic Quality Assurance System Has Helped to Improve Academic Quality](image)

**Figure 8.5 – Academic Quality Assurance System Has Helped to Improve Academic Quality**

Further cross tabulation analysis confirmed that 163 of the 168 academic staff answered this question and reflected proportionally the overall population views. Again, it was a concern that 24% of academic staff “neither agree nor disagree” on the effectiveness of the AQA system and do not know whether or not the AQA system helped to improve academic quality. I expected high scores for Agree and Disagree on this question and was surprised by the level of uncertainty across all groups, particularly the academic staff group.

The administration staff group were above average in their confidence in the effectiveness of the AQA system at 64.8% and indicated a low level of disagreement at 5.6%. However, the high level of uncertainty on this question was also reflected within the administration staff at 29.6%.
The management group view was very much in agreement on the effectiveness of the AQA system (80%). They displayed a lower level of uncertainty (15%) than the general population, with just one of the 20 managers (5%) who answered the question disagreeing with the effectiveness of the AQA system. The Student Services staff group was also strongly in agreement with the effectiveness of the AQA system (80%), with no member of the group disagreeing and 20% ticking the uncertainty box.

Round 2 again questioned whether the AQA system has helped to improve academic quality. The positive response rate increased to 74% from 63% in the Round 1 survey, with all groups strongly in agreement. However, when Academic staff had earlier been required to answer yes or no, without a neutral option, 34% said that “the AQA system has not helped improve academic quality.” When asked this same question with different wording in Round 2 (Question A5B), to cross check views, the percentage of all staff agreeing that the AQA system helps to improve academic quality rose to 78% and the percentage of Academic staff in disagreement decreased from 34% to 28%. Similarly, Student agreement that “the AQA system has helped improve academic quality” rose from 68% to 75% in the cross check repeat question. However, this increase was directly explained by the decrease in the number of respondents to the later question. There was no change in the number of students who agreed, demonstrating a high level of consistency in responses.

Views on effectiveness of AQA

Round 1 continued the exploration of views, attitudes on effectiveness by focusing more specifically on the effectiveness of the academic quality system in improving the student experience.

Figure 8.6 shows that just 51.69% of staff agreed or agreed strongly with this statement. The level of disagreement at 12.29% of staff was consistent with the views expressed in question A5 on effectiveness of the system.

What was surprising in the views expressed by the 236 respondents to this question was that 36% of staff chose the neither agree nor disagree option. The academic staff views were consistent with
the total population views, though slightly less positive, with 47.9% agreement or strong agreement from academic staff compared with 51.69% for the general population. An unexpected response was that 36.8% of academic staff “neither agree nor disagree” that the AQA system has helped to improve the student experience.

Administration staff views were divided between agreement and not knowing (38.9%), with very low disagreement (7.4%). In this case the high level of neither agreeing nor disagreeing was more understandable from a group who are often one step removed from the student experience.

The management staff group was positive regarding the effect of the AQA system on the student experience, with 65% agreement. Management also expressed the lowest level of uncertainty (20%). Their disagreement was in line with the population average at 15%. Again, one might reasonably have expected a higher level of agreement from management staff, with 65% a disappointing score from the group that manages the AQA system.

Student services staff provided the highest level of agreement with this question on the effectiveness of the AQA system for students (70%). The group expressed no disagreement and below average uncertainty (30%). The fact that this staff group deals directly with students at an individual or personal level means they are well placed to appreciate the impact of the AQA system on the student.

Respondent views on the AQA impact on quality or on the student experience (Questions A5 and A6) are interesting. There was an opportunity to explore this relationship further through the expert interviews in Chapter 9.

In the Round 2 survey 66% of all staff agreed that the AQA system has helped to improve the student experience, with 34% in disagreement. Again, the level of agreement on the effectiveness of the AQA system for the student experience was slightly lower among Academic staff at 62%. The Students were more critical of the AQA system here, with equal numbers of students (50%) holding that the AQA system has and has not helped to improve the student experience. I
concluded that even if the AQA system is improving the student experience, this is not widely evident to the students themselves.

8.4 Research Findings: What are the Best QA Processes?

Section B of the questionnaire, questions B1 to B10, explored staff views on different approaches to academic quality assurance, different roles with AQA and the responsibilities pertaining to different roles.
**Views on Best Processes of AQA**

**Round 1** asked the different staff groups their views on “the best processes of academic quality assurance.” More than one selection was permitted if appropriate. There were 209 responses to this question. Figure 8.7 confirms that over 70% (147 respondents) identified policies and procedures as the best process. This score was an endorsement of the current AQA system in place which was policies and procedures driven. Four other AQA processes receive medium levels of endorsement: quality audits (56.46%); standard operating practices (46.41%); follow-up to recommendations of review (45.45%); and collegiate professional judgement (44.98%). These four processes coupled with policies and procedures were supported within the organisation. Benchmarking received the next highest score at 39.71%.

What was noticeable in the results of this question was that the current academic QA processes used are supported, but more business-oriented QA processes are not. Business unit structures and formal quality methods (Lean and 6 Sigma) received marginal levels of support. Local decision making and local work practices were not strongly supported either. Just 26.79% of staff supported a customer service culture and a similarly low number (28.23%) supported external standards and policies.

It was an interesting finding that Academic Staff preferred a flat management structure and loose control, while Management preferred more structure and tighter control. There may be an undercurrent here of support for academic freedom among Academic Staff, which they see as threatened by a hierarchical structure and tight management control. Or the Academic Staff preference for flat management and loose control could be a response to the changing nature of the QA systems, with the rise in Managerialism. Systems based management has seen an increase in non-academic controls and control over academic processes such as assessment.

Perhaps not surprisingly, academic staff differed from the general population average in their high level of support for “collegiate professional judgement” at 54.4% compared with 44.96% for the total population. Support from Academic staff for a “policies and procedures” rules-based approach to AQA was marginally below the general population score of 70.3%, at 66.2% support.
Administration staff views showed very high support for “policies and procedures” at 78.35%, for “quality audit” at 60% and for “follow-up on the recommendations of review” at 50%. The administration staff differed primarily from the general view in their lack of support for “collegiate professional judgement” as a QA process, giving this process 30.4% support compared to the total population average of 44.98%.

Management staff were overwhelmingly supportive of “policies and procedures” at 88.9% and strongly supportive of all five processes supported by the general population. They differed in adding support for “benchmarking” at 50%.

Student support staff were also strongly supportive of “policies and procedures” at 78.9% and support the four other processes identified as best practice across the survey population. However, student support staff differed significantly in their high level of support for “customer service culture” at 52.6% compared with a 26.7% total population average. They also expressed strong
support for “external policies and standards” at 52.6% compared with 28.23% for the total population. Another variance was in student services staff support for “follow-up on recommendations of review” at 73.7% compared to 45.45% for the total population.

**Round 2** confirmed strong agreement across all groups that “Policies and Procedures” is seen as the current process of AQA. Support for “Policies and procedures” was confirmed by 72% as an endorsement of the current system in place. The percentage of Academic staff support for “collegiate professional judgement” as the best process of AQA in Higher Education increased further in Round 2 from 54% to 58%. Management also supported this view (67%). However, Administration staff and Student Support staff do not see “collegiate professional judgement” as the best process of AQA. When presented with the alternative view of Student Services staff support for “customer service culture, external policies and standards and follow-up on recommendations of review” as the better processes of AQA than “collegiate professional judgement”, Academic staff voiced 55% agreement and Management were conflicted in their preference 50%-50%. Among Students 76% saw support for “Policies and Procedures” as an endorsement of the current system in place. There was a sense of conflicted thinking from this question, where Academic Staff and Management favoured “collegiate professional judgement”, yet endorsed the current system based on “Policies and Procedures” because it too had been seen to work effectively in Institutes of Technology, where the higher order academic activities supported by a collegiate culture are perhaps less important than in a university setting. A majority of students (59%) voted against “collegiate professional judgement” as the best process of AQA.

**Importance of Critical Self-Reflection**

**Round 1** queried the importance for AQA of critical self-reflection by academic staff on their teaching. Figure 8.8 confirms overwhelming agreement with this statement. Of the 210 respondents, 123 (58.57%) agreed strongly with another 78 (37.14%) also in agreement, giving nearly 96% agreement with the importance of critical self-reflection by academic staff.

Overall, 95% of academic staff agreed on the need for critical self-reflection, as were all other staff groups. Of the 210 respondents to this question only 9 respondents were neutral or disagreed with
the importance of critical self-reflection by academic staff. Seven of the 9 were themselves academic staff.

Figure 8.8 – Critical Self-Reflection on Their Teaching by Academic Staff is Important for Academic Quality Assurance

The Round 2 survey again questioned the importance for AQA of Academic staff critical self-reflection on their teaching. Academic staff agreement increased from 95% to 96% with all other staff groups returning 100% agreement. What was interesting here is that 3% of Academic staff continued to maintain that critical self-reflection on their teaching was not important for AQA. Students too (76%) were strongly in favour of Critical Self-reflection by Academic Staff on their teaching.
Importance of Management Quantitative Monitoring

Round 1 queried the importance for AQA of management monitoring of quantitative outputs. Figure 8.9 shows that of the 210 respondents to this question, 61% agreed/strongly agreed, 19.5% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 19.5% disagreed/strongly disagreed.

Figure 8.9 – Managing Monitoring of Quantitative Outputs is Important for AQA

Academic staff varied from the 61% average agreement with management monitoring, returning a score of 49% for agree/strongly agree. Administration staff were 81% in agreement with management monitoring, well above the 61% average. Management staff strongly agreed with their own monitoring of quantitative outputs at 71%. However, there was 17.7% disagreement with their monitoring responsibility among management. Student services staff were highly supportive of management monitoring, with zero disagreement.

When asked again in Round 2 the percentage of Academic Staff agreement with “Management monitoring of quantitative outputs” for AQA increased from 49% to 61%, still below the average level of agreement for all staff of 70%. Management staff agreement with their responsibility to
monitor quantitative outputs for AQA increased from 71% to 100%, with similar strong support from Administration staff and Student Services staff. Student support for “Management monitoring of quantitative outputs” (76%) was even higher than the staff average of 70%.

**Importance of External Examiner Monitoring**

**Round 1** queried the importance for AQA of external examiner monitoring of assessment. Figure 8.10 confirmed that 94.23% agreed/agreed strongly, with just 3.4% disagreed/strongly disagreed.

![Figure 8.10 – External Examiner Monitoring of Assessment is Important for AQA](image)

Academic staff supported the importance of external examiners monitoring at 94.23%. Surprisingly, 4.7% of academic staff, or 7 out of 149 academic staff respondents, disagreed with external examiner monitoring. Administration staff at 93%, management staff at 94% and 100% of student services staff agreed with external examiner monitoring.
In Round 2, when informed of the 94% agreement by all staff groups “that External Examiner monitoring of assessment is important for AQA”, 100% then agreed with this statement. This was an excellent example of how the Delphi Method was designed to build consensus based on informed choices. Students were somewhat less supportive of the importance External Examiner monitoring or assessment. This could reflect either an endorsement by students of their confidence in the internal institute fairness around assessment, a sense that the External Examiner monitoring is not that important.

**Importance of Student Feedback**

Round 1 queried the importance for AQA of student feedback on their programme. Again, 92.8% agreed/strongly agreed, with just 2.9% disagreement.

![Figure 8.11 – Student Feedback on Their Programme is Important for AQA](image)

90% of academic staff agreed/strongly agreed that student feedback on their programme is important for AQA. Perhaps surprisingly, 6 of the 148 academic respondents (4.1%) disagreed with student feedback. All administration staff, management staff and student services staff (100%) agreed that student feedback is important for AQA.
In **Round 2**, 97% agreed “the importance for AQA of student feedback on their programme”, up from 92.8% agreement in Round 1. Academic staff alone continued to disagree, but this time 96% of Academic staff agreed compared with 90% agreement in Round 1 by this staff group. The number of Academic staff in disagreement reduced from 6 to 3 staff. Perhaps not surprising, 100% of Students agreed “the importance for AQA of student feedback on their programme.”

**Round 1** also queried the importance of student feedback on assessment for AQA. Figure 8.12 confirmed that 82.3% of staff agreed/strongly agreed and 6.2% disagreed/strongly disagreed.

![Figure 8.12](image)

**Figure 8.12 – Student Feedback on Assessment is Important for AQA**

Academic staff responses from 149 academic staff and Administration Staff views of 44 administrators were in line with the percentage responses of the general population above. The management staff who answered this question (17) returned unanimous agreement. Student Support staff were also highly in agreement (88.9%), with no disagreement from them on the importance of student feedback on assessment.
In Round 2 the level of agreement on the importance of student feedback on assessment rose from 82.3% to 94% across all staff groups. The level of disagreement dropped from 6.2% to 6% and arose only among the Academic staff grouping. While small in the overall context, this disagreement among 6% of Academic staff “that student feedback on assessment is important for AQA” was an interesting finding. Students (100%) agree with the vast majority of staff and of academic staff.

**Importance of Industry Feedback**

Round 1 queried participants’ views on the importance for AQA of industry feedback on academic programmes. Nearly 91% of the total population agreed/strongly agreed with this statement, with under 4% in disagreement, shown below in Figure 8.13.

![Figure 8.13 – Industry Feedback on Academic Programmes is Important for AQA](image)

Among the 149 Academic staff who answered this question there was 90% agreement on the importance of industry feedback for AQA. The 42 administration staff respondents expressed 95.3% agreement. Management staff (17) returned 88.2% agreement and student services staff (18) were unanimously in agreement.
In **Round 2**, when informed that Management were less supportive than other groups, the level of agreement “that industry feedback is important for AQA” dropped from 91% to 86% across the total survey population. Management staff agreement dropped further from 88.2% to 83%. The Administration staff view moved from 95.3% agreement to 100% agreement. Academic staff agreement was reduced to a similar level to Management moving from 90% to 82%. Student Services staff were unchanged at 100% agreement with the importance of industry feedback for AQA. Students also agreed 100%. The in-depth interviews with experts explored the views behind this disagreement between Management and Academic staff.

**Importance of Academic Monitoring**

**Round 1** queried the importance of Academic Council monitoring of academic programmes for AQA. Figure 8.14 confirms that across the total staff population 78% of staff agreed/strongly agreed, with 6% not in agreement with the importance of Academic Council monitoring of programmes for AQA. 16% stated that they didn’t know.

![Figure 8.14](image_url)

**Figure 8.14 – Academic Council Monitoring of Academic Programmes is Important for AQA**

The academic staff views returned below the average agreement of 78% regarding the importance of Academic Council monitoring of academic programmes for AQA (73.5%). As the majority of the Academic Council members are academic staff, one might have expected this staff group to support what is de facto self-regulation by academic staff of academic programmes. How might we explain this result? Either the academic staff do not see Academic Council monitoring of
programmes as meeting the requirements of AQA, or perhaps the lower than average support might reflect a protectiveness or insecurity among academic staff with regard to the monitoring of programmes. This result needed further clarification through the follow-up interviews.

Administration staff views were very strongly in agreement with the importance of Academic Council monitoring of academic programmes at 86%. This level of support was somewhat surprising by virtue of administration staff not being represented on Academic Council. Perhaps the high level of support could be more for monitoring of academic programmes per se than for Academic Council monitoring specifically. This distinction was examined further in the follow-up interviews.

Student services were the most supportive staff group for Academic Council monitoring of academic programmes, with 94% expressing their support. Note that this staff group was also not represented at Academic Council. The management group was just below average agreement with Academic Council monitoring of academic programmes at 76.4% compared with 78% overall agreement.

One might reasonably have expected that the two staff groups represented on Academic Council, academics and management, would be the most supportive of Academic Council monitoring of programmes. That was not the case and the reasons for this merit further investigation in follow-up interviews.

There may also be a need to clarify why having supported the mechanisms in questions B1 to B7 used by Academic Council to monitor AQA, there now seems to be less support for the general concept of Academic Council monitoring.

Acknowledging that 73% of Academic staff support Academic Council monitoring of programmes, Round 2 queried why there was not a higher level of support for Academic Council monitoring of these programmes. 72% of respondents said that this result stemmed from “A better understanding among Academic Council members of the function of Academic Council.” In contrast, 28% explained the lower levels of support as “A lack of support among Academic
Council members for Academic Council authority.” Management were split 50/50 on these two reasons. Academic staff returned 73% support for the explanation based on a better understanding of the function of Academic Council. 75% of the Student Support staff and Administration staff agreed with the explanation based Academic staff’s better understanding. The structure of Academic Council, a balancing of management and academic staff quotas, may help to explain why Management and the other staff groups hold different views on this point. This question was arguably beyond the realm of deep knowledge of students. Hence, we should not be surprised that they expressed a split view 47%-53% leaning marginally towards a better understanding among Academic Council members rather than lack of support for Academic Council as an explanation.

Academic staff themselves explained their lower level of support (73.5%) for Academic Council monitoring of programmes mainly due to “a protectiveness among Academic Staff with regard to the monitoring of academic programmes” (35%) and “Academic staff do not see Academic Council monitoring of programmes as meeting the needs of AQA” (31%), with 23% confirming “There is an insecurity among Academic staff with regard to the monitoring of academic programmes.” Management views confirmed the Academic staff view with 33% for protectiveness, 33% for not meeting the requirements of AQA and 17% confirmation of an insecurity among Academic staff with regard to the monitoring of academic programmes. Administration staff placed the emphasis on the same two reasons, returning 43% for each. Fifty percent (50%) of Student Support thought the main reason was protectiveness among Academic staff. It was noteworthy that one member of Academic staff commented that many saw monitoring of programmes as an obstacle to be “got around.” Among Students 53% referenced “protectiveness among Academic Staff.”

Acknowledging again that 73% of Academic staff agreed with Academic Council monitoring, the expectation that support for Academic monitoring would be higher among the staff member groups of Academic Council (Management and Academics) was supported 100% by Administration staff and Student Support staff and by 76% of Students. However there was just 67% support for this assumption among the member groups for this assumption. It would seem the membership of Academic Council were themselves conflicted in their support for Academic Council authority. This interpretation of the data was explored in the expert interviews.
Round 1 queried the importance of Academic Council monitoring of assessment for AQA. Figure 8.15 shows that across the total staff population over 67% of staff strongly agree/agree, with 11% not in agreement with the importance of Academic Council monitoring of assessment for AQA and 22% don’t knows.

Figure 8.15 – Academic Council Monitoring of Assessment is Important for AQA

On average across all staff groups there was 67% support for Academic Council monitoring of assessment for AQA, with 11% expressing disagreement. 59% of Academic staff were in agreement, 26% selected “neither agree nor disagree” and 15% disagreed. Administration staff were 79% in agreement with Academic Council monitoring of assessment for AQA, with 4.7% disagreement. Student Services staff were 89% in agreement, with zero disagreement. Management staff were 70.6% in agreement with Academic Council monitoring of assessment for AQA, with 5.9% disagreement.

Perhaps it was understandable that Academic staff were less supportive of Academic Council monitoring than other staff groups where the monitoring applied directly and specifically to their
core responsibility for assessment. At the same time, it was questionable how any AQA system in Higher Education can be effective without addressing the quality assurance of assessment through some formal process.

In **Round 2**, respondents were informed of the lower level of support from Academic staff for Academic Council monitoring of assessment for AQA. Yet the level of support across the general population rose from 67% to 75% support. Among the Academic staff themselves the level of support rose from 59% to 68%. Administration staff, Student Services staff and Student views rose to 100% support of the importance of Academic Council monitoring of assessment for AQA. Only Management staff support decreased when aware of the Academic staff view in Round 1, from 70.6% to 67% or the same level of support originally stated by All staff.

**Importance of Management Commitment**

**Round 1** queried the importance of management commitment to establishing a viable QA culture. Across the total staff population 91% of staff strongly agree/agree, with less than 2% disagreement with the importance of management commitment in establishing a viable QA culture.

Of the total survey population 209 answered this question. Figure 8.16 confirms that of these respondents 91% agreed that management commitment was a key element in establishing a viable AQA culture. Academic staff were 87.3% in agreement. Administration staff were 93% in agreement, with zero disagreement. Both the student services staff group and the management staff group were also 100% in agreement.
There was a consistently high level of agreement on the importance of management commitment across all staff subgroups within the organisation. Such high levels of agreement are a positive indication of agreement within the organisational culture around this aspect of the AQA system. All staff groups acknowledging management roles and responsibilities for AQA was a healthy sign of agreement across subcultures within the organisational culture.

In Round 2, this high level of support for the importance of Management commitment to QA culture is explained by 69% of respondents as due to a “High level of agreement within the organisation on the importance of management commitment” to AQA. An alternative explanation referenced by 19% of all staff was a “Top-down management culture of AQA within the organisation.” Management agreed (67%) with the former view but offered no support for the latter view, which was proffered only by small number of Academic staff (23%) and Administration staff (20%). The majority of Students (53%) agreed with the majority staff view.

Figure 8.16 – Management Commitment is a Key Element in Establishing a Viable QA Culture
8.5 Research Findings: Assessment of QA Systems

Section C of the Round 1 survey questionnaire, questions C1 to C5, explored staff views on the strengths and weaknesses of the current AQA system. This section of the survey afforded the respondent the opportunity to respond more fully, beyond the closed question choice listings of the previous sections of the questionnaire. Section C included three open questions C1 to C3, allowing for free text responses. As a result, the response data was rich and varied, requiring a more complex coding schematic. Having initially coded responses by staff role, the codes were then assessed for significance across the staff group. Codes were then merged to a more limited coding set based on significance and commonality of response meanings.

A direct effect of providing free response open questions was a noticeable reduction in response rates. However, the response numbers remained sufficient to be statistically reliable. The benefits of gathering the rich data responses on staff views and attitudes, facilitated by inclusion of the free text response, is justified in this way.

Strengths of the AQA Systems

Round 1 asked the four staff groups for their views on the main strengths of AQA systems in operation. Here I teased out with staff their views on the “the best processes of academic quality assurance.” The question format sought respondents to identify three strengths. Of the 244 respondents 123 responded to this question. 93 respondents listed 3 strengths of the AQA system, 20 respondents offered 2 strengths and 10 respondents provided just 1 strength, all in a free text format.

The analysis tool used for coding identified the 26 codes below for the first strength responses to question C1. The tool used a word count comparison method between responses. Concerned that a word comparison coding method was limited and word context free, I carried out the laborious manual analysis of responses to cross check the coding from the system. This manual cross check revealed 27 possible codes based on context and meaning. While the manual coding was helpful in understanding the data, the difference in coding proved insignificant in the next stage of coding analysis and collapsing of codes.
The order in which the main strengths of the AQA system were listed varied. However, there was a high level of overlap. Hence, the relative significance of factors listed across all three strengths...
listed were clearly identifiable and quantifiable. The variations in response ordering were also clearly identifiable for more in-depth analysis by staff grouping.

Figure 8.19 – Main Strengths of the AQA Systems in Operation (3rd Strength Identified)

The Cloud Diagrams in Figures 8.17, 8.18 and 8.19 above for responses one, two and three to question C1 identified four main strengths of the AQA systems:

1. **Academic Staff**: quality, commitment, motivation, professionalism, integrity and self-reflective were returned as attributes of the Academic Staff. This response also reflects on staff in general, but academic staff is repeatedly mentioned specifically.

2. **Quality Standards** in operation were also considered as a particular strength, with repeated positive references to policies, procedures and documentation.

3. **External Examiners and External Reviews** are noted as a strength of the AQA system.

4. **Student feedback and student involvement** in the AQA system are considered important. Another strength of the AQA system was identified as the extent to which its very existence supports the transparency, accountability and integrity of the system. Fairness and consistency are underpinned by the AQA system.

The practical nature and content of programmes was presented as a strength. Industry engagement and industry alignment of programmes of study was also mentioned as a strength. Collegial inclusiveness and academic dialogue were presented as a source of strength, supporting a homogeneous organisation view and teamwork.
The predominant **academic perspective**, based on analysis of this group’s responses, was well defined and reflective of a widely-shared view among academics of their identity and role as academics. It was clear from the responses that academic staff in institutes of technology see themselves primarily as teachers rather than as researchers, whose primary relationships are with academic colleagues and with their students. Quality was defined by a number of factors. Accountability and integrity of the education system was considered the very basis of quality. Standards and benchmarking externally were presented as the basis of measuring quality.

The commitment and professionalism of lecturers was put forward as defining the quality of the education delivered to students. Student focus, feedback and involvement were recognised as an important aspect of AQA. Internal policies and procedures defined the implementation of quality. External monitoring and review were also considered important elements of AQA. Many lecturers considered the collegiate and teamwork as central to maintaining quality within the academic role. There were repeated references to the importance of industry in ensuring relevance and quality. This variety of responses indicates the complexity of unpacking AQA.

While question C1 sought views on strengths of the AQA system, a small number of negative views were also expressed on the system in place. Though not widespread or representative, these views were worth noting as examples of cultural views that developed perhaps through disaffection or detachment from the predominant group identity among academics. Again, it should be stressed that only 3 of the 252 responses received from academics are in this negative response category. One response stated, “I don’t believe the system is strong”, while another response identified a strength of the AQA system as “That it is being developed – it’s not there yet.” Another response stated a strength of the AQA system as “a strong Academic Council to prevent management watering down standards as has happened. Decreasing class contact hours and meddling in programmes is damaging the institute in industry.” It was important for Management to control any instinctive or negative authority response to “detractors.” While it can be difficult for Management and other culture groups to hear criticism, it was essential to have that critique within a system as a check on the potential for self-perpetuating exuberance in group identity.
The dominant administration perspective was reflected in that group’s response to question C1. A total of 47 strengths were listed by 17 administration staff. These responses reflected the academic perspective in highlighting the importance of external oversight, accountability and integrity of the academic process, the importance of standards and the quality of academic staff.

The administration perspective differed in two respects from the academic perspective. Firstly, there are wider references beyond the quality of academic staff to the importance of all staff, their integrity and commitment, to the AQA system. Secondly, there were a few references to students as customers and upholding the brand and image of LIT, reflecting a slightly different commercial thinking to the involvement of industry that we noted among Academic staff. While the academic perspective and the administration perspective were in agreement on three of the four main strengths identified by the academics, it was noteworthy that students were not mentioned anywhere in the 47 responses from administration staff.

Nine Student Services staff responded to question C1, again presenting a slightly different perspective. A systematic AQA approach based on high academic standards and delivering consistency and transparency with external oversight summarises the Student Services view of the AQA system. Again, it was interesting that as in the Administration perspective, students were not referred to as part of the AQA system. It was also interesting that only one of the 9 Student Services respondents viewed student services as a strength of the AQA system, particularly as Student Services included a learning support centre, dyslexia support service, as well as disability and assistive technology support.

The management perspective was based on 40 responses from 14 managers. Transparency, consistency and standards, policies and procedures, external oversight, qualified, experienced and knowledgeable academic staff, student feedback and collegiate decision-making are all mentioned repeatedly as strengths of the AQA system. More unique to the Management perspective were references to Academic Council, academic freedom, staff enthusiasm and AQA as a mechanism for improvement.
Round 2 further explored views on the four main strengths of the AQA system identified in Round 1, with a staggering 94% agreement with these four strengths of the AQA system, across the general survey population. Only 4 Academic staff and 1 Student Support staff member disagreed with all four of the main strengths of the AQA system identified. Moreover, 92% of students agreed, which confirmed the high level of consensus on the main strengths of the AQA operation among both staff and students.

There was 88% agreement with the Round 1 finding that “Academic staff in Institutes of Technology see themselves primarily as teachers or lecturers rather than as researchers”, including 87% agreement from Academic staff themselves. Students (83%) agree with this view of Academic Staff identity.

The finding that Academic staff see their primary relationships being with academic colleagues and their students was confirmed in Round 2 by 98% of the total survey populations. Only 2 Academic staff disagreed with this view. Again, 100% of students agreed with this view.

Weaknesses of the AQA Systems

Round 1 asked the four staff groups for their views on the main weaknesses of AQA systems in operation. The aim here was to identify the staff’s assessment of and views on any weak processes of academic quality assurance in operation. The question asked respondents to identify three weaknesses. Of the 244 respondents, 118 answered this question. 78 respondents listed three weaknesses, 22 provided two weaknesses and 8 listed just 1 weakness in the AQA systems in operation, all in free text format.

There was no significant difference in response rates between the strengths listed in Question C1 and the weaknesses listed in Question C2, indicating that respondents felt free to express views on weaknesses in the system.

Cloud Diagrams, the analysis tool used for coding, identified the 27 codes below for the first weakness responses to question C2. The tool used a word count comparison method between responses. Having previously established in Question C1 that a word comparison coding method
is context free, I again carried out the laborious manual analysis of responses to cross-check the coding from the system. This manual cross check threw up five primary and two secondary codes based on context and meaning. Codes such as “Poor, Needs, Colleges, Failure and Paper” were not meaningful without context and were eliminated from the coding signifiers.

In contrast to Question C1, where the manual and analysis coding tools were well aligned, for Question C2 the manual coding proved essential to a better understanding of the data. It enabled a deeper understand of what the coding words meant in context in terms of the views and opinions they expressed. This difference reflected the fact that responses on strengths of the AQA system in Question C1 tended to be written in short phrases or single words, whereas responses on weaknesses in Question C2 provided more explanation or examples. In being critical staff tended to be more explicit in explaining precisely the weakness in the AQA system in the adjectives used.

![Figure 8.20 – Weaknesses of the AQA Systems in Operation (1st Weakness Identified)](image)

The order in which the main weaknesses of the AQA system were listed varied between responses. However, there was a high level of overlap between the three weaknesses recorded. Hence, the relative significance of factors listed across all three weaknesses were clearly identifiable and quantifiable. The variations in response ordering were also clearly identifiable for more in-depth analysis by staff grouping. Even in the key word and phrases automated tool analysis there was a consistency across the Cloud Diagrams for all three weaknesses identified, with academic staff, students, teaching and management considerations rated highly.
The Cloud Diagrams in Figures 8.20, 8.21 and 8.22 above for responses one, two and three to question C2 identified five main weaknesses and two secondary weaknesses in the AQA systems. The five main weaknesses are identified:

1. **Academic Staff**: disinterested; resistant to change; underperforming; too busy to be reflective; not monitored and not supported to do research, are some of the comments that support the view that academic staff are represented as a weakness in the AQA system.

2. **Students**: the student experience; student unwillingness; lack of awareness among students; plagiarism and unequal treatment of students, are given as examples of where students are represented as a weakness in the AQA system.
3. **Quality:** AQA system is too removed from teaching; emphasis on efficiency conflicting with a quality focus; lack of communication and training for staff, are presented as the reason why the focus on quality itself is weak within the AQA system.

4. **Management:** overbearing management structure; managerialism; micro management; management lack of commitment and self-obsession; disregard for lecturers; short-term focus; loose management practices; management by pass rates; ineffective departmental management; focus on “doing things right over doing the right thing”, are all represented as contributing to a management weakness in the AQA system.

5. **Teaching:** teaching quality not the highest priority; disconnect of AQA with teaching practice; no assessment and little internal oversight of teaching quality; a focus on quantity versus quality are identified by survey participants as the reasons why teaching is a weakness in the AQA system.

Lack of standards was identified as one of the two secondary areas of weakness in the AQA system. This weakness was attributed to standards generally being difficult to maintain in Higher Education and the effects of increased student numbers or massification of education on academic standards.

The other secondary weakness identified was stated in different ways as relating to bureaucracy, processes, procedures or policies. Staff expressed views that there was too much bureaucracy, that communication of policies and procedures was poor, that a process orientation took precedence over objectives or results, that policies are complicated and inflexible, that there were breaches of procedures, that policy implementation was sometimes unclear and inconsistent, that it was all a box-ticking exercise, that there was failure to implement policies and procedures and that there were different policies and regulations for each Institute of Technology. The above views were presented as reasons why bureaucracy, policies, processes and procedures were weaknesses in the AQA system.

The view in point 1 above of academic staff as a weakness in the quality system contrasts with the earlier identification of academic staff as a strength, based on their commitment, motivation, professionalism, integrity and being self-reflective. Perhaps this contradiction between strengths and weaknesses could be explained by the range of staff surveyed, with different and sometimes
competing role identities. The public sector can typically display a range of personality and performance differences within the staff population. As I was dealing here with people’s perceptions and attitudes it was not surprising that contrary views were expressed.

The 237 academic group responses included references to all five of the main weaknesses and the two secondary weaknesses as expressed in relation to the AQA system. This group displayed the ability to be very robust both in its self-criticism and in its criticism of management and support services related to AQA. A wide range of individual views were also expressed that were not repeated by others, indicating a level of variation in the consideration of weaknesses in the AQA system.

The 33 administration group responses tended not to see the academic staff and management as weaknesses. Their main focus was on the additional bureaucracy and staff issues associated with the AQA system. A number of specific and insightful views that merit mention are:

1. No procedure in place if a lecturer consistently does not meet required standards.
2. It (AQA) appears to be a complicated process.
3. Difficulty getting people on board.
4. Staff under pressure to deliver leaving too little time for reflection.
5. Communication between academic staff and administration not always as it should or could be.

The 42 management responses touched on all five of the general weaknesses identified by the total survey population. The management primary concern was pointedly on teaching and the lack of evaluation and oversight of teaching. They were also critical of the administrative overhead or bureaucracy associated with the AQA system. A selection of management responses identifying weaknesses of the AQA system included:

1. Management involvement.
2. Staff distance from quality assurance processes.
3. Lack of evaluation of teaching.
4. Excessive reliance on bureaucratic approach.
5. Too much emphasis on process not content.
This question C2 received eleven responses from student services staff. Their views were best summarised by repeating responses here:

1. Lack of student participation in quality enhancement.
2. Lack of implemented accountability.
3. Lack of input by student support staff.
4. Lack of awareness of QA.

One particular student services response summed up a few points with the comment: “Not much point in having systems and procedures without the necessary feedback, review and update going forward.”

In Round 2 a number of subsidiary questions arising from Round 1 were explored in more detail. Students, Management and Student Services confirmed 100% agreement with the five main weaknesses of AQA identified. Academic staff confirmed 70% agreement and Administration staff confirmed 87% agreement.

When queried about the seeming contradiction that Academic staff were seen as both the primary strength and the primary weakness of AQA, 81% of all staff explained this in terms of the quality of teaching varying widely, with 76% of Academic staff and 92% of Students agreeing with this view.

Administration staff had previously identified five specific weaknesses of AQA in Round 1 (as above). When queried about these five weaknesses of AQA specifically identified by Administration staff, 84% of all staff and 92% of Students agreed in Round 2 that these were five weaknesses experienced by Administration Staff in carrying out their role. Administration Staff responses provided 100% confirmation of this. Academic staff were the only group to question the Administration staff view. 77% of Academic staff agreed with the Administration staff. However, 23% of Academic staff did not agree that the five weaknesses identified by the Administration staff are experienced by Administration staff in carrying out their role. It was interesting that nearly one in four Academic staff may not appreciate the issues identified by the Administration staff group as issues for their group in carrying out their role. All other staff group responses confirmed full awareness of those issues.
Management staff had identified five specific weaknesses of AQA in Round 1 (as above). When queried about these five weaknesses of AQA specifically identified by Management staff in Round 1, 71% of all staff agreed in Round 2 that these were five weaknesses experienced by Management staff in carrying out their role. Students and Management staff responses provided 100% confirmation of this. Academic staff voiced 36% disagreement with the Management staff views on these five issues with two Student Support staff also in disagreement.

Student Services staff identified four specific weaknesses of AQA in Round 1 (as above). In Round 2, 82% of all staff and 92% of students agreed that these were four weaknesses experienced by Student Support staff in carrying out their role. Student Support staff responses provided 89% confirmation of this. No staff group responded with full agreement. The Student Support staff were less directly involved in and effected by AQA. Their responses exposed a lack of clarity with regard to the issues involved.

**Potential to Improve AQA**

**Round 1** asked the four staff groups for their views on the potential to improve the AQA systems in operation, to explore staff views on areas of potential improvement in the AQA in operation. The question format sought a single response in free text format. Of the 244 respondents, 100 answered this question and 144 skipped the question. One hundred and eleven suggestions for potential improvements were offered. The response rate for this question was just over 10% lower than for questions C1 and C2, perhaps reflecting the increasing level of conceptual thinking required. Academic staff provided 72% of the responses to question C3, administration staff provided 11% of responses, management staff provided 12.5% of responses and support services staff provided 4.5% of responses.

This pattern of response contrasts with the breakdown of the overall survey response population in which academic staff responses were at 62.5%, management staff responses were at 8%, administration staff responses were at 21% and student support staff responses were at 8.5%.
The cloud diagram in Figure 8.23 below documents the most common words and phrases used in responses, with the relative frequency of use indicated by word size or prominence in the diagram.

Delving into the meaning and context behind this cloud diagram I discerned that the different staff groups place emphasis differently. It was noteworthy that 52% of academic staff skipped this question and that the 48% of Academic staff who responded still provided 72% of all responses.

![Cloud Diagram]

Figure 8.23 – Potential for Improvement in Academic Quality Assurance (25 Most Important)

Responses from academic staff focused on seven areas of potential improvement, namely:

- Potential for staff improvement
- Potential for quality improvement
- Potential for improvement in review processes
- Potential for student improvement
- Potential for improvement in Assessment
- Potential for improvement in policies and procedures
- Potential for improvement in communication

Responses from academic staff regarding potential for improvement in staff can be grouped into two underlying points. Firstly, there was an element of self-reflection setting out the need for high-level qualifications, the need for ongoing staff development in subject area expertise, a need for continuing professional development in teaching methods and provision methods, quality
assurance training for academic staff with roles of responsibility, induction training needed by new academic staff, more training for all staff on academic regulations and procedures and a need for academic staff to engage in their subject area outside their department. Secondly, there was an element of reflection on the organisation setting out the need for management of the teaching workloads (academic staff in Institutes of Technology teach 18-20 contact hours per week) to facilitate course teams to work together on development of their programmes and on their own research.

The potential for quality improvement expressed by academic staff primarily addressed the question of resources. Increases in academic workload were linked to a negative impact on quality with, for example, “longer time between submission of continuous assessment work and feedback.” There was a perceived lack of time for critical self-evaluation and for departmental level meetings that provide feedback on quality. A typical response stated “Yes, there is a potential for improvement but this would require the allocation of resources to a self-reflective process such as that involved in learning organisation models. The fostering of a culture of reflection and change rather than complaint and criticism would assist with this.”

With regard to a potential for improvement in review processes academic staff called for more peer review and continuing professional development (CPD), more internal review and audits of course provision for compliance with regulations, more external review by third parties and international accreditation of programmes. One response provided a list of improvements for “Greater inter-institute quality reviews at academic and middle management level, integrated peer assessments, multi institutes quality reviews, improved research and work environments.”

The potential for student improvement demonstrated a level of student-centred thinking in the views of many academic staff and a critical view of students among many others. The former view was expressed in the perception that the organisation “exists primarily to serve and educate students. Everything we do should be about that. Sadly, there was too much value given to external accountability and empire building within the organisation.” In the critique of students there was reference to a demand for “higher standards to compensate for […] falling standards in performance, engagement and attendance all of which impact on quality.” The QA system was
perceived by one academic response as “a flexible standard that promotes student retention despite poor standards. Students who have not achieved learning and programme outcomes can still graduate and this dilutes the work of students who achieve the same degree having achieved all outcomes.” Another response stated that “Educational outcomes can never be left static as it encourages ‘hedging’ by students. Consider the attitude ‘will this be on the exam?’ […] educational excellence will always require tweaking so that outcomes don’t become stale.” On the same theme another response read “Revisions and amendments over time to QA procedures appear to be incremental steps in making it easier to pass poor or failed students.” There was on the one hand a level of support for students and their educational endeavours among academic staff while at the same time holding strong views with regard to any response to students that might be perceived as dumbing down standards or quality.

Potential for improvement in assessment was another theme that finds voice among academic staff responses. There were references to the need for “More regulated and structured assessment criteria” and “more consistent marking of continuous assessment.” The academic staff concerns with regard to assessment were summed up in one response stating that “Standards for setting continuous assessment and new strategies for assessment are not robust and open to abuse by students.”

Academic staff offered views on the potential for improvement in policies and procedures and particularly in the need to communicate these to staff. There was a call for “More focus on the real objective and less on checking the boxes.”

The potential for improvement in communication had been raised in this survey by the academic staff group. This call for more and better communication was common with staff surveys in general, as communication can always be better. One response to the QA systems read “It needs to be a more transparent and accessible process. Great care should be taken with language – jargon must be avoided to ensure good communication.”

**Administration staff** provided just 12 responses to question C3. That equals 21.4% of the total number of administrator respondents to the survey, with 78.6% of administration staff skipping
this question on QA improvement. The administration staff who responded concurred with the views expressed by the academic staff group that there was potential for improvement in “monitoring of academic staff”, improvement in resources and communication of what AQA is needed. However, the administration staff views differed in their focus on “speedier reaction times to changes in outside influences”, an emphasis on the importance of external benchmarks and the potential for improvement in AQA by “More people to get on board with it.”

**Management staff** provided 14 responses to question C3 or 12.6% of responses, well above their 8.6% of total responses to the survey. The management staff group responses presented a shared view on the potential to “allow greater access to honest student evaluation of module delivery.” This view was also express as “Providing students with adequate methods to provide responsible feedback on individual lecturers.” There is an overlap here with the academic staff views. There was also some agreement with the academic staff views on the potential for improvement in review processes so that there is a “stronger external review.” What is new within the management staff view is a comment from one manager that “staff should be acknowledged/rewarded when they contribute to quality improvement/enhancement. This would contribute greatly to a more positive quality culture.”

Of the 23 student support staff participating in the survey, only 5 answered question C3. One of those responses stated: “I am not knowledgeable enough on this issue to comment”, perhaps providing an explanation for the high number of support staff who skipped the question. Two views expressed by the student support staff on potential for improvement were “Maybe a need for stronger links with employers” and “Co-operation and commitment from all bodies within an open and supportive ethos.”

**Round 2** queried further the different staff group views on improvement of AQA. In round 1 Academic staff emphasised the need to improve resourcing to improve quality. The 90% agreement with this view in Round 2 across all staff groups contrasted with the different group views. Administration staff offered 100% agreement that resourcing needs was the key to AQA improvement. However, 40% of Management and 33% of Student Services staff differed with this view. Student agreement was 83%.
In Round 1 Administration staff focused on external factors, expressing a need for “speedier reaction times to changes in outside influences” and placing emphasis on outside benchmarks for AQA improvement. There was only 62% agreement across all groups with this view in Round 2. Even Administration staff themselves offered just 50% agreement on reflection. Management returned only 40% support for this view. Students (83%) were more supportive of speedier reaction time and external benchmarks as necessary improvements.

The Management view in Round 1 calling for more student evaluation and feedback for AQA improvement gained 82% support across all groups and 92% support from Students in Round 2. Academic staff were the only group questioning this view, still giving it 75% support.

In Round 1 Management staff feedback called for staff to be acknowledged for contribution to quality improvement. 87% of the general population and 100% of Students agreed with this view in Round 2.

In Round 1 Student Support staff suggested a need for stronger links with employers as a basis for AQA improvement. This view gained 78% support in Round 2 across most groups, with only the Management staff disagreeing with this view (50%). Student agreement was 92%.

**Effects of AQA on Quality**

**Round 1** asked the four staff groups for their views on the primary result of AQA on quality. Respondents were asked for the primary result, however, were permitted to tick more than one option, to avoid overly influencing the consensus building in Delphi Round 1. This question was looking at the different views and opinions on the effect of the AQA system as it impacts on quality. The question format offered five options and a comment option. Of the 244 respondents, 161 answered this question and 83 skipped it. This was the highest response rate for any question in Section C and signalled an increase from the low of 100 responses to question C3, the last of the free text response questions. Overall, 55% of respondents expressed the view that AQA did in fact improve academic quality, 45% agreed that AQA improved the student experience, 30% gave a view that AQA led to improvement in the academic quality system, 13% were of the view that
AQA increased management monitoring and 9% expressed the view that it improved management monitoring.

Table 8.2 below compared the levels of agreement of the four staff groups to question C4 on the primary results of academic quality assurance on quality. These are presented in percentages as the number of respondents varies across staff groupings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve Academic Quality</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve Academic Quality System</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve Student Experience</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve Management Monitoring</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase Management Monitoring</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.2 – Primary Results of Academic Quality Assurance on Quality (Level of Agreement)

The academic staff grouping was strongly of the view that the result of the academic quality system was primarily to improve academic quality and the student experience. There appeared to be little concern among the academic staff that the AQA results in improved or increased management monitoring. Further, only 28% of academic staff viewed improvement in the AQA system as a primary result of academic quality assurance.

Among administration staff there was also strong endorsement of the improvement in academic quality and in the student experience as a result of AQA. This staff group was somewhat more concerned than academic staff about management monitoring.

Management staff shared the administration staff concern about increased management monitoring as a primary result of AQA, with one in four managers holding that view. The management group were the least convinced that AQA results in improved academic quality and see the primary result as improvement in the student experience.

The student support staff statistics were based on five responses. Hence, they needed to be read more carefully in terms of the weighting of an individual opinion at 20% of total group view. This
group was strongest in the opinion that AQA leads to improvement across all areas under consideration in question C4. The emphasis within this group view on improvement in the academic quality system as the primary result of AQA was noticeably different from the relatively consistent views of the other three staff groups in this regard.

There were 12 additional comments in the comment option under question C4. Eleven of these comments came from academics, one from a person with dual role. Within these additional comments was a view that AQA “has changed nothing”, a view taking exception to AQA as “a monitoring/accounting exercise” and a view that the result of AQA was best measured in terms of “employability following completion of a course.”

In Round 2 staff were again queried about the primary result of AQA being to improve academic quality, with 84% agreement across all staff groups and 92% agreement from students. When asked again if the primary result is to improve academic quality or to improve student experience, 74% of staff and 83% of Students continue to support the view that the primary result of AQA is to improve academic quality.

The minority view that the primary result of AQA was to improve student experience came from Students, Administration staff and Student Support staff. Forty five percent (45%) of Administration staff took the view that the primary result of AQA was to improve student experience, with 33% of Student Support staff also taking this view. Surprisingly, only 17% of Students expressed this view.

The Management staff changed its view explicitly between Round 1 and Round 2. In Round 1, the majority of Management (56%) were of the view that the primary result of AQA was to improve student experience. In Round 2 Management staff views changed to 83% that the primary result of AQA is quality improvement, with 17% continuing to hold that it improves the student experience.

In Round 1 Student Support staff views had differed from all other group views, holding that the primary result of AQA was improvement in the Academic Quality System itself. When this was
queried in Round 2 the Student Support staff moved away from this view, but the Students (66%), Management staff (50%) and the Academic staff (70%) gave this view increased support.

**Effects of AQA on Staff**

**Round 1** asked the four staff groups for their views on the primary result of AQA on staff. I was looking here at the different views on the effect of the AQA system as it impacts on staff. The question format offered four options and a comment option. Of the 244 respondents, 136 answered this question and 108 skipped the question. Overall, 77% of respondents expressed the view that a primary result of AQA was to improve academic staff performance, with 4% of respondents taking the contrary view that AQA dis-improved academic staff performance.

A total of 33% of respondents expressed the view that a primary result of AQA is to increase academic staff commitment, with 8% of respondents expressing the contrary view that a primary result of AQA is to decrease academic staff commitment.

Table 8.3 below compares the levels of agreement of the four staff groups to question C5 on the primary results of academic quality assurance on staff. These are presented in percentages as the number of respondents varies across staff groupings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Results of AQA on Staff</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve Academic Staff Performance</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>100% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dis-improve Academic Staff Performance</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>25% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase Academic Staff Commitment</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>75% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease Academic Staff Commitment</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>25% (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 8.3 – Primary Results of Academic Quality Assurance on Staff (Level of Agreement)**

There was agreement across all staff groups that the primary effect of AQA on staff is to improve academic staff performance. The academic staff responses acknowledged this result. To a much lesser extent academic staff acknowledged a positive effect on academic staff commitment with all other staff groups viewing increased academic staff commitment as a stronger result. The
management views were the most critical of the AQA results on staff, returning 14% agreement that dis-improved academic staff performance and decreased academic staff commitment were primary results of AQA. There was a low level of support for this Management group view among administration staff and academic staff. The percentage score in this question for student support staff was based on four individual survey responses. The response pattern for student support staff was generally consistent with the response pattern across other staff groupings. However, the absolute percentage weightings were out of kilter with other groups because of the small group size behind the responses and they should be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

There were 32 additional comments in total, with 25 from academic staff in the comment option under question C5. There were also 4 comments from administration staff and 3 comments from management staff, with no comments from the student support staff for question C5. Consistent with the critical leaning of the management views on question C5, all three management comments are negative statements that the primary result of AQA on staff is “no effect” or “a leading cause to a loss of motivation from staff members.” One of the administration staff comments stated: “It makes staff question whether management trust that staff carry out their job with personal commitment and integrity first and foremost, not because the course/outcomes are subject to scrutiny.”

A range of academic views were expressed in comments in response to question C5. These are worth presenting here to gain a qualitative sense of the range and variations in responses within that academic role group. This group displayed the widest variation in views of the four groups surveyed. These responses were to the question “The primary result of academic quality assurance on staff is to:

- Improved quality assurance - those choices are not appropriate
- Has made no change
- Procedures and paperwork may improve increasing workload only
- It's not simple cause and effect. Lack of resources, increased student numbers and increased hours are compromising the process. It can become just a chore/ box-ticking exercise.
- None of the above
- Improve the educational experience for students should be the main result
• Current practice is a leading cause to a loss in motivation from staff members in my opinion
• Outsourcing QA away from course boards and individual lecturers
• To ensure that staff are adhering to the rules and regulations set out by the institution in order to ensure fair and equal treatment of the students
• Performance is not an accurate metric for academics - motivation is more apt
• An opportunity for evaluation, reflection and response
• Managerialism - manuals and box-ticking culture have redirected energy away from the classroom
• Ensure that staff meet certain minimum requirements
• Cripes....if there was a true quality system, then I could answer the Q....and academic performance would improve
• Increase in paperwork with little or no impact on quality of academic programmes
• Recognition and acknowledgement of effort, commitment to professional development.
• I don't think it currently achieves any of the above four options.
• Should be to increase capacity which should improve outputs
• Help staff to do their job as best as possible
• Not sure
• Academic quality assurance brings standards to staff. The primary result of this is the benefit of "law" to staff efforts.
• It makes little or no difference.
• Spend more time mangling assessments to fit generic models
• Support the academics and their work, outline where and what they are doing well and where an improvement can be made

The comment responses displayed a range of differing attitudes among academic staff to AQA. Question C5 elicited a large number of comment responses from academic staff. I would suggest that the focus of the four answer options provided on the effect on academic staff specifically encouraged this group to respond more fully with the comment option than other role groups.

In Round 2 all staff confirmed that the primary result of AQA on staff was to improve Academic Staff Performance, with the support level increasing from 77% to 79% from Round 1 to Round 2. Administration staff had been the most sceptical group in this regard in Round 1 at 74% but their support for this primary result increased to 87% in Round 2. Academic staff support decreased from 79% to 72% in Round 2. Students returned 92% support for the view that the primary result of AQA on staff is to improve Academic Staff Performance. Management returned a 14% response that the effects of AQA on Staff were to Dis-improve Academic Staff Performance and to Decrease
Academic Staff Commitment. When this response from Management was shared with all respondents in Round 2, 74% of all staff and 58% of Students disagreed with this view from the 14% of Management. The support levels for the individual negative effect statements changed as follows between Rounds 1 and 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Results of AQA on Staff (Round 1 Compared to Round 2)</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dis-improve Academic Staff Performance – Round 1</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>25% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dis-improve Academic Staff Performance – Round 2</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>11% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease Academic Staff Commitment - Round 1</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>25% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease Academic Staff Commitment – Round 2</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>11% (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.4 – Primary Results of AQA on Staff (Round 1 Compared to Round 2)

The negative effects of AQA on staff in Table 8.4 would be a concern for an organisation’s AQA system, particularly when coupled with the 24% overall response in Round 2 that the primary result of AQA on staff is “a leading cause of a loss of motivation from staff members”, a view held by 33% of Management staff, 29% of Academic staff and 25% of Students. Moreover, 38% of all staff expressed the view in Round 2 that the primary result of AQA is “it makes staff question whether management trust that staff carry out their job with personal commitment and integrity.” It was somewhat surprising that 50% Management staff themselves, 58% of Students and 50% of Administration staff share this view of management lack of trust in staff. Concern was also expressed by 31% of staff that the primary result of AQA on staff was “outsourcing AQ away from course boards and individual lecturers.” Thirty seven percent (37%) of Academic Staff and 50% of Students supported this viewpoint, but no Management staff agreed. There was 46% support among staff and 67% support among students in Round 2 for the view that the primary result of AQA on staff was “Managerialism – manuals and box-ticking culture have redirected energy away from the classroom.” 51% of Academic staff and 63% of Administration staff share this view.
8.6 Research Findings: QA Management

Section D explored attitudes to and views on the purpose, structure, organisation and management of Higher Education and how these relate to AQA management.

What is Higher Education About?

Round 1 asked the four staff groups for their views on the general nature of the Higher Education endeavour. With this question I examined the different views on and attitudes to the nature of Higher Education across the four role groupings. The question format in Figure 8.24 offered four options and a comment option, with respondents permitted to choose more than one option in Delphi Round 1. Of the 244 respondents, 159 answered this question and 85 skipped it. Overall, 49% of respondents agreed with the view that the primary purpose of Higher Education is the pursuit of knowledge and 40% of staff agreed that Higher Education is a public service.

Contrary to the current focus of public policy, only 33% agreed with the view that Higher Education is primarily training for employment. Just 10% of staff agreed that Higher Education is primarily a business.
Table 8.5 dissected the overall organisation views and attitudes to check the consistency and difference across the organisational culture of the four staff groups being studied. The table below compares the levels of agreement across the four staff groups with the different purposes proposed in Question D1 as the primary functions of Higher Education. These are presented in percentages as the number of respondents varies across staff groupings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher Education is Primarily:</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Business</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Public Service</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pursuit of Knowledge</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training for Employment</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than One Option</td>
<td>(30%)</td>
<td>(53%)</td>
<td>(30%)</td>
<td>(84%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.5 – What Primarily is Higher Education (Levels of Agreement)

The Academic staff group views above were almost completely consistent with the overall organisation view. Though this academic group consisted of 118 of the 159 respondents to Question D1 this alone did not explain the strength of the correlation between the academic group view and the overall organisation view on the primary purpose of Higher Education. This academic group view appears to be the decisive view on this question, with a low level (30%) of ambiguity on the primary purpose of Higher Education. The academic view was the least favourable towards the idea of Higher Education as a business (10%). There was also below organisational level support among academic staff for the concept of Higher Education as training for employment (31%).

The Administration staff group views differed noticeably from the overall organisation views on the primary purpose of Higher Education. It may be significant here that of the 30 administration staff who answered this question, less than half would have gone to Higher Education as a full-time student.

In contrast to the academic staff views and the overall organisational view, the administration staff group was the most strongly favourable of the concept of Higher Education as a business (23%), at more than double the organisation score for this view. The administration group was also the group that most strongly identified the primary purpose of Higher Education as public service.
(53%) and the administration group also offered above the organisation average support for the view of Higher Education as training for employment (40%). Where the administration group again significantly differed from all three of the other staff groups was in its low level of identity with the concept of Higher Education as the pursuit of knowledge (37%). A comment provided by one of the administration staff group respondents to Question D1 gives a sense of the unease in defining the primary purpose of Higher Education: “It is turning into a business, but should be the pursuit of knowledge and a public service.”

The **Management** group view of Higher Education as a business (12%) was consistent with the low level of overall organisation and academic group views that Higher Education is not primarily a business. The management view of 31% was well below the overall view at 40% that the primary purpose of Higher Education is a public service. So if Higher Education is not viewed as a business or as a public service what was the predominant management view of the Higher Education endeavour? The management staff group was strongly supportive of the pursuit of knowledge as the primary purpose of Higher Education (62%). On the definition of purpose based on training for employment the management group was again below the overall organisation average of 33%, at 25% support for this definition. There was a high level of clarity within the management views, with only 30% choosing more than one option.

The **Student Support** group view included a high level (84%) of choosing more than one primary purpose. Hence, their percentage scores across the options were marginally higher in comparative terms. So the student support staff group score of 15% support for Higher Education viewed as a business was marginally ahead of the management view at 12% and ahead of the overall organisation view of Higher Education as a business, at 10%. The student support staff view of Higher Education as a public service was at 46%. This score was ahead of the overall organisation view (40%), yet more in line with that view than the administration group (53%) or the management group (31%). Where the student support staff group differed most from the overall organisation view was in its strong support for Higher Education as the pursuit of knowledge (69%) and strong support for a view of Higher Education as training for employment (54%). Supporting both the pursuit of knowledge view and as training for employment view explained the high level of choosing more than one option. An intuitive response to this selection of both
contrasting options might consider it odd, if not contradictory. The growing complexity in the balancing of personal value and social value purposes of Higher Education lends itself with ease to apparent contradiction, paradox and oxymoron. The unique positioning of student support staff outside the student academic endeavour, yet supporting students directly, provided an interesting lens on the purpose of Higher Education. One of the student support group used the ‘Other, please specify’ option to add the comment, “Ideally, in my opinion, it is the pursuit of knowledge. Realistically, it is a business and training for employment. These three purposes should complement each other – the best HEIs get the balance right.”

The academic staff group offered twelve additional comments in their responses to Question D1 that display some of the difficulty experienced in defining the primary purpose of Higher Education:

- The pursuit of knowledge and training for employment, dependent on the discipline.
- To educate students to be productive members of society.
- As (institute x) is a publicly funded body we provide a public service and are answerable to the taxpayer.
- Pursuit of knowledge in a structured context.
- Well....I get a strong whiff that it’s a business at (institute x). Personally, I like the "pursuit of knowledge" a la Captain Kirk, a voyage of discovery.
- Also the pursuit of knowledge.
- There is a difference between what it is and what it should be.
- In the IOT sector, it is primarily training for employment with a small element of the pursuit of knowledge.
- A resource for community, educational, public and private bodies which should help further the interests of society.
- It all depends on the primary objective of the provider. e.g. for (institute x) it's a public service, for a private college it's a business.
- Enabling people to develop skills and knowledge to develop a career.
- The rampant commodification of knowledge needs to be resisted.

**Round 2** explored the question of how Higher Education is viewed by different staff groups and by students. It began by querying whether Higher Education is viewed primarily as the Pursuit of Knowledge or as a Public Service. The outcome was a decisive 84% support for Higher Education as the Pursuit of Knowledge. A majority of **Administration** staff had expressed a contrary view in Round 1 (53%). When informed of other groups views Administration staff views changed to
75% support for Higher Education seen as primarily the Pursuit of Knowledge. Students agreed (81%) with this view.

Round 2 followed up on the question of Higher Education viewed as primarily a Business and returned 80% disagreement with this view across the total survey population, with Academic staff returning 86% disagreement. A majority of all other groups also disagreed. However, one in three Managers, Administrators, Students and Student Support staff held the view that Higher Education is primarily a Business. When the Pursuit of Knowledge definition of HE was contrasted with the Training for Employment definition, 68% of staff and 64% of Students plumped for the Pursuit of Knowledge definition. Administration staff were divided 50/50 on this question with a majority of all other groups favouring the Pursuit of Knowledge definition.

A decisive 97% of all staff and 91% of Students explained differences between Management and Academic staff views on the one hand and Administration and Student Support staff views on the other in terms of a difference in understanding or perception of Higher Education between staff groups. This level of agreement was revealing of the strength of staff group identities and their impact on staff views and perceptions of Higher Education. The strength of this agreement was further highlighted by the breakdown of responses by staff group, with 100% of Management, Administration and Student Support staff supporting this explanation of differences between staff group views.

**How QA is Best Achieved**

**Round 1** asked the four staff groups for their views on how academic quality is best achieved within institutions, in terms of the management structure. The focus here was on the link between academic quality and whether an institution has a hierarchical or flat management structure, shown in Figure 8.25.
Academic Quality is Best Achieved within Institutions with a Hierarchical Management or Flat Management Structure

With this question I looked at the four role groups views on and attitudes to how management structure in Higher Education supports academic quality. The question format offered two options and a comment option. Of the 244 respondents, 128 answered this question and 116 skipped it. Overall, 59% of respondents agreed with the view that academic quality is best achieved within institutions with a flat management structure. Forty-two percent (42%) of staff agreed with the view that academic quality is best achieved within institutions with a hierarchical management structure. So while there was more support for the link between academic quality and a flat management structure, this support was not overwhelming by any means.

I then dissected the overall organisation views and attitudes to check the consistency and difference across the organisational culture of the four staff groups being studied. Of the 168 academic staff respondents to the survey 94 answered Question D2 and 74 skipped that question. Over two-thirds of the academic staff respondents (68%) supported the view that academic quality is best achieved within institutions with a flat management structure. The exact opposite was the case for all the other three staff groupings. Administration staff, management staff and student support staff each returned an exact two-thirds view that academic quality is best achieved within institutions with a hierarchical structure. There was agreement in the comments from management staff and
administration staff that all parties need an input to the process to achieve better quality. The management group comments also drew attention to the issue of “whether good decisions can be reached effectively and efficiently” and the need for “structure with clearly defined roles and responsibilities.”

As the academic group view differed considerably from the predominant view of all other groups in the organisation it is worth reproducing the academic group comments here to show the range in thinking that favours a flat management structure over a hierarchical management structure as a means of achieving academic quality:

- Neither is inherently better than the other. It depends on how each is operationalised.
- All parties responsible having an input to the process.
- Learner centred management structure.
- Management structure has nothing to do with it.
- An open systems approach by self-directed teams.
- When management take a direct interest in the academic’s day to day functions and attend occasional lectures.
- Get rid of management who do nothing.
- Some levels of hierarchy, with clear lines of responsibility, but not so many levels that a disconnect in communication happens.
- Depends on the outcomes envisaged.
- It depends.
- All stakeholders need to have significant input for better quality assurance.
- Question is not clearly interpretable.
- A combination of both. Innovative professional educators must have the liberty to develop strategies for the improvement of the quality of educational experience offered. Strong leadership is also needed.
- National centralised management structure.
- Greatest asset is the diversity of staff and their professional knowledge. Failure to tap into this is a consequence of a hierarchical management structure.
- Tough question....
- Management Structure is largely irrelevant. Should be matrix based around course teams.
- The structure is not the issue - the management and staff focus on same.
- The correct mix of both.
- I think it should be driven by heads of department. Having come from industry, I still find it strange (even several years on) at the infrequency of course board meetings, staff
meetings etc. where issues related to academic quality could be discussed and potentially improved regularly.

- **Collegiate system which reflects on continuing best practice. It needs to be self-perpetuating.**
- **Structure with clearly defined roles and responsibilities.**
- **Do answers and questions match? Academic quality is best achieved where the academic standards are legitimate and all within the institution buy into the virtues of the system. That it be parallel or perpendicular is of secondary importance.**
- **The more layers of management the greater the disconnect and the greater the discontent.**
- **A mix of both structures is required.**
- **Respect for the lecturer within the discipline, support from management, open communication and a lack of fear.**

In **Round 2** the support for a flat management structure to achieve AQA rose from 59% in Round 1 to 68%, with Academic staff being joined by Management staff in favouring a flat management structure for AQA. Both Administration staff, Students and Student Support staff continued to favour a hierarchical management structure.

Two thirds of staff and 73% of Students returned the view that failure to tap into the diversity of staff and their professional knowledge is a consequence of a hierarchical management structure. When read in conjunction with the previous finding, there appears to be a degree of contradiction in the Student view on management structure. Management staff were equally divided on this negative view of hierarchical management. Administration staff were consistent with their preference in Round 1 and Round 2 for a hierarchical management structure. Academic staff and Student Services staff supported criticism of a hierarchical management structure. Here we had an excellent example of the tug of war within individuals and groups between supporting the importance of staff participation on the one hand and wanting to get things done quickly or have authoritative decision making on the other hand. The dilemma for organisational culture is that the decision-making pendulum swinging in either directly can create a longing for the other approach.

There was 89% support among staff and 100% support among Students in Round 2 for the statement that “Academic Quality is best achieved where the academic standards are legitimate and all staff within the institution buy into the virtues of the system.” This support was shared across all groups. The support for a more collegial culture over a managerial culture was striking.
Round 1 also asked the four staff groups for their views on how academic quality was best achieved within institutions with either a managerial focus or a collegiate focus. Respondents were permitted to choose more than one response, though only 2.5% did so.

With this question I examined the four role groups’ views on and attitudes to the effect of organisation focus on the achievement of academic quality, shown in Figure 8.26. The question format offered two options and a comment option. Of the 244 respondents, 155 answered this question and 89 skipped the question. Overall, 89% of respondents agreed with the view that academic quality is best achieved within institutions with a collegiate structure. There was a very clear lack of support across the organisation for a managerial culture as a means of achieving academic quality.

![Figure 8.26 – Academic Quality is Best Achieved within Institutions with a Managerial or Collegiate Focus](image_url)

When I dissected the overall organisation views and attitudes to check the consistency and difference across the organisational culture of the four staff groups being studied, I found that only the administration group differed significantly from the organisational view, with 32% of administration staff supporting a managerial focus over a collegiate focus to achieve academic quality. There was a comment from a member of the management group that “essentially a mix of both is required” and a comment from a member of the student services staff group that favoured a “teamwork focus”.

213
The academic staff group was strongest in its support for a collegiate focus with over 90% support. One member of the academic group commented “The collegiate focus is needed in order that academic quality is understood in its fullest sense rather than two dimensional outputs that can arise if a managerial class arises.”

In Round 2 there was 99% support across all staff groups and 73% support from Students for a Collegiate Focus over a Managerial Focus for AQA. The only minimal support for a Managerial Focus comes from Academic staff, with less than 2% of Academic staff seeing benefit in a Managerial Focus for AQA.

Round 1 asked the four staff groups for their views regarding different types of performance management. The question was through the use of what type of performance measures is academic quality best managed, with the results shown in Figure 8.27.

![Figure 8.27 – Academic Quality is Best Managed Through the Use Of…](image)

With this question I explored the different views on and attitudes to performance management across the four role groupings, as it impacts on academic quality. The question format offered four options and a comment option. Of the 244 respondents, 151 answered this question and 93 skipped
the question. Overall, 108 staff (72.5%) selected “a mix of management and academic measurements.” However, while “academic performance measurements” on its own was selected by 23% of staff, the option of “management performance measurements” on its own was only selected by 3% of staff. “Student results performance measurement” was selected as useful for best management of academic quality by 26% of respondents.

Table 8.6 scrutinised the overall organisation views and attitudes to check the consistency and difference across the organisational culture of the four staff groups being studied. The table below compared the levels of agreement across the four staff groups with the different types of performance measurement proposed in Question D4 as best for the management of academic quality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Quality is Best Managed Through the Use Of:</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Performance Measurements</strong></td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Management Performance Measurements</strong></td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Mix of Management and Academic Performance Measurements</strong></td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Results Performance Measurements</strong></td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 8.6 – Best Means for Managing Academic Quality (Levels of Agreement)**

Of the 111 academic staff who responded to Question D4, 78 expressed the view that the use of “a mix of management and academic performance measurements” would best manage academic quality. The academic views were relatively consistent with the administration staff views with regard to the best type of performance measurement for academic quality. The only significant difference was a higher level of support for “Student results performance measurement” among administration staff (32%) compared to academic staff (24%).

Support among the management staff group for “a mix of management and academic performance measurements” at 81% was a particularly strong view within the management staff group. The student support group views stand out as significantly different and less decisive on this question.
compared to the three other staff groups. This student support staff group is more supportive than any other group, even more supportive than the academic staff of “academic performance measures.” They were also more supportive than any of the three other staff groups of “student results performance measurement.” Most noticeable of all, they would appear to differ somewhat from the consensus around “a mix of management and academic performance measurement” as the best way to manage academic quality.

In the comments section 18 members of the academic staff group provided further comments on Question D4. There were no comments from the other three staff groups. The more insightful comments are reproduced here to complete the analysis:

- Neither - performance measurement is not an apt metric for academic quality...it implies an industrial quality mathematical construct.
- The assessment system would be my answer.
- This is difficult. All of the above can be manipulated. For example, we can achieve terrific pass rates if lecturers are worried about student numbers and job preservation. Student assessment of lecturers might help but this also has the obvious flaw of students rating lecturers inappropriately - e.g. because they are 'nice' or because they give the exam away in advance etc. The number of research papers produced is fairly irrelevant in an IOT. We generally don't teach at the research level. We teach basics.
- Interaction of a variety of measures.
- Suggest it needs to be comprehensive i.e. 3 & 4 above (a mix of management and academic measurements & student results performance measurement).
- A mix of all of the above.
- A system that all actors within it buy into as fair.
- Student performance measurement can be skewed and may become a self-fulfilling prophesy.

The 71.5% preference in Round 1 of the survey, supported by a majority of all staff groups, was for a Mix of Management and Academic Performance Measurements for management of AQA. This level of cross-group support was confirmed in Round 2 with 99% staff support and 100% Student support for this type of performance management. There was 100% agreement from all staff groups except for Academic staff, 2% of whom did not agree.

The minority support for AQA being best managed through Students Results Performance Measurement in Round 1 (Academic 24%, Management 25%, Administration 32%, Student Services 46%) was queried further in Round 2. On reflection in Round 2 a more decisive 78% of
all staff disagreed with this viewpoint. However, the total population support hides the gap between the Academic and Management view on the one hand and the Administration and Student Services view on the other, which remained significant (Academic 19%, Management 0%, Administration 37%, Student Services 44%). Perhaps to be expected, 45% of Students agreed that “Academic Quality is best managed through Performance Measurement based on Student Results.”

**Round 1** asked the four staff groups for their views on the statement “Academic Quality Assurance is primarily driven by” a range of different drivers:

![Figure 8.28 - Primary Drivers of Academic Quality Assurance](Image)

With this question I examined the different views on and attitudes to what drives AQA, with results shown in Figure 8.28. The question format offered six options and a comment option. The options offered facilitated a wide range of views and attitudes. Respondents had the opportunity of choosing more than one option in Delphi Round 1. Some selected a second option.
Of the 244 respondents, 159 answered this question and 85 skipped the question. The first pairing of options sought views on management commitment or management pre-occupation as alternate primary drivers of AQA. In response to this pair of contrasting options 25% of respondents selected management commitment as a primary driver, with very small numbers of staff choosing management pre-occupation. The second pairing of options sought views on activities of front-line staff or external scrutiny and accountability as alternate primary drivers of AQA. In response to this pair of contrasting options 26% of respondents selected the activities of front-line staff as a primary driver of AQA. Similarly, 25% selected external scrutiny and accountability as a primary driver. The third pairing of options sought views on staff ownership of academic quality or tokenism and form filling as alternate primary drivers of AQA. In response to this pair of contrasting options 65% selected staff ownership of academic quality, while 9% selected tokenism and form filling.

Table 8.7 then dissected the overall organisation views and attitudes to check the consistency and difference across the organisational culture of the four staff groups being studied. The table below sets out the comparative percentage selections of each primary driver option by each staff group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AQA is Primarily Driven by:</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management Commitment</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management Pre-occupation</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities of Front-line Staff</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Scrutiny &amp; Accountability</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Ownership of Academic Quality</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokenism &amp; Form Filling</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.7 – Primary Drivers of Academic Quality Assurance (Levels of Agreement)

The academic staff group scored management commitment (20%) below the overall organisation average of 25% and below all of the three other group views of management commitment as a driver of AQA. Academic staff also gave the lowest score to management pre-occupations as a driver of AQA. While acknowledging the role of activities of front-line staff (25%) and external scrutiny and accountability (25%), the academic staff group was clear in identifying staff
ownership of academic quality as the primary driver of AQA. In fact, all four groups agreed that staff ownership of academic quality was the primary driver of AQA, with two-thirds of each staff grouping selecting this option. **Administration** staff and **student support** staff respondents gave higher than average scores to management commitment and activities of front-line staff as drivers of AQA. The **management** staff group responses were noteworthy for the relatively low score (31%) they attributed to management commitment as a driver of AQA and for the high score (44%) they attributed to external scrutiny and accountability as a driver of AQA, perhaps reflecting a distinctive experience of AQA within a management role.

The “management pre-occupations” option and the “tokenism and form filling” option were chosen by small numbers of staff across all staff groups and do not appear to be a major concern for any staff group.

**Round 2** queried further the two-thirds support from each group and across all staff groups in Round 1 for Staff Ownership of Academic Quality as the primary driver of Academic Quality. Round 2 confirmed 91% support from staff and students for this view, with just 6 Academic Staff and 1 Administration staff member and 1 student not in agreement.

Support for the importance of Management Commitment as a driver of AQA revealed a gap in views between staff groupings in Round 1 (Academic 20%, Management 31%, Administration 43%, Student Services 46%). When this gap was tested again in Round 2, 75% of all staff agreed in Round 2 that Management Commitment is a driver of AQA, with Academic staff at 69% the lowest group level of support. Students expressed 82% agreement with the importance of Management Commitment as a driver of Academic Quality.

In **Round 2**, 68% of all staff returned the opinion that the Activities of Front-line Staff are a primary driver of AQA. All staff and student groups except Management staff changed their view to majority support for this view in Round 2. The Management staff view remained consistent in Round 2, at 67% disagreement that the activities of front-line Staff are a primary driver of AQA. There was a clear difference in perception here between Management and other staff and student groups.
The differing staff views on External Scrutiny and Accountability identified in Round 1 were queried further in Round 2. While the level of support across the full survey population was 66%, Administration staff remained sceptical with regard to External Scrutiny and Accountability as drivers of AQA, with a 50/50% for and against response. The Student view was similar to the overall staff view at 64% support for External Scrutiny and Accountability.

8.7 Research Findings: Focus of Academic QA

Section E returned to the focus of the AQA system, exploring views of staff on the AQA system through the different concepts that underpin varying approaches to QA. It was understood that this philosophical perspective on QA may present a difficulty to some participants due to limited understanding or knowledge of the AQA system. A neutral answer was included in the scoring system, (Neither Agree nor Disagree), to facilitate those who might struggle with this type of questioning. The neutral option was removed later in the Round 2 survey so that those who chose a neutral view in the Round 1 survey had to agree or disagree in the Round 2 survey or skip the question completely. Of the 244 staff who started the Round 1 Survey Questionnaire 159 attempted Section E, the same number that had answered Section D.

There were eleven quite specific questions within Section E to be answered on a Lickard scale, rating the level of agreement and disagreement on a five-point progressive scale from strong agreement to strong disagreement. The questions were designed to require staff reflection on the AQA in operation within their organisation.

Focus of AQA in the Organisation

Round 1 asked the four staff groups for their assessment of the statement that Quality Enhancement is the focus of AQA in their organisation.
Q27 E1. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Quality Enhancement: (Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

Answered: 150  Skipped: 85

With this question in Figure 8.29 I examined the different staff groups perceptions of the nature of the AQA system as a continuous improvement support system. The percentage ratings for each staff group are set out in Table 8.8 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of AQA is on Quality Enhancement:</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>4.96%</td>
<td>7.69%</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>35.54%</td>
<td>42.31%</td>
<td>60.00%</td>
<td>72.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>34.71%</td>
<td>38.46%</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>23.97%</td>
<td>11.54%</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0.83%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.8 – Focus of AQA on Quality Enhancement (Level of Agreement)
**Student services** staff perceived a very strong focus on Quality Enhancement in the AQA system in operation (82%), with the other 18% expressing a neutral view and no member of the group disagreeing with the statement. The **management** staff group perceived a similar strong focus on Quality Enhancement (73%), with just 13% expressing a neutral view and 13% expressed mild disagreement. Among the **administration** staff the perception of Quality Enhancement as the focus of AQA was less decisively strong (50%), with 38% taking a neutral view and 11% expressing mild disagreement. The perception of Quality Enhancement as the focus of AQA was weakest among **academic** staff (40%), with 35% taking a neutral view, 24% mild disagreement and 1% strong disagreement. The range of perceptions of the AQA system was broad with regard to the focus on Quality Enhancement, with those most involved in developing and enhancing the AQA system having the weakest perception of a Quality Enhancement focus.

Having shared the results of Round 1 above with survey participants, **Round 2** queried again the level of agreement with the statement that the focus of AQA in the organisation in question is on quality enhancement. 61% of all staff agreed and 39% disagreed, in line with the level of support in Round 1. 73% of Students agreed. The Administration staff view was unchanged at 50% agreement. Student Support staff continued to offer the strongest support of the Quality Enhancement view of AQA up from 83% support to 87%. Management staff support reduced from 73% to 67% support. Academic staff who had offered the lowest level of support in Round 1 at 40% increased their level of support on reflection in Round 2 to 58%.

**Round 1** asked the four staff groups for their assessment of the statement that Quality Monitoring is the focus of AQA in their organisation. This question in Figure 8.30 below examined the different staff groups perceptions of the nature of the AQA system as a monitoring and reporting system.
Q28 E2. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is Quality Monitoring: (Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

Answered: 158  Skipped: 86

Figure 8.30 – Focus of AQA in My Institution is Quality Monitoring

The percentage ratings of agreement for each staff group are set out in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of AQA is on Quality Monitoring:</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>6.61%</td>
<td>8.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>33.88%</td>
<td>16.00%</td>
<td>53.33%</td>
<td>54.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>36.36%</td>
<td>60.00%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
<td>36.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>23.14%</td>
<td>16.00%</td>
<td>26.67%</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.9 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in My Institution is on Quality Monitoring (Levels of Agreement between the Four Staff Groups)

Question E2 Round 1 was effective in stimulating reflection. Where Quality Enhancement in Question E1 would invariably be read as a positive aspiration, Quality Monitoring in itself needs to be reflected on as an attribute of AQA. There was an increase in the number of staff in every staff grouping who chose the neutral option or central tendency option. There was also a move
away from the extreme options of Strongly Agree and Strongly Disagree as staff groups were more considered in their responses.

The **administration** staff group experienced the most difficulty answering the question, with 60% selecting the neutral option. They returned 24% agreement with the statement and only 16% disagreement with Quality Monitoring as the focus of the AQA system. **Student Services** staff perceived a strong focus on Quality Monitoring in the AQA system in operation (55%), with 9% of the group disagreeing with the statement. The **management** staff group perceived a similar strong focus on Quality Monitoring (53%), with the lowest level of staff (20%) expressing a neutral view and the highest level of disagreement with the Quality Monitoring description of AQA (27%). Among the **academic** staff group the perception of Quality Monitoring as the focus of AQA is very similar to the scoring for Quality Enhancement as the focus. The level of agreement was the same for both (40%). There was very little change with 36% taking a neutral view and 23% mild disagreement. The range of perceptions of the AQA system as Quality Monitoring was much narrower across all staff groups than the broad range of perceptions with regard to the focus on Quality Enhancement.

**In Round 2**, average support for Quality Monitoring perceived as the focus of AQA strengthened to 54% across the staff survey population, with 73% support among students for Quality Monitoring. Support among all staff groups increased. When the neutral option was removed staff groups were decisive in their support with Academic staff support up from 40% to 42%, Management staff support up from 53% to 67%, Student Services staff support up from 54% to 87% and Administration staff making the largest shift towards AQA perceived as Quality Monitoring, from 24% support to 87% support when those 60% of Administration staff in the neutral position in Round 1 made a decision in Round 2.

**Round 1** asked the four staff groups for their views on the statement that Assessment of Quality is the focus of AQA in their organisation, shown in Figure 8.31 below.
Q29 E3. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Assessment of Quality: (Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

Answered: 156  Skipped: 88

Figure 8.31 – Focus of AQA in My Institution is on Assessment of Quality

With this question I examined the different staff groups’ perceptions of the nature of the AQA system as a measurement or assessment of quality. The percentage ratings for each staff group are set out in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of AQA is on Assessment of Quality:</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>3.39%</td>
<td>11.54%</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>27.12%</td>
<td>19.23%</td>
<td>40.00%</td>
<td>45.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>44.92%</td>
<td>61.54%</td>
<td>40.00%</td>
<td>45.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>24.58%</td>
<td>7.69%</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.10 – Focus of AQA in My Institution is on Assessment of Quality (Levels of Agreement between the Four Staff Groups)

Question E3 pushed the requirement for reflection on the focus of the AQA system. With Question E3 there was a further increase in the number of staff in every staff grouping who chose the neutral option or central tendency option. However, the increase was less than between Questions E1 and
E2. The use of the extreme options of Strongly Agree and Strongly Disagree remained limited as staff chose primarily between the Agree and Disagree answers to this conceptual question.

The administration staff group, with 62% selecting the neutral option, expressed a low percentage of agreement with the statement of focus of AQA on Assessment of Quality (31%). Administration staff disagreement with this focus (8%) was the lowest level of disagreement within the staff groups. Agreement among Academic staff also dropped to 30% with the focus on Assessment of Quality as a description of the AQA system. 25% of Academic staff disagreement. Student services staff perceived a focus on Assessment of Quality in the AQA system in operation (45%), with 9% of the group disagreeing with the statement. The management staff group perceived a similar 40% focus on Assessment of Quality with a higher level of management staff (40%) expressing a neutral view and 13% disagreement with this a description of AQA system.

Round 2 revealed a split view regarding the focus of the AQA system being on Assessment of Quality. Administration staff moved from 31% support in Round 1 to 71% support in Round 2. Similarly, Student Services staff moved from 45% support in Round 1 to 75% support in Round 2. Academic staff continued to be lukewarm about this view of the AQA system, with support increasing from 30% to 40%. Management staff were even more decisive in rejecting the proposition in Round 2, with support for an Assessment of Quality view of the system decreasing from 47% to 33%. What needed to be determined next is whether different staff groups were satisfied with the system addressing or not addressing Assessment of Quality. Students were firmly on the side of Assessment of Quality at 73% agreement.

Round 1 asked the four staff groups for their assessment of the statement that Impression Management is the focus of AQA in their organisation. This question helped to explore the extent to which the AQA focus was on managing the impression of academic quality as opposed to the substance of academic quality. The question response rates are shown in Figure 8.32 below.
Q30 E4. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Impression Management: (Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

Answered: 158  Skipped: 86

Figure 8.32 – Focus of AQA in My Institution is on Impression Management

With this question I examined the different staff groups perceptions of the nature of the AQA system as having an outward focus or purpose. The percentage ratings for each staff group are set out in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of AQA is on Impression Management:</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>7.50%</td>
<td>3.85%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>32.50%</td>
<td>26.92%</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>44.17%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>40.00%</td>
<td>54.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>11.67%</td>
<td>15.38%</td>
<td>40.00%</td>
<td>27.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>4.17%</td>
<td>3.85%</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.11 – Focus of AQA in My Institution is on Impression Management

This question was intended to push the requirement for reflection on the focus of the AQA system a step further, asking a more explicit criticism of the AQA system. This push produced a discernible response. With Question E4 there was a change in the number of staff who chose the neutral option or central tendency option, with Student Services staff alone increasing their
percentage choosing the neutral option from 45% in Question E3 to 56% in Question E4. The use of the extreme options of Strongly Agree and Strongly Disagree were more prominent in response to this question.

Among the academic staff group in particular a pattern emerged across Questions E1, E2, E3 of two differing views of the AQA system leading to relatively clear positions of agreement and disagreement with the conceptual descriptions of the AQA system within the academic group. The other three staff groups appeared to be internally consistent in their views, with high levels of group consistency. Question E4 saw a shift in the profile of the academic group responses. The neutral response group has remained steady around 44%. However, the level of disagreement across all previous questions (23%-25%) went down to 16% for Question E4. The level of agreement that the focus of AQA is Impression Management climbed to 40%.

In direct contrast to the shift in the academic staff perception, the management group perception shifted strongly in the opposite direction, with 47% disagreement with the AQA focus on Impression Management and only 13% agreement. There was a similar, less pointed move among student services staff to 27% disagreement and 18% agreement. The administration staff perception regarding Impression Management concurs broadly with the academic group perception, with 31% agreement and 19% disagreement. What was noticeable was the reduction in those choosing the neutral option from 61% in Question E3 to 50% in Question E4. This 11% difference matched the corresponding increase in the level of disagreement that the AQA system focus is on Impression Management.

Round 2 removed the neutral option in order to further assess the question of AQA as Impression Management. A soft lead-in question explored the difficulties staff had in previous questions deciding to what extent the AQA system in operation was focused on Quality Enhancement, Quality Monitoring or Assessment of Quality. Given the option that the focus of AQA is a combination of all three of the above, 78% of all staff and 64% of Students agreed. 70% agreement among the Academic staff was the lowest level staff group agreement with the view of AQA as a combination of Quality Enhancement, Quality Monitoring and Assessment of Quality.
Round 2 then addressed the thorny question of AQA as Impression Management. The level of agreement among All staff that AQA was focused on Impression Management moved from 36% in Round 1 to 39% in Round 2. Students were most strongly in agreement with the Impression Management view, at 73%. Administration staff and Student Services staff continued to disagree strongly with this view. A majority of Academic staff continued to disagree. However, the level of agreement among Academic Staff rose from 40% to 42% that the focus of AQA is on Impression Management. The Management staff group response was the most interesting, increasing its agreement with this view from 13% to 50%. So while the overall view was 61% disagreement with the Impression Management proposition, there were questions to explore in the Round 3 Structured Interviews regarding Academic staff and Management staff views on AQA as Impression Management.

**Round 1** asked the four staff groups for their assessment of the statement that Quality Improvement is the focus of AQA in their organisation.

![Bar chart](image)

**Figure 8.33 – Focus of AQA in My Institution is on Quality as Improvement (Agree/Disagree)**
This question in Figure 8.33 was included in the survey as a consistency check, when paired with the earlier question on Quality Enhancement. If the respondents were consistent in their answers then the responses to Question E1 and E5 would be relatively consistent, which proved generally to be the case.

With this question I examined the different staff groups perceptions of the nature of the AQA system. The percentage ratings for each staff group are set out in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of AQA is on Quality as Improvement: [E1 Enhancement Scores]</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>3.39% [4.96%]</td>
<td>15.38% [7.69%]</td>
<td>15.38% [13.33%]</td>
<td>9.09% [9.09%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>37.29% [35.54%]</td>
<td>42.31% [42.31%]</td>
<td>30.77% [60.00%]</td>
<td>63.64% [72.73%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>41.53% [34.71%]</td>
<td>34.62% [38.46%]</td>
<td>38.46% [13.33%]</td>
<td>18.18% [18.18%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>16.95% [23.97%]</td>
<td>7.69% [11.54%]</td>
<td>15.38% [13.33%]</td>
<td>9.09% [0.00%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0.85% [0.83%]</td>
<td>0.00% [0.00%]</td>
<td>0.00% [0.00%]</td>
<td>0.00% [0.00%]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.12 – Focus of AQA in My Institution is on Quality as Improvement (Levels of Agreement between the Four Staff Groups)

There was a very high degree of consistency in the academic staff group responses to Questions E1 and E5. The level of agreement (Agree / Strongly Agree combined) was unchanged at just over 40% agreement in both survey rounds. The level of disagreement with Quality Improvement (Enhancement) as the focus of AQA decreased by 7%. shifting from disagreement into the neutral option. The student services staff responses are also highly consistent, with a shift of one person from agree to disagree (9.09%). The level of agreement among administration staff has increased from 50% to 58%. There is a 3.8% reduction in the neutral option to 35% and a 4% reduction to 8% in those administration staff who disagree that the focus of the AQA system is Quality Improvement/Enhancement. These changes were of a scale that was not overly significant with the general weighting of views maintained. The consistency check for the management staff group had raised an issue. The level of agreement responses had declined from 73% to 46%. At the same time the level of disagreement had remained relatively consistent up two points from
13% to 15%. For some reason the level of management respondents choosing the neutral option had risen from 13% to 38%. This saw a change from a positive to a neutral position by four managers that might find explanation through the follow-up interview stage.

In **Round 2** the change in the level of agreement among Administration staff from 50% to 58% was presented to all groups to check their view of the consistency in this response. Only the Academic staff viewed this change as evidence of inconsistency, with 59% of all staff surveyed and 55% of Students viewed the change as demonstrating consistency in Administration staff views.

Round 2 explored four possible reasons why the level of agreement in the Management group between the consistency check questions changed from 73% to 46% with a corresponding rise in the “I don’t know” option. No clear explanation was provided, with 38% of staff respondents viewing it as resulting from “Fatigue towards the end of the survey.” Another 38% of staff explained this change in views as resulting from “Placing more meaning on Improvement over Enhancement.” Sixty-seven percent (67%) of Management staff accepted this explanation. Interestingly, 18% of all staff suggested the change was due to “Closer consideration of the answer to the repeat of the question”, an explanation supported by 21% of Academic staff. This suggestion supports the approach taken by the Delphi Method to refine understanding and build consensus. A majority of Students (55%) believed the change in Management views was due to fatigue towards the end of the survey.

**Question E6 Round 1** asked the four staff groups for their assessment of the statement that Quality as Discipline and Technology is the focus of AQA in their organisation. The results for this technocratic perspective are shown in Figure 8.34.
Q32 E6. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Quality as Discipline and Technology: (Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

Answered: 155  Skipped: 89

Figure 8.34 – The Focus of AQA in My Institution is on Quality as Discipline & Technology

With this question I examined the different staff groups’ perceptions of the nature of the AQA system as a form of control system. The percentage ratings for each staff group are set out in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of AQA is on Quality as Discipline and Technology:</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>0.85%</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>20.34%</td>
<td>16.00%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>61.02%</td>
<td>64.00%</td>
<td>40.00%</td>
<td>63.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>16.10%</td>
<td>16.00%</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1.69%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.13 – Focus of AQA in My Institution is on Quality as Discipline & Technology (Levels of Agreement between the Four Staff Groups)

This question required even more complex reflection on the focus of the AQA system and this proved a step too far for some staff. The numbers of staff choosing the neutral option rose
significantly. Setting aside this central tendency, there was still no clear perception across the different staff groups on this question.

The academic staff group was 61% neutral on the question, with the small number in agreement (21%) just marginally ahead of the small number of respondents who disagreed (18%).

A similar number of administration staff (64%) chose the neutral option, with 20% agreement and 16% disagreement. This pattern of response was repeated by the student support staff, with 64% neutral responses and 18% both agreement and disagreement.

The management staff group were the most decisive on this question. While 40% chose the neutral option there was also 40% disagreement with the statement and only 20% agreement. As management are the group who would most likely drive a discipline and technology model of quality, their perception in response to this question was significant.

Round 2 asked all groups if they agreed with the Management staff view that traditional industrial models of QA as Discipline and Technology are not the focus in Higher Education. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of all staff agreed with this view. Academic staff were 70% in agreement, the lowest level of support across all staff groups. Interestingly, Students were the only group (55%) who did not agree with the Management view.

Round 1 asked the four staff groups for their assessment of the statement that “Meeting Staff Expectations of a Quality Work Environment” is the focus of AQA in their organisation. This again was a challenging question for some, requiring deeper reflection on the interrelatedness of task, management, environment and the staff experience. The results for this question are shown in Figure 8.35.
Figure 8.35 – Focus of AQA in My Institution is on Meeting Staff Expectations of a Quality Work Environment

With this question I examined the different staff groups perceptions of the nature of the AQA system as focused on serving their expectations. The percentage ratings for each staff group are set out in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of AQA is on Meeting Staff Expectations of a Quality Work Environment:</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>1.69%</td>
<td>3.85%</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>14.41%</td>
<td>23.08%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
<td>36.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>41.53%</td>
<td>57.69%</td>
<td>46.67%</td>
<td>36.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>33.05%</td>
<td>11.54%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
<td>27.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>9.32%</td>
<td>3.85%</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.14 – Focus of AQA in My Institution is on Meeting Staff Expectations of a Quality Work Environment (Levels of Agreement between the Four Staff Groups)

Question E7 required staff to reflect on the extent to which their role as participants or employees in the organisation influenced the focus of the AQA system. This was a complex question for any
participant in an organisation, involving reflection on the subjective aspects of systems by actors in the system.

The academic staff group was the most decisive group in its rejection of this representation of AQA (42%), with just 16% agreement with the rubric. There were mixed views among management staff with 27% agreement and 27% disagreement. The majority of administration staff chose the neutral option (58%), with 27% agreement and 15% disagreement. Student services staff responses provided the highest level of agreement at 36%. However, disagreement among student services staff at 27% was also significant. Yet it was the level of disagreement with the statement among academic staff that was most decisive in the table of responses above.

In Round 2, 73% of All staff confirmed the view held by Academic staff that the focus of AQA in their organisation is not on Meeting Staff Expectations. Students provided a contrary view with just 36% agreement.

Round 1 asked the four staff groups for their assessment of the statement that “Breaking Staff Expectations of Management Responsibilities” is the focus of AQA in their organisation. This question is typical of one perception of neoliberalism in Higher Education as a conservative or a right-wing or a hard-line managerialist strategy to undermine the position and role of academics in society.

This view of AQA arose in academic responses to government initiatives in Australia and the United Kingdom to introduce accountability to government and managerialism into traditional Higher Education institutions. While this view might be seen as radical or somewhat reactionary in the Irish context, over 12% of staff agreed with this view, as shown in Figure 8.36.
Figure 8.36 – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in My Institution is on Breaking Staff Expectations of Management’s Responsibilities

With this question I examined the different staff groups’ perceptions of the nature of the AQA system as characterised from a typical left-wing or critical theory perspective on management. The percentage ratings for each staff group are set out in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of AQA is on Breaking Staff Expectations of Management’s Responsibilities:</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>9.40%</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>56.41%</td>
<td>64.00%</td>
<td>40.00%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>31.62%</td>
<td>24.00%</td>
<td>46.67%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.15 – Question E8: Focus of AQA in My Institution is on Breaking Staff Expectations of Management’s Responsibilities (Levels of Agreement between the Four Staff Groups)

Question E8 was challenging for staff because of its overtly political tone. Not surprisingly, over 50% of all staff chose the neutral option. However, 60% of the management staff group chose to
respond to the statement, with 53% voicing their disagreement and just 7% agreement with the statement. There was 0% agreement among student services staff, with 50% disagreement and 50% choosing the neutral option. The largest choice of the neutral option was among administrative staff at 64%. Those who did respond within the administration group responded with 28% disagreement and just 8% agreement. Academic staff group perceptions returned the lowest level of disagreement at 32% and the highest level of agreement with the statement at 12%. Consistent with other staff group responses to this pointed question, 56% of academic staff chose the neutral option.

In Round 2, 81.5% of staff disagreed with the assertion that the focus of AQA in the organisation was on Breaking Staff Expectations of Management’s Responsibilities, up from 34.4% in Round 1 when the “neither agree nor disagree” option was removed in Round 2. Students (55%) again expressed a contrary view that the focus of AQA is on Breaking Staff Expectations of Management Responsibilities. It might be a cause for concern that 18.5% of staff and 55% of students agreed with this view of AQA, up from 12% in Round 1 with the removal of the neutral option. This 18.5% of the total staff population was composed of 9 Academic Staff responses and 3 Student Services responses. It is also interesting to note that 47% of the surveyed staff skipped this challenging question.

Round 1 asked the four staff groups for their assessment of the statement that Adopting External Quality Policies is the focus of AQA in their organisation.

The question required reflection on how AQA policy is developed internally and to what extent the focus is on Adopting External Quality Policies. As confirmed in Figure 8.37, with Question E9 the number of staff who chose the neutral option or central tendency option reduced to 44%. There was 37% agreement with the question statement overall across all staff groups and 19% disagreement. The extreme options of Strongly Agree and Strongly Disagree were rarely chosen (2%).
Q35 E9. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Adopting External Quality Policies: (Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

Answered: 154  Skipped: 50

Figure 8.37 – Question E9: The Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in My Institution is on Adopting External Quality Policies (Agree/Disagree)

With this question I examined the different staff groups perceptions of the relative influence of external quality policy over the internal process in the focus of AQA. The percentage ratings for each staff group are set out in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of AQA is on Adopting External Quality Policies:</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>41.18%</td>
<td>29.27%</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
<td>30.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>44.54%</td>
<td>37.50%</td>
<td>35.71%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>13.45%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>35.71%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0.84%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.16 – The Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in My Institution is on Adopting External Quality Policies (Levels of Agreement between the Four Staff Groups)
The academic staff group provided the strongest level of agreement (41%) that the focus of AQA in the organisation is on Adopting External Quality Policies, with just 14% disagreement. The other three staff groups were less decisive in their views. In contrast to the academic perception of the AQA system, the management group perception was in the opposite direction, with 36% disagreement on the AQA focus on Adopting External Quality Policies and 29% agreement. Among student services staff the response was 30% agreement and 20% disagreement. The administration staff perception concurred broadly with the academic group perception, with 38% agreement and 25% disagreement.

In Round 2, the outputs of Questions E9 and E10 were brought together to gain a clearer understanding of whether the AQA system focuses more on adopting or on adapting External Quality Policies. Respondents were required to clarify their view on whether the emphasis in their organisation is on Adopting or on Adapting external quality policies. 78% of all staff confirmed that the focus is on Adapting External Quality Policies. All staff groupings concurred with this view, clarifying the earlier expressed view of Academic Staff of the focus on Adopting external policies. Students (55%) agreed that the focus is on Adapting External Quality Policies.

Round 1 asked the four staff groups for their assessment of the statement that Adapting External Quality Policies is the focus of AQA in their organisation.

The overall response to this question, shown in Figure 8.38, was very similar to the previous question. It was interesting to observe where differences arose between staff groups and within staff groups.

These two questions required critical reflection on how AQA policy is developed internally and to what extent the focus is on Adapting External Quality Policies. With this latter question the number of staff who chose the neutral option or central tendency option was 46%, up 2% from the previous question. There was 37% agreement with the question statement overall across all staff groups, the same as for the previous question. The overall response included 17% disagreement, down 2% from the previous question.
Q36 E10. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Adapting External Quality Policies: (Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

Answered: 156  Skipped: 88

Figure 8.38 – The Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in My Institution is on Adapting External Quality Policies

As in the previous question, with this question I looked again at the different staff group’s perceptions of the relative influence of external quality policy on the internal process in the focus of AQA. The percentage ratings for each staff group are set out in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of AQA is on Adapting External Quality Policies</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>1.68%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>35.29%</td>
<td>20.83%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>30.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>49.58%</td>
<td>45.83%</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>13.45%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.17 – The Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in My Institution is on Adapting External Quality Policies
The academic staff group responded with a strong level of agreement (37%) that the focus of AQA in the organisation is on Adapting External Quality Policies, down 4% from their level of agreement with Question E9. Academic staff returned just 13% disagreement, down 1% from the previous related question. I noted that the academic staff group made little distinction in its perceptions between adopting and adapting external quality policies, seeing both as focus of AQA. Yet they confirmed that the organisation can and does go beyond adopting external policies to adapt them to internal requirements.

In contrast to the academic perception of adopting and adapting external quality policies, the management group perception switched significantly to 50% agreement on Question E10 compared with 29% agreement on Question E9. Their level of disagreement at 21% was down from 36% disagreement for Question E9. Management respondents were very much of the view that adapting external quality policy was the focus of AQA over adopting them. Their responses to the two related questions demonstrated that management perceived a significant difference between the AQA focus on adopting and adapting External Quality Policies.

Among student services staff the response was exactly the same for Questions E9 and E10, 30% agreement and 20% disagreement, with 50% choosing the neutral option. The administration staff perception concurred broadly with the academic group perception, with 38% agreement and 25% disagreement.

Round 2 brought together the outputs of Questions E9 and E10 from the Round 1 Survey Questionnaire to clarify that the focus of AQA was on Adapting rather than on Adopting External Quality Policies.

Round 1 asked the four staff groups for their assessment of the statement that the focus of AQA in my institution was on form rather than substance. The results are shown in Figure 8.39.
Figure 8.39 – The Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in My Institution is on Form Rather than Substance (Agree/Disagree)

In this question I was looking at the different staff groups’ broad perceptions of the robustness, vigour and tenacity of the AQA system. The percentage ratings for each staff group are set out in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of AQA is on Form rather than Substance:</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Student Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>10.92%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>38.66%</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
<td>45.83%</td>
<td>20.57%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>20.17%</td>
<td>29.17%</td>
<td>40.00%</td>
<td>30.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1.68%</td>
<td>4.17%</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.18 – The Primary Results of The Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in My Institution is on Form Rather than Substance (Levels of Agreement between the Four Staff Groups)
In Round 1 the overall response to this question returned 43% agreement that the focus of AQA was on Form, with 30% choosing the neutral option and 27% in disagreement. This confirmed that 43% of staff perceived the AQA system as focused on accountability rather than on improving quality. This perception was explored further in Round 2 and through in-depth interviews with experts. The requirement from state agencies for increased accountability and transparency might have brought about this unanticipated and undesirable side effect of shifting attention in HE from the substance of quality to the form and perceptions of quality.

Where differences arose between staff groups and within staff groups in Round 1, I found the academic staff group responded with above average agreement (49%) that the focus of AQA in the organisation is on form rather than substance. This was a very significant outcome. The academic staff group were the main operators of the wider AQA system and nearly half of that group of 119 respondents to the survey viewed the AQA system as more form over substance. Just 22% of academic staff perceived the AQA system as primarily one of substance.

In contrast to the academic perception noted above, 53% of the management group perceived a dominance of substance over form in the AQA system. Yet 27% or one in four of the management group agreed that the focus of the AQA systems is on form rather than substance.

Among student services staff the response was just 10% agreement, with 40% disagreement and 50% choosing the neutral option. The administration staff perception was again distinctive from other views, with 21% agreement, 33% disagreement and 46% returning a neutral view.

Round 2 eliminated the “Neither agree nor disagree” neutral option. The result was that the majority staff view shifted to Substance over Form, though not decisively. In Round 2, 53.7% of staff confirmed that the focus of AQA is on Substance rather than Form. The remaining 46.3% of staff continued to see the focus of AQA on Form. The Student view returned opposite proportions, with 55% seeing the focus of AQA being on Form over Substance. Round 2 also discerned that the majority of Academic Staff (54%) continued to confirm that the focus was on Form as a System of Accountability rather than on the Substance of Improving the Quality of Operations. Notwithstanding the issues raised by this view of the AQA system, it was confirmed in Round 2
(Question E11B) by 73% of all staff across all groups that they had a generally positive view of AQA. This was an important overarching finding for research that had encouraged staff to be reflective and critical in their responses. It framed the staff critique of QA systems within an appreciation of the value and importance of QA in HE.

8.8 Research Findings: Comments & Conclusions on QA Process

Section F of the survey questionnaire provided an opportunity for “any further comments that you would like to provide. A total of 33 staff chose to comment further. There were no comments from the Student Services group, 3 comments from the administration group and 3 comments from the management group. A total of 27 academic staff provided an additional comment. A few of the comments identified the person through the question and were excluded to maintain confidentiality. Where possible I have removed a very limited part of the comment so that it maintains anonymity and can be included here. The resulting selection of comments are presented below:

Academic Comments

- The experience of the application of ACRP in one department may vary from the college wide application of ACRP.
- Quality can be measured but it has more value than its weight.
- I've been employed at LIT since January 2013 and have to date, had the most warm and wonderful experience with both Learners, academics and management alike. I don't wish to partake in further stages of the study as I believe I'm not equipped to do so.
- Management in LIT don't care about the academic staff. Lecturers are bullied into taking on jobs while some staff do nothing. Management are detached and only interested in power and the titles that go with them. President, Dean Professor etc. What a joke.
- I feel the academic staff of the former Tipperary Institute did not receive adequate support on integration. The active learning compendium does not seem to be on the staff intranet as stated in the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy.
- A definition of the term Academic Quality would have been useful at the start of survey. I assume it refers to the quality of the academic experience of our students. Not sure about wording of A4 “top down interests of management.” I think there might be a more appropriate word - function/duty/role/responsibility - not sure what is the right word, interests doesn’t seem right?
- Good survey
I would love to see a refocus on teaching again. I think there has been too much focus on things like Blended learning, internationalisation and copying the university model. Our dept. has done a lot of tinkering with programmes and the result is a lot of lecturers adopting new subjects and it takes years - if ever - to get these right. Moodle has had a lot of advantages but again, its a form of distance learning for many students with poor attendance. Our niche has to be taking weaker students and teaching them. To move into some of these other areas is to move into areas of impossible competition.

Academic quality assurance should not be about measurement metrics as dictated by industrial or financial outputs. It has to be based on the actual student learning experience and outcomes and whether these have been met.

The survey would have benefited from an ethical statement at the beginning - regarding nature of the research and use of data. Questions are posed with a lot of hidden assumptions regarding the purpose of education and assumptions about quality management/assurance and what it actually means.

The mission of IOTs has become confused between academic pursuit to serve academic delivery and the provision of skills training with little academic content. These diverse goals require different QA systems and clarity must be brought to which of these goals is the true goal.

An interesting survey - good luck with it.

Striving for academic quality should be a consistent aspiration. No matter where an institute is now it should always improve to the future. Quality can only be achieved where control, responsibility and consequence can rest in one place if they do not there is scope to "pass the buck."

Quality from student or teaching staff perspective is based on quantitative indicators only, is competing (and losing) with the efficiency argument and is in a negative cycle. Quality assurance lacks substance, based on conjecture and rhetoric lacks real muscle in its implementation.

I would need more information to give a more thorough assessment. If you want further input, please contact me. I have been a student at LIT and have many years experience working as a QA professional.

Here are some thoughts on aspects of quality assurance at LIT and probably in the wider IOT sector:

1. To ensure the best possible staff get the job (for quality reasons), the external members of the interview panel should also be involved in agreeing the shortlist of candidates. This would prevent a head of dept. blocking a strong candidate from reaching the interview table in order to ensure that a 'preferred candidate' gets the job.

2. The external panel members should be imposed by the HEA rather than invited by the college themselves to avoid inviting external panel members with whom the college or dept. have a 'cosy' relationship.
3. In technology areas in particular, more recognition needs to be given to industrial experience. The system currently expects that someone coming in with 20+ years of experience will start at the bottom as an assistant lecturer.

4. The external examiner system needs an overhaul. No one examiner can have adequate knowledge of all aspects of a course. In the ideal world, we would have subject matter experts.

5. External examiners should receive training. This would particularly apply to the industry-based external examiners who would be less familiar with the arcane assessment systems and related concepts.

6. Our own teaching academic staff themselves should get more training on assessment schemes, marking schemes, compensation schemes, course element marking etc. There is a significant level of ignorance of the system displayed at exam boards. I don't think this is the fault of the academic staff. The training or at least adequate training just doesn't seem to be provided.

7. Academic staff should be given training on the results recording system itself - there is widespread confusion over what codes to enter for illness, deferrals, course element marking, rounding up/down of decimal places in course elements etc. As an alternative, a good user-friendly website or helpline would sort out a lot of that.

8. As referred to in some of my survey answers, I think one of the biggest problems with quality assurance is the academic job preservation culture. The argument that the assurance system will catch staff out is weak. All a weak lecturer has to do to look good is give out the exam paper in very strong hints to look good.

9. Under-funding for lab equipment also limits academic quality. This is obviously difficult to address from a financial point of view.

10. Course leaders should be given an allowance of several hours a week in lieu of teaching to organise and promote the courses better. I'm not a course leader by the way! Academic quality is strongly though not exclusively linked to academic quality in. Promote the courses in a better way to attract a better intake.

11. In some of our fast-changing technology disciplines, academic staff should be more actively encouraged/rewarded to take career breaks to work for periods in industry again.

- QA for me is about creating self-reliant well-informed graduates who value understanding rather than results.
- Best of Luck Terry with the PhD, I do hope that when you have figured out how we should operate you will let us know.
- In my experience academic quality is driven by teaching staff on the course team who constantly seek to improve their teaching. Line management is more interested in ticking boxes.
- Quality assurance is something that only bothers academics where there is new programme development, programmatic review, or a crisis. Most academic staff don't make reference to the documents only work on the collective knowledge.
• It would be interesting to trace the range of amendments made to QA procedures over time to discover if there is a correlation between students passing/failing and making procedures easier! Most QA procedures within the IT sector is too insular.
• The rushing of programmatic review can be simply a box-ticking task rather than a curriculum development exercise which will ensure the development of quality programmes and rather more like a rush to plug the dam and be seen to do something.
• Lip service is often paid to these issues. We also lack an ethos of constructive peer review.

Administration Comments
There were no comments from the Administration Staff. Considering that this role group is normally excluded from academic QA commentary perhaps a null response here should not be a surprise.

Management Comments
• Good survey
• A number of studies have shown that countries with well-established institutions have effective frameworks and those that do not don’t.

Student Support Comments
There were no comments from the Student Support Staff. Considering that this role group is normally excluded from academic QA commentary perhaps a null response here should not be a surprise.

In Round 2, based on the findings of Survey Round 1, nearly 99% of all staff and 100% of the students surveyed concluded that there were different staff groupings within LIT with different group perceptions of AQA. Over 90% of staff and 100% of Students confirmed that it was reasonable from the evidence to conclude that differences in views and perceptions are role related. Significantly, 96% of all staff and 91% of Students confirmed that it was reasonable to conclude that the culture of the organisation was in fact composed of subcultures that are role related.
In the final section of Survey Round 2, staff were asked for their views on how the organisation should respond, in light of the Survey Round 1 findings. Some 30 staff members and 5 students responded to this question. Academic Staff provided 23 of the 30 staff responses, with 3 responses
from Management staff and 2 responses each from Administration and Student Services staff as follows:

**Academic Staff Responses in Survey Round 2 to Survey Round 1:**

- **Be conscious of quality more than concerns of student progression.** Sometimes quality procedures in place but ignored due to over focus on progression.
- **The organisation should have a culture of dissemination; what’s been done to date in respect of AQA is by committee(s) of vested interests.** No real collaboration has been undertaken. Inclusiveness & transparency needs to be pushed to the fore first. Additionally, 'management' needs to accept responsibility for their part in determining the baseline for entry by setting the CAO points way below what a course board might define as acceptable for a quality intake. Students also need to take responsibility for their own engagement in a course also. More work should be done with students to foster this notion. The entry points, the engaged student and the quality of lecturing staff together make courses successful.
- **Consider the findings of research in detail at the relevant forum reinitiating suitable responses if relevant and appropriate.**
- **Remove the silo mentality that has constrained LIT over the decades by embracing the concept of in-service teaching across departments.**
- **Quality as a concept has different meanings to different people.** Commercial organisations usually formulate a cogent quality mission/vision statement although lot of them are meaningless waffle. From a cosy vision, detailed policy & understanding can be developed.
  1. Greater interaction between the various subcultures; not just to express views, but to gain insight into how these views are formed.
  2. A number of case studies could be carried out to report on the various ways in which a particular policy impacts on each subculture as they carry out their tasks.
  3. Staff development day would provide a great opportunity for interaction; much of the focus is on improving academic delivery, perhaps a detailed examination of how such a change effects each subculture could be investigated.
  4. Staff development throughout the academic year rather than just one day will keep up increased awareness and improve communication and understanding between subcultures (provided all subcultures were involved).
- **Allow Academic staff greater time for reflection, research and greater input into AQA procedures.** There would appear to be a majority of non-academic staff on many of the sub committees of Academic Council. These committees should largely comprise of academic staff.
- **Embed a culture of inclusiveness, information sharing, team based rather than role based, transparency, shared decision making which takes time and resources but will enhance the student experience.**
• Inclusion (active)
• Focus on the students. Focus on what a graduate should be; build the systems around a student centred system.
• Quality systems are necessary. But to work they need to be meaningful to all stakeholders and there needs to be trust that the aim is to improve (inward accountability) rather than prove (quantitative measuring for external and superficial reasons). Trust is missing, it is not necessarily that AQA system is wrong...the ecosystem doesn’t work...so any system relies on trust and meaning. The culture of the organisation is toxic...it would be a long project to change this.
• Ideally, teaching staff from each department should be accommodated in one office to avoid sub cultures and "meetings about the meeting" occurring.
• The issues facing HE in an Irish IOT context are supra-institutional and are at, or should be at, Department. of Education and Union level. Academic staff are delivering lecturing loads similar to secondary education teaching levels but with all the extra quality assurance and administrative duties. This is the primary concern facing Irish IOT HE.
• Greater recognition and dialogue around the quality of lecturing, tutorials, assessment, course development etc. that academic staff engage in.
• Our organisational culture has been negatively affected by the recent recession, as an external force we cannot of ourselves change it but we can respond internally in the way we treat each other and develop a better sense of fairness and support to enable management, academic, administrative and student domains to work more tolerantly together.
• Do not have all the data, so cannot agree that any of this can lead to a conclusion. Same applies for how to respond.
• Better communications at all levels of the organisation
• Consult in an engaging way
• Perhaps on the first day back, where quality is explained to everyone together, might help in generating a more common understanding of quality assurance across different functions in the Institute. Most academics associate quality assurance with the individual efforts we put into making our classes more interesting and improving the student experience at a front-line level.
• Redirect resources internally not externally, invest in staff training and development. This might improve quality performance as a good word from a student leaving LIT is worth more than us telling the world how good we are. A highly educated and trained student equals high academic quality standards.
• Mixed role group trainings at staff training day on AQA
• Build a collegiate culture
• Greater understanding of the roles and responsibilities of Academic Council, Sub-committees and working groups. Address the divide between Executive Management and Academic Council. Realisation that all roles in the institute have a bearing on the ultimate
quality, the student experience. Greater appreciation of the link between what is defined as Academic and what is not.

Management Staff Responses in Survey Round 2 to Survey Round 1:

- If Management Staff see the primary result of AQA is to Improve Student Experience, the name of AQA should be changed (especially since they are the staff implementing AQA). Student experience is not about quality, the measures of their grades/marks are about AQA. The Student experience is Customer Satisfaction and a service provided...this is about meeting the customers' (students') expectations for their student experience in college.
- These role differences inevitably mean different perceptions - and no doubt they will continue. The key point is whether they damage or limit effectiveness of AQA. Part of management’s role should be to facilitate resolution where such different views give rise to a specific problem with AQA.
- Effective change comes from a combination of top-down and bottom up activities. A real, tangible, stated and consistent commitment on the part of the Institute to the development of a learning organisation model and the provision of resources to assist with this would be a start.

Administration Staff Responses to Survey Round 1:

- Improved communication needs to take place, where the different subcultures work together on an even playing field so to understand each other’s point of view and to learn from the different perspective offered.
- Increased communication, use of many formal and informal avenues to increase the community spirit of the Institute. This in turn may result in better buy-in to the Quality initiatives that are introduced.

Student Services Staff Responses to Survey Round 1:

- Clear communication with all staff groupings and subcultures around expectations, fears and resistance re AQA to ensure buy-in.
- It is important that all groups within our organisation work together for the common goal of academic excellence creating a positive experience for our students.

Student Responses to Survey Round 1:

- I think the organisation should work towards making the views of all staff more cohesive. If there were common goals and views of the organisation amongst staff then it would lead to a better working environment and a better organisation that works together to achieve those goals. At the moment, there seems to be a tension amongst the different
groups of staff, possibly because of a lack of understanding of each other’s roles and maybe a lack of appreciation of the work each person does.

- Academic staff in my view would be more vulnerable to Academic QA than other staff groups. The better the quality of the lecturer, the less opposed to changes and vice versa, in my opinion.

8.9 Conclusion

The Delphi methodology in this study helped to focus and bind the collection of data. Thus, the methodology supported identification of issues to be investigated in the depth interviews (Miles et al. 1994). Note how the respondent groups that did not provide comments in Section F of the Round 1 Questionnaire Survey were willing to do so in response to the Delphi Round 2 Follow-up Survey. Given even the limited opportunity afforded by participation in this research, we see the role identity groups who might normally not be involved in AQA starting to contribute and have a voice in this integrative QA process. Geertz (2000) described the value of providing “thick descriptions” that helped respondents clarify their views. One could argue about the extent or how consistently Round 2 furnished such thick descriptions. The respondents however were able in Round 2 to refine their own views with greater clarity in light of the views of other role groups. Geertz’s thesis that culture influences description to derive “thick descriptions” could be applied to the conduct of this primary research. Acting in the role as an ‘ethnographer’ and being part of the landscape I am researching, I find these cultural thick descriptions revealing and supportive in the conduct and writing up of my research. They provide the language and focus needed to support the integrative approach to QA that can define an institution-wide, collaborative, AQA policy as the base of evidence and principle on which to discern how AQA is implemented, monitored and revised at institute level (EURASHE 2015).
Chapter 9: Expert Review of Integrated Survey Findings

9.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines and analyses the results of the semi-structured interviews with six experts in AQA or academic management from Delphi Round 3. The chapter will elucidate how attitudes to key elements of QA have shifted or persisted through the Delphi rounds. The findings demonstrate the importance of group culture within the QA system and the potential to approach QA through an integrated, collaborative approach.

Interviews were completed with three AQA experts and three Executive Managers responsible for organisation quality. In this Delphi Round 3 these interviewees responded to the research findings from the previous Delphi Round 2. The primary purpose of the interviews was to deepen insights gained from the surveys. The data from these interviews triangulate the staff and student views on responsibility for AQA and the implementation of an integrated approach to AQA. The interview questions and format followed the same six themes set out previously in the six sections of the surveys. Each of these six themes is addressed in turn in Sections 9.2 to 9.7 below. The interview questions that addressed each theme are grouped and labelled (A, B, C, D, E and F) within the relevant section. There was a high level of consensus among the different staff groups in the earlier surveys. These interviews further explore this consensus.

9.2 What is Academic Quality Assurance

9.2.1 Inclusivity in the Research Cohort

The interviewees in Delphi Round 3 were given the breakdown of respondents:

1. Academic 72%
2. Administration 11%
3. Student Services 9%
4. Management 8%

The interviewees were then asked to consider if including the views of all staff role groups in reviewing QA was valuable and valid? I was conscious in asking this question to keep the question
open to avoid leading the interviewee. The interviewees interrogated the question before answering (how did you classify Management? Did you include Heads of School?). All six interviews confirmed that they considered the approach inclusive of all voices and that was valuable in reviewing QA. All interviewees complemented the inclusive nature of the Delphi design. For example, one AQA expert commented, “Yes because it reflects all of the stakeholders involved in ensuring that what we do provides quality. So you are getting the delivery side, the administration side in ensuring that all the service areas, and the management thinking in terms of the policy side of what we decide in terms of quality. It’s very much reflective of all the audiences that need to be represented” (Interviewee 1). The respondent was endorsing the inclusive nature of the design in that it reflected all of the stakeholders involved in providing quality. The approach was seen as “very much reflective of all the audiences that need to be represented” (Interviewee 1). This sense of ownership by all for quality is important in the QA ecosystem. Only then does it become an integral part of the culture of the organisation rather than the responsibility of a particular manager, department, team or subgroup. Quality in HE can sometimes be considered intangible because it is complex and wide-ranging. The requirement for involvement and participation is certainly an important consideration for AQA. Another interviewee reiterated this perspective with the comment, “you have to get the buy in from all groups within the institute” (Interviewee 2). While another commented positively on the relative numbers of staff in each group and the dominant position given to the Academic Staff as “they’re the ones that have the most involvement with academic quality” (Interviewee 5). They further explained that this “also reflects the position of the Academic Council where the majority on the Academic Council, under the Act, have to be Academic Staff” (Interviewee 5).

The executive managers agreed that the targeted groups were representative of the key stakeholders in quality assurance with an interest in and impact on the delivery of AQA. One of the managers commented, “They are the key stakeholders amongst all the Staff [...] that would have an interest in and impact on the delivery of Academic Quality so that makes sense. I’m not sure with the vast majority of response, 72% being Academic Staff, I don’t know whether that then also skews the results very much towards their way of thinking” (Interviewee 3). This executive manager’s concern about the majority academic voice in the AQA survey is revealing of the manager’s view and possibly of a more general managerial view. The manager stated that she/he
would have preferred to see the different staff groups represented with numerical equally in the research rather than taking account of the statistical reality of relative group size within the organisation. Representation was based on individual decisions to respond, as a proxy for level of interest in QA and proportion to the relative numbers of staff in that staff group to the total staff population.

Both the AQA experts and the executive managers all confirmed that they are well disposed to the collaborative approach to QA. One manager replied enthusiastically to this collaborative approach that “I think the way that you got a broad range and that spread seems to be absolutely perfect to me” (Interviewee 4). That all 6 AQA experts and executive managers concurred in their view of the inclusive cohort approach to QA.

9.2.2 Staff Group Sub-Culture and Identity

The AQA experts were of the view that the primary focus for all is the provision of quality service to students, yet the groups who do this differ. To paraphrase the AQA experts, staff have the same objective but different understandings and role identities. A comment from one AQA expert provided the nuanced clarification that, “How the different groups go about supporting students would differ and perhaps that might then create its own type of subculture. But I wouldn’t consider it distinctly different cultures” (Interviewee 1). Executive managers were emphatic and clear that sub-cultures exist. The AQA experts generally agreed, with a more nuanced understanding of the nature and level of distinctness between group cultures.

The executive managers agreed equally emphatically that “they are definitely different groups that are very distinct” (Interviewee 3). They suggested that there would be 4 different group cultures that intersect. For example, the executive managers raised the question of how staff were classified for this research. A Head of School for instance, could be classified as a manager and as an academic. One of the interviewees perceived that “there might be a bit of tension there” (Interviewee 3). This view is not supported in the research findings, which confirm that increasingly, Deans or Heads of School are professional academic managers and are unlikely to continue to be active academics (Harman, 2002). To address this possibility of dual identity in the
research, staff were self-designating in their identities in the Round 1 Survey Questionnaire and could choose multiple identities. In practice, the vast majority of staff chose one role identity, with very few choosing more than one identity. The data here concurs with the literature, that academics who become managers undergo a transition in their identity over time, from a distinctive academic perspective through a dual perspective and finally will transition to a management perspective. Since completing the research, I have taken the opportunity to observe this change at individual level in those who transfer to academic management roles. What I have observed is that the view of transition from academic to manager in the literature holds true for those at the level of Dean of Faculty or above. It appears to be true to a lesser extent for those academics who take on Head of Department level roles, who maintain their identity as academics first, or as academics and managers, without fully identifying as management per se. This is an important insight for the culture of academic organisations, where expectations of individual identities in different roles may not be well understood or given enough thought as to the changing nature of academic identity.

One executive manager suggested that while there might be common strands to each of those role subcultures “making the distinction is useful for the purposes of the research” (Interviewee 6). Comments from the interviewees suggested that the sub-cultures can be distinguished. Academic culture placed value on freedom of thought and decision, administration culture valued standardised decisions and deadlines, student services staff focused on the wider student experience and wellbeing, while management culture placed emphasis on cost efficiency and effectiveness. Awareness of these different sub-cultures was helpful to understanding the perceptions, tensions and operational possibilities that impact on QA.

9.2.3 Responsibility for Quality?

Interviewees were asked to respond to this research finding that 78% of all staff said primary responsibility for academic quality assurance in a Higher Education institution rests with academic staff, with 19% of all staff attributing primary responsibility to management. AQA expert number 5 began by referring back to the Institutes of Technology Act and the statutory basis of Academic Council confirming that responsibility for QA lies primarily with academic staff. They then proceeded to say that it is not fully or only the responsibility academic staff, acknowledging the
involvement from other staff groups. So, while management has a particular and shared role in QA, it was suggested by the same AQA experts “that the dominant position within academic quality assurance must be with the academic staff” (Interviewee 5).

Another AQA expert acknowledged that this separation of QA responsibilities resulted in “keeping the two cohorts separate again” (Interviewee 1). This person suggested that responsibility for QA “would be shared across, particularly those two groupings, management and academic staff” and that they together “have the primary lifting responsibility in terms of delivering quality.”

Yet another AQA expert was “not surprised at that result” (Interviewee 2). This AQA expert took the view that everybody within the institute has a role in quality. Yet s/he understood why 19% of respondents attributed responsibility to management, the group whose role definition is to manage, control and monitor and to be answerable for organisation performance.

One executive manager explained the finding by collating the 78% placing responsibility for QA with Academic Staff with the 72% of respondents in the Academic Staff grouping. “So it’s quite likely that the Academic Staff will account for the very large majority response saying that ‘primary responsibility for academic quality assurance in a Higher Education institution rests with Academic Staff’” (Interviewee 3) because they were the bulk of respondents anyway. I needed to evaluate this view. I checked the data behind the 78% result in the Round 2 Survey Questionnaire responses. The data confirmed that the executive manager’s view of the result was incorrect. In fact, the Academic Staff group returned the lowest attribution of QA responsibility to themselves. This is an example to the development of an understanding or opinion that was based on a perception of the Academic Staff that was not supported by the evidence. It confirms the problems that arise from role group perceptions and the value of a process to facilitate communication of individual and group views on AQA, so that individual, role or group bias can be countered by the evidence from an inclusive view.

All executive managers agreed that primary responsibility for QA rests with Academic Staff. “Without the Academic Staff taking ownership, academic quality is really just a gloss, so that needs to be there” (Interviewee 3). This was an important observation by the executive managers. One
could interpret their position as acknowledging, attributing or abdicating the central role in AQA to Academic Staff. The executive managers were also at pains to explain that responsibility does not rest solely with Academic staff as management hold ultimate responsibility for organisation performance. There was clearly a potential tension here in the management perspective between academic responsibility for QA and managerial responsibility. Again, the integrated approach to AQA illuminated this potential tension and is worthy of further consideration.

Nuancing their view that primary responsibility for QA would have to be with Academic Staff because they are in effect delivering learning and knowledge, one executive manager offered the view that “there is responsibility on management to ensure that the quality assurance procedures are all followed as well” (Interviewee 4). This distinction was termed by the executive manager as “a fair enough distribution of the responsibility” (Interviewee 4).

In summary, executive managers tended to agree that the primary responsibility for quality rested with academics, but many academics differed from this view. The executive manager view was expressed in a number of different ways and qualified with a number of supplementary observations and contingencies. The key finding here was that even the views of highly experienced executive managers displayed the tension that exists for managers in the academic environment. One executive manager articulated the management-academic tension succinctly as follows:

“I think that that response is understandable, is good. I think that clearly academic quality at its core is an Academic function. But I also understand that Management does set frameworks, that Management does provide leadership in many things and that it’s understandable that there’d be a view that Management has a role. But clearly in the majority of cases people see it as an Academic role but not forgetting the Management’s role” (Interviewee 6).

9.2.4 Interrogating the Tensions: Culture and/or Identity

During the interview the result from the Delphi that indicated that two-thirds of all staff saw differences in views about responsibility for AQA as related to the Organisational culture and one-third saw differences in views about responsibility for AQA as related to the Staff Group Identities
was shared. The interview respondents were asked for their perspectives on differences in views on responsibility for AQA.

The AQA experts agreed with this finding with one AQA expert stating that “it’s certainly reflecting an interesting thing about the division of the service delivery” (Interviewee 1). The same AQA expert commented on seeing differences as related to Organisational culture, “I wouldn’t have seen that myself in terms of that distinctiveness” (Interviewee 1). Introducing culture in the research as an explanation for organisation behaviour seemed to enable the AQA experts to look beyond staff role groupings. One AQA expert went on to suggest that:

“Obviously the organisational culture filters down into each of the subgroups within the organisation. So when you are talking about the identities of individual staff groups, yes each individual staff group as you will have outlined up here under the four headings, will have their own staff identity which will influence how they would do their own academic quality assurance or implement in some cases the academic quality assurance. But I think each of these Staff groups gets some of their identity from the overall organisational culture because that actually does filter down from the top down to the bottom” (Interviewee 2).

Another AQA expert, apparently teasing out the impact of culture in his/her head, said:

“I think that’s probably true. Yes, I do think an organisational culture certainly would have a major influence. But, of course, organisational culture primarily comes from the top. So that in one sense is not consistent with what we just said in the previous comment. But I do think it’s a fair comment alright. Because organisational culture does come from groups like the Academic Council as well. Okay yes, that’s fair enough” (Interviewee 5).

Organisational culture seemed to provide the AQA experts with a new way of framing differences in views and opinions that helped to explain the interface between the group and the organisation. The executive management were less clear on this point. One manager leaned towards the dominance of role group culture as an explanation of different views, using the language, “It most likely is, because that would colour your view as to which part of the organisation you belong to. That’ll definitely have a clear impact. But I don’t think they are totally homogenous, that would surprise me” (Interviewee 3). Another executive manager was unsure on the impact of culture stating that “in relation to the Staff Group Identity that line is very much blurred for me as an Academic Manager. I’m not fully convinced that is the explanation for the difference, I wouldn’t fully agree” (Interviewee 4). I was somewhat surprised by the tentativeness of the executive
managers’ responses to the definitive role of organisational culture and could only explain this as pertaining to their cultural interests as executive managers who see their role as the defining role in the organisation.

Yet another executive manager responded, “I think that the explanation again would explain partly perhaps and would be towards an explanation. I think one would need a more nuanced understanding because Staff identities are also tied into the culture of that group. So I think these explanations help but they wouldn’t be the final story, I think there would be further analysis to be done to see where culture intersected with identity and identity intersected with culture and so on” (Interviewee 6).

The interplay of group culture and organisational culture is complex and as suggested above, needs further consideration. The ability to influence culture from two perspectives, organisation and group, is noteworthy. There was agreement on the influence of an overarching organizational culture, but less coherence with regard to the influence of distinct role group subcultures within that. The need for this balance or distinction spoke to my research in that organisational culture was more important than the management and AQA experts seemed to have considered previously. The view expressed that organisational culture is top-down was in itself a revealing and disconcerting comment, as if role group views and opinions were something other to the organisational culture.

9.2.5 Responsibility Abdication

During the interviews participants were also asked about the result that 72% of all staff expressed the view that locating responsibility for AQA with management or external bodies and the suggestion was made that indicated a weakness in collegiate academic culture in the organisation and an abdication of responsibility by those who took this view. The AQA experts offered mixed views including the statement “that putting the onus onto Management or an External Body in a way is passing the buck from yourself to somebody else” (Interviewee 2). However, one AQA expert, with international experience in HE, pointed out “we’re in the Higher Education sector, more specifically the IOT sector. And there are standards, both international and national standards that we have to adhere with to maintain academic quality. So I’m not so sure that I
would claim that looking outside is a weakness in our own culture” (Interviewee 5). This perspective, seeing beyond the surface dichotomy of third-party involvement, suggests that management or external body responsibility or authority can be acknowledged without weakening the collegiate culture internally. If this is the case, it again speaks to the potential for an integrated collaborative approach to QA.

The management experts took a similar view from a perspective of their management role, with one saying that “I think that’s actually total nonsense. I don’t think academic quality is purely and only exclusive, excluding anything else to collegiate academic culture within an organisation. Because that would be extremely inward looking” (Interviewee 3). Another phrased the view in softer language as “Well I think that there is an element of responsibility that management and external bodies have to therefore reference. I would have thought that if it wasn’t referenced at all that would be an even bigger weakness. So my sense would be that on its own this certainly wouldn’t indicate to me that it was a weakness in collegiate academic culture” (Interviewee 6).

9.2.6 Group Perceptions of Academic Quality

During interview the Delphi result that 63% of management staff and 64% of administration staff viewed academic quality as the primary measurement of a Higher Education institution was also shared with attention also to the contrast that 47% of academic staff and only 36% of student support staff placed emphasis on academic quality as the primary measurement.

One AQA expert was “Surprised, very surprised by that” (Interviewee 1). The respondent explained that perhaps some academic staff might take a very narrow group view. They might see programme provision and the examination results as the key measure of quality, as their more immediate primary measurement. It was somewhat surprising that academic staff did not hold a wider view of quality as it relates to the whole student experience of learning. An overly committed academic role group identity might explain a quality focus limited to the academics’ provision and assessment. This was noteworthy as it may indicate some misconceptions among managers and AQA experts as to how academic staff interpret academic quality, with some narrowing as relating to their roles as lecturer and assessor.
Another AQA expert struggled to comprehend, reflecting that “I suppose the primary measurement of the academic education institute is the quality of our graduates because they will either make or break us, if you want to put it that way. If you say that the quality of our graduates then depends on the academic quality system that we have in place and it would have a certain input into the quality of our graduates. I would say the primary measurement really is the quality of our graduates as opposed to the primary being the focus on academic quality, but then academic quality feeds into the quality of the graduates so it’s kind of turning it a little bit around” (Interviewee 2). Here QA emphasis is placed on the student, the quality of the student and with academic quality as an interplay of these factors. During the interview, the AQA expert was visibly struggling with academic staff placing less emphasis on academic quality than management or administration staff. S/he seemed to be searching for a reason that might explain this view among academic staff. S/he settled on an explanation that “the emphasis is on the student, the quality of the student and the academic quality feeds into that” (Interviewee 2). Attribution of such importance to the student in the measurement of Higher Education quality as explaining the academic view is quite a narrow focus. Research profile, citation ratings, benchmarks and rankings are also factors in most recognized measurements of institute QA.

One AQA expert rationalized it as “See I think academic staff probably take it as inherent, that they don’t always consciously think about it. So I think some of it is inherent in their practice and maybe they don’t think very much about it. Management may be more conscious of it” (Interviewee 5). They further added that academic staff would, at the same time, be very conscious of maintaining standards. There was a sense of paradox in what might academic staff both consciously and unconsciously think and do. There was something very intriguing about a respondent conceptualizing how some groups have a tacit, inherent orientation and another explicit, conscious orientation. The seeming incoherence between group views sheds light on cultural issues within an organisation and research has the benefit in uncovering such incoherence so that it can be reflected upon by the organisation.

Management interviewees also expressed surprise at this finding, particularly in light of the academic staff support for AQA expressed in some of the earlier survey questions. One executive manager responded, “I would have thought that once you say that there is a particular grouping
within the organisation fully responsible for it and that really the other groupings are only really there to create the conditions. Then therefore it should also be the academic staff that accept that academic quality is a primary measurement of the Higher Education institution” (Interviewee 3).

Another expressed surprise in stronger terms. “Stunning. I would have expected academic staff to state that management and administration staff have no emphasis on academic quality. Wow” (Interviewee 4). Another responded similarly, “I’m surprised at that, I’m very surprised at that. On both counts because I’m thinking of the management as managing the money and the staff numbers and the strategy and all of that, and I’m thinking of academics managing academic quality all of that” (Interviewee 6).

The anonymous surveying of views across different staff groups had thrown up unexpected viewpoints and opinions that in turn seemed to perplex the AQA experts and the management. Certainly, there seemed to be quite different interpretations by the interviewees of what the findings could mean. One must interpret the data here with some caution. Interviewees were responding to the data and were attempting to explain an unexpected finding. Nonetheless, the academic staff view was unexpected. The insight that may be gleaned from this is that perhaps all groups form their core meaning and values from what effects them most or that has direct impact on their role. Explicit acknowledgement of these role groups in the collaborative approach to QA gave rise to reflection among the AQA experts and Management that challenged their role-based beliefs about other groups’ views.

9.2.7 Collegiate or Procedural Operation

In responding to the result that 57% of all staff viewed the Academic Quality Assurance system as “A collegiate system of excellence” while 38% of Staff viewed the AQA system as “Operational policies & procedures”, all AQA experts and executive managers expressed their preference for the former definition, in agreement with the majority view from the survey. One AQA expert was surprised that the level of agreement with this was not higher than 57%, stating surprise, “that there’s not a more distinct two ends of the spectrum in terms of the level of percentage” (Interviewee 1). S/he clarified this spectrum as the expectation that the vast majority would view AQA as a collegiate system and very few would see AQA as just operational policies and
procedures. Another AQA expert reflected that in the context of the particular institute being studied “I would have thought the view would be higher in terms of ‘operational policies & procedures’ that the perception would be higher in terms of a system of operational policies & procedures” (Interviewee 2). A third AQA expert shed light on these differing views with the thought that “Our own Academic Council is a collegiate system so I do think that probably the view of the 57% is probably more correct. Now on the other hand, in practice there’s no doubt that people look to the Academic Council Regulations and Procedures or they look to the External Examiner Regulations of Procedures. So again it’s probably, you know, what they’re conscious of or what they’re not conscious of (Interviewee 5). This issue of what staff are conscious of (policies and procedures) and not conscious of (a collegiate system) was raised by the same interviewee in response to Interview Question A3A above.

Management also expressed varying views on this finding. One executive manager commented, “Okay well it should be more a system of collegiate, a collegiate system of excellence but there is the word system in there, ‘a collegiate system of excellence.’” Now a system does have policies and procedures, policies and procedures are part of that system and you need to then layer the excellence thinking, the quality enhancement thinking, the innovation on top of that as well. But you need to have operational policies and procedures, it can’t stop there. I do agree it can’t stop there” (Interviewee 3). Another executive manager said, “I find it positive. If almost 60% of Staff are viewing the AQA as a system of excellence to assist the AQA rather than operational policies & procedures that have to be adhered to, I think that’s a positive finding” (Interviewee 4). For another manager, this finding gave concern. “Only just over half the Staff saw it as ‘A collegiate system of excellence’ would be a concern for me. That 38% of Staff only viewed it as another policy or procedure or just an operational thing, I would be concerned that that would be the modus operandi in people’s minds about quality assurance. I obviously agree more with the first one” (Interviewee 6).

With this survey data and interview question, I was trying to examine whether staff embrace quality as an essential part of the organization’s commitment to excellence or whether it’s experienced more as a box-ticking exercise? The interviewee responses in general expressed a degree of surprise that the collegiate view was not stronger. This finding reinforces the importance
of involving staff in AQA. It also reinforces the importance of a collaborative approach that hears the different perceptions and tensions within the culture and across role groups and provides a process to raise to consciousness the nature of the AQA system.

9.2.8 Effectiveness of the Academic Quality System

Interviewees were asked to respond to the finding that 78% of staff agreed that the Academic Quality Assurance system has helped to improve academic quality. All 6 interviewees, AQA experts and management, agree with this finding and confirmed that they would have expected this staff response.

One AQA expert attributed this to “all the forms of the Academic Quality Assurance System, you know the subsystems within that. Because it gives us checks and balances. And also allows us to holistically see that what we are doing is to create excellence in education” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert expanded on this that “the system here does certainly contribute, and certainly again I would give a lot of credit to the Academic Council and to the people who are involved in it at all levels” (Interviewee 5). This person talked of the “consciousness constantly being raised, issues are being resolved, the regulations and the procedures are adapted from time-to-time, it’s an ongoing process and there being a will for continuous improvement” (Interviewee 5). Management further endorsed the consensus support for the AQA system as providing the framework to structure things and support dialogue.

9.2.9 Response to Criticism of the Quality System

When asked if it was a matter of concern that 28% of academic staff disagreed that the Academic Quality Assurance system has helped to improve academic quality, AQA interviewees were consistent that it should be a matter of limited concern “because they’re the front-line” (Interviewee 1). Management interviewees were more concerned, though mainly curious as to why 28% of academic staff might hold this view. This management concern stemmed from the academic staff being the interface to the students and needing to see themselves as central to delivering quality in the form of how they deliver.
Interview respondents tended to focus more on the 78% agreement that the AQA system helped to improve academic quality. Two AQA experts suggested that it would be unlikely ever to get 100% agreement from academic staff because, as one AQA expert stated, “we all know the kind of hobby horses they come up with from time to time” (Interviewee 5). S/he continued, “I don’t think it should be a major concern that they’re not conscious that the system itself actually improves quality” (Interviewee 5). At the same time, this AQA expert suggested to try to reduce the 28% would be important. In the words of another AQA expert “I don’t think one should be too worried that it’s at 28% but you need to get it down” (Interviewee 2). Similarly, the executive managers were somewhat concerned, yet asserted that it might be more “interesting to probe why some respondents had that view” (Interviewee 3) to find out why they believe that the AQA system hasn’t helped to improve academic quality.

There appeared to be an understanding or acceptance among the interviewees that academic staff sometimes hold contrarian views that are tolerated or ignored by the organisation at large and not taken too seriously. The danger here is that the appearance of tolerance or acceptance could disguise a degree of passive aggression towards contrarian views that can then be systemically ignored. The inclusive, anonymous approach to QA provided an opportunity to surface this tacit belief and behaviour, to create awareness of the extent of the contrarian viewpoint and an opportunity for the organisation to treat it with the level of seriousness deserved relative to the importance of the subject matter.

9.2.10 Quality Assurance and the Student Experience

Interviewees were also asked to respond to the finding that 66% of all staff agree that the Academic Quality Assurance system has helped to improve the student experience. Administration staff were most in agreement, with 100% and 75% agreement respectively. Academic staff (62%) and student support staff returned the lowest level of agreement.

All managers and AQA experts concurred with this view of the AQA system. One AQA expert explains, “it goes back again to the Academic Council. I mean I think that the Academic Council is the premier system within the college for maintaining academic quality assurance and the Academic Council in my experience is very student centred. And now that there are more students
involved at various levels, both at the Academic Council itself and in the various subcommittees, and the efforts that are made to engage with the student experience, through the Irish Survey of Student Engagement, I do think that it does help to improve the student experience” (Interviewee 5). Management participants also agreed, evident in comments such as “because the academic quality assurance system helps improve the quality of what we do in every way. And the student experience obviously is broader than just the actual teaching and learning, but teaching and learning is core to that. So I do agree” (Interviewee 3).

9.2.11 A Hidden QA Consensus

Interviewees were asked to comment on the fact that while staff groups expressed some differing views of what Academic Quality Assurance is about, there was none-the-less a consensus across the staff as a whole. Staff groups held differing views, leading at times to tensions between groups, on superficial or false perceptions of difference.

The AQA experts provided the insight that “it reflects perhaps the different focus of people’s work. And as a result there can be contradictions then about how you achieve the quality. So I think it’s more about how you achieve it perhaps is what’s causing the tension, rather than the work itself [...] So it is how we go about our work that creates tensions at times” (Interviewee 1). The QA tension among staff groups was described as arising from staff “looking at it from their own particular workloads and interaction with the students and their own particular deadlines and implementing the deadlines which sometimes is part of a quality assurance system. You know, if deadlines conflict or are not understood by the other groups then that can cause huge tensions within it” (Interviewee 2).

An AQA expert observed that when asked for their views anonymously, as in the surveys used for this research, one will always have a different perspective than face-to-face. The AQA expert explained, “because in a face-to-face scenario one is very much aware of one’s own accountability and one may not want to differ too far from the herd” (Interviewee 5). S/he continued that if the perceived consensus is that there are problems then somebody will not say, “well actually I don’t think there are problems at all” (Interviewee 5). When the question is anonymous staff may be more willing to offer a contrary view. It was not seen as a concern by the interviewees to have a
difference between the face-to-face views and the anonymous views. “I wouldn’t be over concerned about that. But also you would expect the different staff groups would have different views, you know we all look after our own half-acre” (Interviewee 5). This indeed was an interesting insight on the difference between what staff groups think and what they are assumed to think.

One executive manager suggested that there could be an element of stereotyping of roles by those in other staff groups. The very different terms and conditions that people work in the Irish system can be divisive. It was explained by the executive manager that in different countries it would not be the case that you have such different terms and conditions of employment in terms of working hours, attendance requirements and holiday periods. There can also be suspicion that the organisation continues to operate and decisions are taken while academic staff are on leave. “Yes, the organisation doesn’t stop. So I think some of that, now it’s not the only explanation” (Interviewee 3).

Another manager reflected that staff even sit separately in their staff groups in the canteen. That explained the perception that these differing staff groups hold differing views. The manager pointed out that in the canteen “there’s a table for administrators, there’s a table for managers, there’s a table for lecturers and albeit even from different departments. So maybe it’s a familiarity of personality and grade and what other people and what other grades do, not what other grades but what other sector, what’s the term, differing staff groups. Maybe it’s an awareness, ‘those over there are talking about us now’. Maybe they’re not” (Interviewee 4). This interviewee went on to reflect that organisations can have different organisational cultures and that does not have to be the organisational culture described here.

Another manager summed up, “Well I would say that there would be a high level of agreement about what Academic Quality Assurance was about in itself. However, how that might be implemented, how the effect of other issues going on in the organisation at the same time might affect people’s attitudes towards each other and towards each other’s roles and so on would explain why you could have tensions and yet agreement on what the overall picture of Academic Quality Assurance is. So for example, this might be an extreme case, if there was an industrial
relations issue going on at a time about to do with the Administration Staff, there would be tension around implementing academic quality arrangements in that case even if there is an agreement that academic quality arrangements are a good thing, for example” (Interviewee 6).

9.2.12 Tensions and Perceptions of Difference

Interviewees were also asked if the collaborative approach to AQA proposed would help to reduce these perceptions of difference and tensions between staff groups. There was unanimous agreement from all interviewees that the collaborative approach to AQA would help through “more communication about the detail of those quality assurance processes” (Interviewee 1) and “get people working together and trying to understand things from the other group’s perspective” (Interviewee 2). It was suggested that “the Academic Council is the best single operation in the college from the point of view of collaborative and collegiate effort” (Interviewee 5). In the context of this research of course, this observation might lead to the question of why only two of the four staff groups sit on Academic Council, though all four staff groups participate on subcommittees of Academic Council.

One of the executive managers reflected, “Well I think a collaborative common understanding of what needs to be achieved could only help. Two other things I’d say […] will inevitably be some tensions anyway even if people are 100% behind the overall process. And the other thing would be that it might even be good that there are some tensions because tensions in themselves often uncover issues and problems which if properly addressed will actually lead to a better system” (Interviewee 6).

Interview Question A2C referencing management or external body responsibility for AQA indicated a weakness in collegiate culture, presented the most difference in interviewee responses. The three most senior people, the two most experienced managers and the most experienced AQA expert did not see referencing others responsibility as a weakness in collegiate culture. The executive manager whose role as a Dean was closer to academic staff and the two AQA experts who worked closely with academic staff, were more concerned by what one characterised as “passing the buck from yourself to somebody else” (Interviewee 2).
Knowing all six interviewees well, I could see that the position taken by each aligned well with their own identity, the extent to which they viewed themselves as managers or as academics. Even within my control group of experienced professionals the role identities underpinning this research came into play in determining perceptions and tensions in AQA. We return here to the identity nexus set out in Chapter 5. We see demonstrated here the tension between management and academic perspectives identified by Lipsky (1980) and by Hudson (1989).

**9.3 Best processes of Academic Quality Assurance**

**9.3.1 Policies and Procedures**

Interviewees were asked to respond to the perspective that “Policies and Procedures” are the best process of academic quality assurance in Higher Education. The AQA experts all agreed with the consensus of the all staff view illuminated in the Delphi “*because they (policies and procedures) are the checks and balances that we need*” (Interviewee 1). Policies and procedures were viewed as benchmarks to measure achievement. Acknowledging the consensus support for policies and
procedures, the AQA experts argued for the importance of clear policies and procedures that are simple, operational and easily implementable. One AQA expert commented, “that the formation of those ‘Policies and Procedures’ through a collegiate effort at Academic Council and at the subcommittees helps that perception among Staff” (Interviewee 5).

While generally agreeable with the all staff consensus, managers voiced some conditions, including “Well as long as these ‘Policies and Procedures’ recognize that it’s not just simply a rule book. But that for instance Policies and Procedures would involve inviting in dissenting views, inviting in external views, external stakeholders as part of the academic quality assurance processes. That is good practice. That we try to follow that, we bring in other Academics from other organisations, industry and communities. So it really depends on the quality of the policies and the procedures that they are developmental and promote culture of enhancement as opposed to just following very strict simple rules” (Interviewee 3). One manager went further to state, “There’s a level at which I don’t agree. I think that Policies & Procedures are ultimately an implantation of a philosophy. I believe one needs to have a philosophy and a framework overarching Policies & Procedures” (Interviewee 6).

A significant majority of staff had endorsed a particular view: documented policies and procedures-based outlook. However, it appeared that management interviewees struggled to adapt to the collaborative approach. They seemed conflicted about the consensus approach possibly challenging or curtailing management control over academic operations. This management struggle was documented in the literature in Newton’s (2000) study of the differences between academic and management perspectives and the follow-up study on these differences by Cartwright (2007). Thus, one should not underestimate the power of the role group interests and agendas and that these can be challenged by a consensus approach.

**9.3.2 Collegiate Professional Judgement**

The interview also explored the findings that 58% of academic staff and 67% of management staff are supportive of “collegiate professional judgement” as the best process of Academic quality Assurance in Higher Education. The AQA experts are supportive of collegiate professional judgement, “because it’s not a one size fits all in terms of what we deliver and how we deliver it.
So you do need that professional judgement” (Interviewee 1). The AQA experts viewed the academic staff as the professionals, with the management and administration staff viewed somewhat differently “as professional in their own areas as well [who] have to be listened to from the point of their own professional judgement in drawing up any quality assurance system. I would be supportive of collegiate professional judgement feeding into an academic quality system but then one has to listen to the other groups’ perspective as well and come up with a workable solution” (Interviewee 2). It was suggested by an AQA expert that collegiate professional judgement fits the concept of the Academic Council, so “I do think that the collegiate professional approach is the best approach for academic quality assurance within a Higher Education Institution. I don’t believe in top-down” (Interviewee 5).

A manager found it curious that there was a higher percentage of the management who were of that view and wondered if the word ‘professional’ threw some of the academic staff slightly off course. It was asked by this manager that if the survey question had said ‘collegiate academic judgment’ more of the academic staff would have said yes?” (Interviewee 3). The other managers accepted the views presented and agreed with the importance of collegiate professional judgement. It could have been useful to explore further the reasons for differences in opinions between interviewees. The design of questions, interpretation of questions by different groups, genuine differences of opinion, social influence of others are possible influences on consensus and difference in view. However, the structured nature of the research methodology, the individual nature of the survey process and the strong characters of the senior people interviewed suggested that respondents would not generally have struggled with interpretation or understanding. One of the strengths of this integrative approach to AQA is that QA can be evidence based on consensus views and thus more acceptable to those who accept collegiate, collaborative or democratic decisions.

9.3.3 Critical Self-Reflection

Interviewees were also queried on the finding that 97% of all staff agree that Critical self-reflection on their teaching by academic staff is important for Academic Quality Assurance.
There was unanimous agreement across all AQA experts and executive managers with this finding. An AQA expert commented, “Yes of course it’s true. I mean one expects that the academic staff should operate in a professional manner including critical self-reflection. And I do believe that the college is extremely fortunate in the calibre of the academic staff that we have” (Interviewee 5). A manager commented, “I think it’s a good finding. I think it’s an interesting finding. I’d be concerned as to how that would be turned into any sort of reality. Critical Self-reflection would appear to be a very internal process. We just said Collegiate Professional Judgement is the best way, so I would like to see a collegiate aspect building on the Critical Self-reflection” (Interviewee 6). Implicit in this comment from the manager was that there was something unreal about an introverted critical self-reflection. This manager’s view challenged the contemporary understanding of critical self-reflection being central to academia and educating.

### 9.3.4 Management Monitoring of Quantitative Outputs

Interviewees were also asked to respond to the finding that 70% of all staff, including 61% of academic staff agree that management monitoring of quantitative outputs is important for Academic Quality Assurance.

All except one AQA expert were in full agreement with this finding. The AQA expert in question commented that “It depends on what the quantitative outputs are. Like some of them may be relevant but I think an over emphasis on monitoring quantitative outputs sometimes can go against developing a culture of quality within the organisation and getting people to buy-in for the greater good as opposed to just meeting different quantitative measures. So the balance between the two” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert confirmed agreement with the phrasing, “Of course I do. What the boss inspects employees respect” (Interviewee 5).

### 9.3.5 External Examiner Monitoring of Assessment

Interviewees were also informed that there was 100% agreement among all staff that external examiner monitoring of assessment is important for Academic Quality Assurance. This finding was welcomed by all interviewees and described as a “safety valve” (Interviewee 1) by an AQA expert. Another AQA expert viewed external examiner monitoring as very important to the
assessment process. Yet another commented that the external examiner system and the external validation or programmatic review system are two of the best methods for assuring quality. Agreeing with the finding one manager commented, “Yes it’s interesting. It’s so unusual for a 100% return isn’t it? I’m not too surprised that it would be the vast majority. I would have probably expected sort of 97% or 98%, like some of the previous questions” (Interviewee 3). A tentative insight about why this would be the item that received unanimous agreement relates to a point made previously about the trust invested in external perspectives. In this case of support for external examiners the consensus was entirely a good thing in terms of quality assurance.

9.3.6 Student Feedback on their Programme

Interviewees were informed that 97% of all staff agree that student feedback on their programme is important for Academic Quality Assurance. The AQA experts expected this high level of agreement from all staff groups and saw student feedback as a valuable, if sometimes subjective measurement of academic quality. Confirming agreement, one AQA expert commented, “I would [have expected this finding] because we have a tradition of formative assessment. ‘Johnny try that again until you get it right.’ That there’s a long tradition of personal student centred education in the institute and that kind of relationship with the student where there is constant exchange between the student and the member of staff and student feedback is part of that process. In fact I would argue that most of our staff, the vast bulk of our staff, are totally committed to engaging with their students. So I’m not really surprised at that finding at all. I think again it’s a very positive thing to say” (Interviewee 5).

Management interviewees displayed some surprise at the finding, with one stating, “To be honest I wouldn’t [have expected this finding] because I don’t think we gather enough student feedback and we haven’t really built into the system robustly enough that student feedback is taken on board. So there’s a bit of ‘lip service’ going on here” (Interviewee 3). One manager took an alternative view, stating, “I would [have expected this finding] in the sense that I think Student Feedback is a cornerstone of academic quality. I also am aware that Student Feedback is a problematic area and the implementation of it has often led to some of the tensions we’ve been talking about earlier on. But I’m heartened to see that as an aspiration at least by Staff members. I think it’s something that can be built on” (Interviewee 6).
There was an interesting paradox here of acknowledging the importance of student feedback and that it is a problematic area leading to tensions. In some ways this paradox exemplifies the management and academic cultures touching off each other. Both cultures acknowledge the importance of student feedback. Indeed, academic staff in many if not most cases solicit feedback from their students at the end of delivering their module or course. Executive managers in particular can be unaware of these local student feedback mechanisms. Academics claim to use this student feedback to review and improve their module and provision. However, institutional, formalized student feedback as an instrument of management monitoring can meet with deep mistrust by academics, fearing it could be used not as a mechanism of continuous and reflective quality improvement but as a blunt instrument of performance management and critique. Thus we have the paradox of near universal acknowledgement and support for student feedback accompanied by the tensions of the power dynamic relating to who ‘owns’, interprets and decides the response to the feedback. Overcoming this and other tensions through collaborative, integrated QA processes can help to build trust and understanding across the role-group culture barriers.

9.3.7 Student Feedback on Assessment

Interviewees also responded to the result that 94% of all staff agree that student feedback on assessment is important for Academic Quality Assurance. The AQA experts confirmed their agreement with this finding, though they would not generally have expected this high level of agreement from all staff groups. One AQA expert commented “I think these three questions 4A, 5A & 6A reflect the nature of you know the understanding amongst academic staff about programmatic reviews and having that external voice, be it student or be it external examiners, in terms of assuring what we are doing. I think that’s highly reflective, those percentages” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert responded, “I wouldn’t have expected that high level of agreement. But I do think that student feedback on assessment, timely feedback on assessment and a lot of formative feedback on assessment is extremely important” (Interviewee 2). Yet another AQA expert offered an insight on where the high level of agreement might come from, commenting, “Yes I suppose it’s a little bit high alright. But I think again it illustrates the close relationship between the academic staff particularly and their students. In fact I would say that not alone the academic staff but all the staff here would be very student centred” (Interviewee 5).
Management interviewees were generally surprised by this level of agreement commenting, “No I wouldn’t have expected that” (Interviewee 3). At the same time one executive manager commented positively, “Again I’d be heartened by people seeing it as a fairness, the whole idea of being able to appeal, being able to look at something a second time. Having a fairness of process and due process and so on” (Interviewee 6). This response exemplifies a managerial culture that interpreted findings in a very specific and rather narrow, procedural way, different to the more reflective academic culture and requiring an integrative QA process to resolve the differences.

9.3.8 Industry Feedback on Academic Programmes

When informed that management were less in agreement than the other staff groups with the statement that “Industry feedback on academic programmes is important for Academic Quality Assurance”, then overall staff agreement dropped slightly from 91% to 86% and that the administration staff group view went in the opposite direction from 95% to 100% agreement. One AQA expert explored the finding, “I’m surprised first by the management side of it particularly. I’m not surprised because I think for administration staff the difference there in the directional agreement level is minor…. Whether or not it’s kind of fear of the external, getting too much industry feedback in terms of the effect that it would have on our programmes. And the amount of churning in terms of revising programmes and whether that is management’s reason. That’s the only conclusion I could make. But I would be surprised that it was downwards. I’m not really surprised by the second one” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA person reflected, “I suppose management in one way don’t like to be dictated to and would like the freedom to do what they deem fit. Not that I’m saying that industry dictates but they might prefer to make their own judgements rather than to be told maybe from industry what to do” (Interviewee 2). Yet another AQA expert stated, “Now I’m surprised that Management were not supportive of the notion that ‘Industry feedback on academic programmes is important for Academic Quality Assurance’ that’s a surprise for me” (Interviewee 5).

The executive managers struggled more with this finding, stating, “That’s amazing. Well firstly, I would have almost expected management to be more supportive than the other staff groups of the statement. So that’s the first thing. And then to see that people started thinking twice about it.
Maybe some academic staff felt, ‘well if they don’t think it’s all that important then perhaps I needn’t bother’. That’s all I can think of” (Interviewee 3).

Another manager responded, “I’m at a loss to know why management is in less agreement than other groups that Industry feedback is important. I mean are we talking like 95s against 94s against 93s or something, are we talking a very small difference, is it really a statistically important difference? That’s what just strikes me. I’d be very surprised if management were not supportive generally of industry feedback. Maybe there was some person had a bad day or something. I don’t know but I need to answer the question I realize. But I’m just saying the premise on which the question is based may not be statistically sound” (Interviewee 6). In response to this interviewee’s astonishment, I checked the Round 1 Survey statistics to confirm support for Industry Feedback on academic programmes as, Student Services 100%, Administration 95%, Academic 90% and Management 88% and the question statement as correct.

The interview continued to explore this question in terms of the possibility that views are being socially constructed in the context of other views. This explanation had arisen in response to other questions also and indicated the potential of a collaborative, integrated process to build or ‘socially construct’ an institutional understand of AQA. This was an important finding for the proposed collaborative approach to AQA. Five of the six interviews, both AQA experts and executive managers, agreed with this explanation.

To the suggestion of socially constructed meaning an AQA expert commented, “I think in terms of the administrative staff group view, I think that would be highly socially constructed because they are a more cohesive group anyway rather than the independent management views” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert added, “I’d say they are. Because I don’t think anybody remains insular in their own right or standing alone in their own right. So I think they are being influenced” (Interviewee 2). The third AQA expert stated, “Well that always happens, that possibility’s always there right. I mean I’m not saying that’s the explanation but that possibility would always be there. But I am surprised at the original statement there that management were less supportive of the Industry feedback” (Interviewee 5).
Management agreed, “Of course” (Interviewee 3) and “Yes. I can understand why, let’s say the overall staff agreement dropped because they might have said, ‘If the leaders of the institute are saying this well then maybe it’s not important, maybe it’s somewhere else.’ But why would a particular group go against?” (Interviewee 4). One executive manager who held a contrary view stated it as, “I don’t think myself that that’s a socially constructed thing, I don’t. I mean administration staff going in the opposite direction and the other staff going down would indicate in fact that it wasn’t socially constructed. That people maybe just rethought their own position on it and so on. Or they just decided themselves...well there are two ways you can say it, management said it we’ll do it because management said it or management said it so we definitely won’t do it because management said it. So I don’t think that management have the influence on that kind of a question in a survey situation. No, so the answer is no I don’t think it’s socially constructed, I think there are other reasons for it” (Interviewee 6).

9.3.9 Academic Council Participation

Interviewees were invited to comment on the finding that the higher the level of representation of a staff group on Academic Council, the lower the level of support from that staff group for Academic Council monitoring of academic programmes and assessment. Seventy two percent (72%) of all staff had explained this finding as related to the fact that the respondents sitting on Academic Council had “A better understanding among Academic Council members of the function of Academic Council.”

Amongst the AQA experts, a majority were in agreement with the staff explanation above. An AQA expert explained the finding, “The Academic Council does not monitor academic programmes or assessment. That is a function of the Executive. I do think that once people are involved, once they see that Academic Council sets policy and procedure and sets benchmarks they have confidence in the system yet are concerned about the potential for management control of and through Academic Council. But the implementation, the monitoring of academic programmes and assessment is a matter for the [...] management more than executive management because it does involve management down to department level by the Heads of Departments” (Interviewee 5).
A manager was also perturbed by the finding and found it a bit worrying because the Academic Council “is the only real institute-wide platform which has status for instance that advises the Governing Body. It’s a very important platform in the organisation so that’s where it should happen. Particularly also in the sub-committees of Academic Council. As to what the explanation for it is, no I don’t think it’s a better understanding, it’s just not wanting to be controlled” (Interviewee 3). The response from another manager helped me understand the mix of agreement and concern, “I think that yes, a better understanding would help. But I think in the subtext looking at this here there would be something of a worry, for me, that any Staff group would think that monitoring of programmes and assessment was not a function of Academic Council. That would seem like a huge gap for any Academic to have even if they didn’t understand particular procedures that they would for example think that somehow it was appropriate that Academic Council wouldn’t monitor assessment. That would be a worry for me beyond a marginal improvement in understanding, that would seem to be a very big gap and it would be worrying” (Interviewee 6).

In responding to the finding, an AQA expert used the phrase “I would like not to agree” (Interviewee 2) indicating the mixed feelings that even an AQA expert might hold regarding this finding. It would be important in a collaborative process to tease out the role and functions of Academic Council precisely. If monitoring of programmes and assessment was not included in that role, then both QA experts and management would be eager to specify where precisely that function is held in the AQA system. It was of interest for me to experience the mix of agreement and concern in individual responses, reflecting the underlying role group culture interests and power dynamics.

9.3.10 Support for Academic Council

When asked if they agree there is this conflict in the insight that the membership of Academic Council (academic and management groups) are themselves conflicted in their support of Academic Council authority to monitor academic programmes and assessment all AQA experts agreed. One AQA expert commented, “I do. Because again they have different needs. I think at times, the two different groups and the priority that is put on some what we would call ‘assurance processes and procedures’, the academic staff mightn’t always immediately see the benefit.
Downstream they see the benefit of it. Management upstream I think see more the immediate benefit of some of these academic programme and assessment procedures. And I think that can cause the conflict. It’s not necessarily that they disagree it’s the immediacy of having it in place I think can be the problem” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert commented, “I think it might be the case alright. To conclude from the previous statement as to maybe Academics, even though we have a huge representation of academic staff on Academic Council, again has it become too bureaucratic? And do people feel that they really have a voice on Academic Council to express their view?” (Interviewee 2). A comment from an AQA expert was revealing of the basis of the conflicted Academic Council being, “There have been occasions where the Academic Council have felt, at least I have felt, that they (academics) did seek to adopt a more management type function which is not their function. But I’ve also felt that they have been asked by management from time-to-time to get involved in monitoring and I don’t believe that’s their function at all” (Interviewee 5).

The managers agreed less with this conflicted positioning of Academic Council. One manager reservedly agreed that there is this sense of conflict for Academic Council members and commented, “Yes there is still the kind of thinking, amongst certainly some parts of the organisation, that the Programme Board is the owner of a Programme no matter what. Now that is entirely in conflict with the whole notion of having a quality culture which is overarching, having policies and procedures which are overarching, strategies and so on. And in some cases people have put themselves forward to sit on Academic Council to try and prevent an institute-wide agenda being adopted around quality that’ll have an impact on their own Programme Boards that they sit on. So they’re just there to slow things down” (Interviewee 3). Another manager declared a clear management perspective that, “It shouldn’t be problematic because it is the right thing to do, it is why you are elected onto that council to actually ensure that all academics and all management and everything can be monitored. No I really don’t think that is the problem” (Interviewee 4). A final quote from an executive manager teased out the question more by reflecting that “I believe that the idea of a collegiate approach, the idea of people having a professional approach to their work and I think indeed, based on that, they have a good understanding of what it is they are to do. I don’t believe that there’s any conflict. I don’t. I mean some people may perceive themselves that there’s a conflict but I think it’s well possible for people
to carry out their work, provided they take a professional approach to it, without being conflicted” (Interviewee 6).

9.3.11 Management Commitment to Quality Assurance

All managers and AQA experts confirmed that they would have expected this high level of 91% agreement by all staff that Management Commitment is a key element in establishing a viable Quality Assurance culture from all staff groups.

Comments from AQA experts included, “If senior management don’t walk the talk, in terms of Quality Assurance and the culture of Quality Assurance, it doesn’t happen” (Interviewee 1) and the comment “I do think that management commitment is key in establishing a viable quality assurance culture. Again for the same reason that the culture in an organisation starts at the top. It shouldn’t end at the top but it starts at the top” (Interviewee 2). Returning to the role of the Academic Council one AQA expert commented, “It goes back to you know, what management inspect employees respect. That you cannot divorce quality assurance from management within an organisation. So as we’ve said earlier the setting of the procedures and the policies may be done primarily by Academic Council but the actual monitoring does go back to management. So a viable quality assurance obviously does involve a ‘Management Commitment’ to me anyway. So I’m not surprised at the high-level agreement to that by the staff groups” (Interviewee 5). Management comments were one word agreement, as though the answer to this question was an obvious or unquestionable affirmation for management.

It was interesting throughout this Section 9.3 on the best processes of AQA that there was again a high level of agreement among the AQA experts and the executive managers, with a different viewpoint occasionally by each and well-developed reasoning around views held. At the same time the two interview expert groups can be seen to reflect the underlying subculture groups in this research, the management and academic perspectives.
9.4 Assessment of the Academic Quality Assurance System

9.4.1 Main Strengths of AQA System

Interviewees were presented with the finding that 94% of all staff agreed that the main strengths of the Academic Quality Assurance in operation in Higher Education in Institutes of Technology in the following order are:

1. **Academic staff** quality, commitment, motivation, professionalism, integrity and self-reflective were returned as attributes of the academic staff. This response also reflects on staff in general, but academic staff is repeatedly mentioned specifically.
2. **Quality Standards** in operation were also considered as a particular strength, with repeated positive references to policies, procedures and documentation.
3. **External Examiners and External Reviews** were noted as a strength of the AQA system.
4. **Student feedback** and student involvement in the AQA system were considered important.

AQA experts explained this finding as very much reflecting the lifecycle of delivering academic services to students. “So the immediate one is academic staff, that’s who you meet, they’re
responsible for ensuring that the service that is delivered is of a quality high standard. They’re the front face, if you don’t have that correct than the others are irrelevant really. The quality standards I think for academic staff because 1 and 2 are kind of linked in a way in terms of the policies and procedures and documentation about how they go about delivering the service. The objectivity and independence of the third is needed because otherwise you are only evaluating yourself by 1 and 2. And the student feedback because at the end of the day they’re the ones that can actually say whether what we delivered was fit for purpose” (Interviewee 1).

Another AQA expert responded, “I would agree that the staff on the ground are the main interface anyway with the students and if there’s a good relationship between the academic staff and the students then you’re off to a good start” (Interviewee 2) and regarding the ordering “yes I probably would agree with that order. I might have put the student feedback up. Academic staff, student feedback, the quality standards and external examiners” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert replied, “I think they’re fairly accurate. I mean I wouldn’t have any difficulty with the priority as listed 1, 2, 3, 4” (Interviewee 5).

The managers also agreed with the listing, with a comment from one manager “It’s certainly the first two, there’s no denying that’s where it needs to start. And the quality is delivered on the ground, is delivered in the classroom, in the workshops, etc. And there are some fantastic people, there’s great innovation. You only need to take some time walking around to see what’s happening and you can see that there’s huge talent and it’s the academic staff who deliver that. And as long as they retain their enthusiasm and commitment and motivation and of course keep up their professionalism, keep up with developments in their field, that’s critical. So that is definitely a strength that we have and we know that from the ISSE (Irish Survey of Student Engagement) and all the various other ways and means in which we gather feedback. Very strong, so I agree with that. And I can see that that’s the main strength and there couldn’t really be anything else. The second one ‘quality standards’ underpinning all of that, yes. And I’m a bit less sure about 3 & 4 because the one that’s missing is feedback and working in conjunction with industry in the community in developing and reviewing programmes. And I’m amazed that’s not there in this list” (Interviewee 3).
The final point above suggests that managers’ wider responsibility for quality of the three pillars of teaching, research and engagement broadens their view of academic quality to engagement with industry and community, beyond what is understood as academic quality by the AQA experts.

9.4.2 Identity as Teacher or Researcher

The interviews also explored the finding that 88% of all staff, including 87% of Academic Staff, agreed that Academic Staff in Institutes of Technology see themselves primarily as teachers or lecturers rather than as researchers.

All AQA experts and managers confirmed that they would have expected this finding. The AQA experts commented, “Yes. That’s the remit of the IOT’s” (Interviewee 1) and “I think in some ways that’s the strength of the IOT sector” (Interviewee 2) and the observation that “Absolutely. Their contract says that they are teachers” (Interviewee 5). One manager commented humorously, “Absolutely, he says with his head in his hands” (Interviewee 4), meaning he would very much like to see that self-perception change.

9.4.3 Primary Relationship with Colleagues and Students

All AQA experts again confirmed that they would expect that 98% of all staff agreed that Academic staff see their primary relationships being with academic colleagues and with students. One AQA expert commented, “Yes and I would consider Academic colleagues to include the management side. You know you have mentioned it as a separate group, but I would consider the colleagues in my own understanding to include management” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert responded, “Now I would even say it’s probably Academic Staff see their primary relationships with Academic colleagues within their own department. Now okay it’s again in this institution but very often we almost have a silo attitude and there are consequences to that which we are very well aware of” (Interviewee 5). A manager commented, “Definitely yes. And in fact I’d worry if it wasn’t” (Interviewee 3).
9.4.4 Main Weaknesses of AQA System

The interviewees also considered the finding that 87% of management and 70% of academic staff agreed on the main weaknesses of Academic Quality Assurance in operation in Institutes of Technology were:

1. **Academic staff**: disinterested; resistant to change; underperforming; too busy to be reflective; not monitored and not supported to do research, are some of the comments that support the view that academic staff represent weakness in the AQA system.

2. **Students**: the student experience; student unwillingness; lack of awareness among students; plagiarism and unequal treatment of students, are given as examples of where students represent a weakness in the AQA system.

3. **Quality System**: AQA system is too removed from teaching; emphasis on efficiency conflicting with a quality focus; lack of communication and training for staff, are presented as the reason why the focus on quality itself is weak within the AQA system.

4. **Management**: overbearing management structure; managerialism; micro management; lack of commitment and self-obsession; disregard for lecturers; short-term focus; loose management practices; management by pass rates; ineffective departmental management; focus on “doing things right over doing the right thing”, are all stated as contributing to a management weakness in the AQA system.

5. **Teaching**: teaching quality not the highest priority; disconnect of AQA with teaching practice; no assessment and little internal oversight of teaching quality; a focus on quantity versus quality are identified by survey participants as the reasons why teaching is a weakness in the AQA system.

Each interview respondent examined the order of weaknesses in great detail, without questioning that these are five main weaknesses of academic quality assurance systems in operation in Institutes of Technology. One AQA expert offered this detailed response, “I think this reflects the public sector and delivering a public service. The public sector thing I think reflects itself in two areas, Number 1 Academic staff and Number 4 Management. Like all systems in the public sector we have a problem with underperformance as much as we have a value in over performance. And as such the bad apples are in there. And you do have, and this is reflective right across the public service in terms of different areas, of where you do have Academic staff and Management who are not interested and are underperforming and who don’t engage, and I think that feedback is reflective of that. In terms of the public service and education, I think that Number 2, Students, would be reflective of what the wider issue is in the education area about the nature of some students, not all students. But I think it would reflect the nature of some students that come into
the system. And I think this reflects some of the issues that we have about their expectations when they come into third level versus what they have experienced as second level students. So I think Number 2 is reflecting some of that, and also the points system and the point that in the IOT’s in particular the point level our students come in at. In terms of Number 3, I think this is an issue to do with, I mentioned it earlier on, about communication and making some of the quality assurance policies and procedures more active and alive. I think that Number 3 might be reflecting some of that lack of living the quality assurance processes. In terms of teaching, I think teaching perhaps in the context of when you were doing this quantitative data collection might have been reflective of the wider issue in the public service at the time in terms of Haddington Road (national agreement) and the whole focus now on, like the private sector measuring everything, the number of hours that you have to deliver etc., and perhaps not having the time to reflect on what you are doing in terms of teaching” (Interviewee 1).

Another AQA expert commented, “I wouldn’t have put Academic staff up there, up front because I think the majority of Academic Staff are dedicated and enthusiastic and would want to do the best job that they possibly can. Students, I think the student experience yes, because we’ve gone through a very difficult time within the country and the pressures that have been externally on students have had a little bit of an impact, but we should be supporting the students through that. I think the Quality System and the teaching maybe are linked a little bit that we went through a phase alright of concentrating on policies and procedures but we had to go through that phase because that was imposed on us externally in relation to getting delegated authority and then focus on collaborations and Technological Universities and the reviews and the change in emphasis as well within the IOT sector moving into the area of research and community and development and all the other areas. So I do kind of agree that the focus on teaching may have switched there for a while within the last decade like 2000-2010. But I do feel that we are coming back to putting an emphasis, with the National Forum, on Teaching & Learning and building that in too and it is an important element of the quality assurance system so it should be put back into it. But I would agree that really it did lose its focus, it wasn’t as high up on the priority level within the institute over that time because of some of the other pressures that were put on the institution” (Interviewee 2).
Another AQA expert approached the question, saying: “I would put Management as the single weakness. I mean I do believe that the Academic Council functions very well, but I do believe that the implementation of and the adherence to the practices and the implementation of the various policies is a matter for Management. And if there are weaknesses I do think the primary responsibility comes back to managers. Managers are paid to manage. I’m not taking from the others. I mean of course we would say ‘disinterested’ Academic Staff but by and large that’s not our experience, disinterested Academic staff is not a problem for us. While you will have some students who are problematic, the vast bulk of our students are not problematic. The quality system itself, I do believe that our marks when we did the last institutional review said that our system, as again approved by Academic Council, was on the best, 5 out of 5. I do believe that by and large our staff are extremely committed to teaching, so I would be prejudiced” (Interviewee 5).

The management interviewees also went through the weaknesses identified in detail. One manager commented, “So amongst Academic staff, I think the key one there is ‘resistance to change’ which in a way is quite surprising because the level of job security for instance. Well certainly once people are in the door, once they’ve come through their probation, once they have a CID or a permanent contract, they have nothing to worry about really. So it’s not as if, if we were to for instance to make changes to the way in which we deliver programmes, to bring in more independent learning, to try and bring in more technology, flipped classroom approaches, etc. which clearly would mean different ways of structuring your timetable. What do they have to worry about, they have a job. All they need to do is adapt and learn maybe more exciting ways and methods of teaching so it becomes less monotonous, less repetitive. There are people certainly, fairly substantial members of Academic staff that would be resistant to even discussing these kind of different approaches. So that’s a key one” (Interviewee 3).

The same manager continued, “Among Students, I think probably the key one there is ‘lack of awareness’ and coming into third level not really being fully prepared for third level and that brings with it lack of confidence or perhaps not having made the right choice. So it’s that whole awareness piece that’s important. Well in the Quality System then, I’ll pick up on the ‘lack of communication and training for staff’ and maybe the stronger link that needs to be made between our quality system and our teaching & learning centre or the teaching & learning supports that
we have. I still feel that it’s quite marginalised, and that is not only because of lack of resources, it’s also because of the thinking that quality is over here and teaching and learning is over there” (Interviewee 3).

Concerning management (point 4), the same manager replied, “I’ll just focus on the ‘departmental management’. I think there are huge differences in how Heads of Department manage their departments when it comes to creating a culture of innovation and quality. Some of them have a very hands-off approach which might suit of course some Academics, some of them are more engaged. And then of course you have changes. We’ve seen in the last few years a little bit of turnover of different Heads of Department coming in, restructuring. So whether all the departmental Management is effective now that would be in an ideal world yes, but that probably isn’t the case. So I think there are huge differences” (Interviewee 3).

Regarding teaching (point 5), the manager continued, “It’s funny the first one actually seems to contradict some of the earlier findings ‘teaching quality not the highest priority’, after all that’s been said in the earlier findings is a bit of a surprise. I think we’re probably not sharing enough so rather than ‘oversight’ maybe I’d use the word ‘sharing and benchmarking’ of good practice, we’re not doing enough of that. And people have this huge fear of anyone else coming into their classroom. And I think we should encourage people to invite each other in, not necessarily inviting the Heads of Department in I understand that, but inviting their peers in learning from each other. I think that’s what’s lacking.” (Interviewee 3)

Another manager responded, “Yes. But I am questioning why Academic Staff is number 1 and Teaching is number 5. I’m just questioning that because Academic Staff provide the teaching. I would put Academic Staff and Teaching as one, because it is the act of teaching, it is the staff who perform the act of teaching, they’re the same in my mind I suppose. If you’ve got somebody who’s disinterested, disengaged, the quality of teaching can’t be good, you know what I mean. So why teaching is 5, you know what I mean” (Interviewee 4).

Yet another manager replied, “Well, I hesitate to answer the question, because it has to be answered I appreciate, it’s just that question C1A is the exact opposite in terms of what the main
strengths are, so I’m struggling as to how to frame an answer. What strikes me as well is that the way the answer is posited there would be that well is this very much a minority of people, is it a minority of Academic Staff are disinterested, is it a minority of Students are cheats you know, is it a minority of the procedures or because the minority of Management are overbearing and the teaching quality isn’t the highest priority? I’d be concerned about giving statements equal weight, because I don’t think it’s possible to give statements equal weight. That said, if one wanted to improve academic quality, in what’s already considered to be a good system, well then there’d be some thoughts in here as to where one might begin” (Interviewee 6).

9.4.5 Quality of Teaching

Interviews also explored the apparent contradiction that academic staff are seen as both the primary strength and the primary weakness of academic quality assurance. 81% of all staff and 76% of academic staff attributed this to the quality of teaching varying widely.

All interviewees, except one AQA expert, confirmed that they would have expected this finding. One AQA expert commented, “But I think this is an issue not just perhaps in terms of this survey being conducted here but this would be a general issue being reflected both in Ireland and wider in terms of third level and standards in terms of teaching amongst Academic Staff” (Interviewee 1). Managers had more to say about this question, with the comments, “yes the quality of teaching will vary widely too. It’s your Achilles heel. It’s potentially the quality of teaching is what can drive an organisation and it’s also your Achilles heel” (Interviewee 3) and “Yes okay I would. I think that’s a fair point yes” (Interviewee 4).

This emphasis on teaching as a determinant of quality was somewhat surprising in the Irish context. Teaching quality is not a criterion or tested by the national QA cyclical reviews system or by internal institutional QA systems. Yet 81% of all staff and 76% of academic staff acknowledged its significance for AQA. This incongruence in AQA is a significant finding for this research project with potential wider significance for the national AQA system.
9.4.6 Weaknesses in AQA System – Administration Perception

During the interview, participants were also asked to comment on the result that 84% of all staff, including 77% of academic staff, confirmed their awareness of specific weaknesses of academic quality assurance as perceived by administration staff as follows:

- No procedure in place if a lecturer consistently does not meet required standards.
- Academic quality assurance appears to be a complicated process.
- Difficulty getting people on board.
- Staff under pressure to deliver, leaving too little time for reflection.
- Communication between academic staff and administration not always as it should or could be.

All interviewees had to think about this carefully. One AQA expert commented, “And I would agree. And I think they were reflective of some of my discussions even already. I think the first one is very much reflective of this wider issue about what do you do when people don’t meet the standard requirements and perhaps there’s a weakness there in general in the HR area in the public sector. So whether or not quality assurance can do anything further than what it’s doing at the moment by having programme boards and reporting mechanisms, going beyond that I’m not quite sure what can be done. I think some of the other bullet points, Number 2 and Number 5, are reflective of the communication issue and perhaps streamlining some of the quality assurance processes not to be too pedantic, I understand why they may have to be very explicit but sometimes they don’t need to be so pedantic. And Number 3 and Number 4 I think are reflective of just the shifts that have taken place on the academic side in terms of hours and what is available in additional time then to do that reflection, to do the research, to do the feedback, to get engaged in subcommittees, etc. I think that would reflect on that issue” (Interviewee 1).

Another AQA expert responded, “I don’t know if there is no procedure in place if a lecturer consistently does not meet required standards. ‘Appears to be a complicated process.’ Yes okay, if they perceive it to be complicated well then they need support in doing it. ‘Difficulty getting people on board.’ Well if it’s perceived to be complicated then you are going to have difficulty getting people on board. ‘Staff under pressure to deliver leaving too little time for reflection.’ Well I think all staff have been under a lot of pressure to deliver over the last while with the cutbacks so yes. ‘Communication between academic staff and administration not always as it should or...
could be.’ Can be hugely problematic and especially communication problems are always difficult. You need lots of understanding. That would be a big one. And I suppose clearer policies that will simplify the complicated process. Maybe we have put lots of policies and procedures in place but we need some kind of little implementation guides or something like that to aid people in terms of how to use them” (Interviewee 2).

A manager commented, “Yes I could see how administrative staff, who are under I suppose really restrictive controls and rules when it comes to their normal working day, can see that academic staff have far more freedom in how they operate. So certainly the first one doesn’t surprise me and I would expect that they see it that way. As regards some of the other ones, they are sort of generic. Yes it’s difficult ‘getting people on board’. ‘Academic quality is a complicated process’ I don’t think that’s the real issue. Yes the admin staff have been pared back to the bone as a result of the Employment Control Framework so they’re busy and they’re still doing quite a lot of paperwork manually that perhaps could be done more efficiently. There’s still quite a bit of that so they are very busy doing busy things. And yes those things will have an impact on the communications between the different groupings” (Interviewee 3).

Another manager reflected, “I’m not so sure about number one because what does that mean: ‘Lecturer consistently does not meet required standards’? Is it timing submission of results, is it quality of results, is it consistent marks or is it too many fails? Yes, although I wouldn’t have put the first one, I wouldn’t have put: ‘No procedure in place if a lecturer consistently does not meet required standards’ first. That kind of threw me a little bit. Even if it was done in the opposite order. ‘Communication between academic staff and administration not always as it should or could be’, I can see examples of that, I can see examples of, you know, Staff pressure and all that, whether or not I would agree with all of that, Yes, I would agree with the fact that Administration Staff might see this as” (Interviewee 4).

Another manager offered the reflection, “Well it’s an interesting finding because it is effectively being confirmed by academic staff what administration staff have said. If it had just been administration staff on their own without the academic staff confirming it, I would have perhaps been less sure it was sound because it certainly seems to be the administration staff’s five concerns are all kind of about other people rather than themselves and that’s always a bit of a worry.
Whereas they seem to have identified things which academic staff also agree with, so we have to accept that this is important and that this is a good insight I agree” (Interviewee 6).

The AQA expert responses above were explicit in their references to the funding cutbacks in Higher Education that took place during the period of recession and their impact on AQA. They read the findings predominantly from the academics’ perspective. In contrast, the managers read the findings from the administration staff’s viewpoint, providing explanations related to communications between administration and academics, administrative workload and workplace envy.

9.4.7 Weaknesses in AQA System – Support Staff Perception

Interviewees were also asked to comment on the finding that 82% of all staff confirmed their awareness of four specific weaknesses of the academic quality assurance system for support staff as follows:

- Lack of student participation in quality enhancement.
- Lack of implemented accountability.
- Lack of input by student support staff.
- Lack of awareness of QA.

One AQA expert declared surprise by this finding, “Particularly in view of the level of student support that is active on the ground in LIT and hence why it’s not translating in terms of some of these findings. I would be surprised by that in terms of student support” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert reported that they were not surprised, “Not from the point of view of support staff” (Interviewee 2) due to a lack of participation in AQA by students and student support staff.

A manager who was not surprised by the finding replied, “Certainly the first one ‘Lack of student participation in quality enhancement’. They can probably see that more than others can. And they no doubt do feel because they will be confronted with students availing of their services coming to them with particular stories and difficulties and then they are probably at a loss where to take those stories” (Interviewee 3).
It was noticeable across interviews that AQA experts and managers both found it more difficult to respond to questions reporting any negativity, weakness or area in need of improvement. This set of C2 questions reporting such findings proved challenging for respondents. Where questions explored negative findings there was a growing tendency to respond somewhat defensively from a managerial or QA perspective by the corresponding interviewees.

9.4.8 Potential for Improvement

During the interviews, participants were presented with the result that when asked about the potential for improvement in academic quality assurance, staff agreement was evident as follows:

- 90% of all staff agreed with the academic staff view that resourcing is needed to improve academic quality.
- 62% of all staff agreed with the administration staff view that “speedier reaction times to changes in outside influences” and emphasis on external benchmarks would improve QA.
- 82% of all staff agreed with the management staff view that more student evaluation and feedback would improve AQA.
- 78% of all staff agreed with the student support staff view that stronger links with employers would strengthen AQA.

Interviewees responded to each part of the finding separately. An AQA expert expressed surprise at this finding and offered the comment: “Yes, but I think the findings are more reflective of perhaps not understanding the different groups and what they’re doing. Such as this issue to do with administrative staff and their view about outside influences. I think there is more of that happening than is perhaps realised because the academic staff are heavily involved in programme development, programmatic reviews. A lot of getting that external feedback takes place in terms of programme design that administrative staff may not be aware of at the level that it’s taking place. And again, the interesting one about Number 3 is that student evaluation and feedback takes place annually at programme boards and equally takes place at programmatic reviews etc. So I would be surprised that there seems to be a need for some of these things when they are actually happening on the ground and perhaps this reflects the difference in terms of the different groupings and not being fully aware of actually the checks and balances that are actually taking place on the ground” (Interviewee 1).
Another AQA expert responded, “Again I suppose I’m surprised that 90% of all staff agreed with academic staff’s view that resourcing is needed to improve academic quality. Because I don’t think academic quality is as simple as resourcing, resourcing is one part of it but there’s a lot more to it as well. And sometimes you can do a very good job without very many resources at times. So I’m surprised 90% that it was that high” (Interviewee 2). Moving to the next potential improvement on the list this AQA expert continued, “I suppose speedier reaction times to changes but then how we act on that, do we need to react or do we need to act? Sometimes a speedy reaction mightn’t always give the best result. Sometimes you need to stop and rather than react you need to act. So I suppose 62% alright in terms of that would be towards middle of the road to agree with that.” Reflecting on 82% of staff agreeing with more student evaluation and feedback this AQA expert commented, “Yes I would agree with that. We need more student evaluation and feedback. No I’m not surprised by that. I suppose I’m surprised that 82% agreed with the Management, I thought it mightn’t be quite that high because of the resistance sometimes to get student feedback or build student feedback into our day-to-day delivery of what we do.” The AQA expert responded to 78% of all staff agreement with the student support staff view that stronger links with employers would strengthen AQA and commented, “I suppose I’m surprised at that one. I suppose it would strengthen it in one way but again it’s just one element of an overall and its part of it and a very essential part of it but there’s a lot more in terms of the quality than just stronger links with employers.”

Similarly, another AQA expert commented, “Well the first finding ‘90% of all staff agreed with the academic staff view that resourcing is needed to improve academic quality’. I’m not surprised at that one right. ‘62% of all staff agreed with the administration staff view that “speedier reaction times to changes in outside influences” and emphasis on external benchmarks would improve QA.’ Yes I wouldn’t have been surprised if it had been a little bit higher. ‘82% of all staff agreed with the management staff more student evaluation and feedback’ Yes again the interaction with the student, 82% is probably a good figure there. ‘78% of all staff agreed the student support staff view that stronger links with employers would strengthen AQA.’ Again we would have a tradition of working with employers and I think the consciousness with Industry I think again the 78% probably reflects that pretty well. So I don’t think those findings are a particularly surprising. Except the 62% maybe could be a bit higher” (Interviewee 5).
A manager analysed the proposals differently, “Okay, well there’s two things here. Firstly, each Staff grouping had a particular slant and an emphasis that they wanted to place on how we could improve things. So I’m not surprised by the Academics saying, ‘we need more resources’ and admin saying ‘we need to just be a bit quicker’, because of course they’re obviously waiting for responses to stuff that they are asked to cover. Management typically would like to involve more student evaluation feedback and Student Support yes that more employers input, absolutely. So I’m not surprised by those four different priorities that came though the four different Staff groupings. And then the second part of the question is are you surprised then that subsequently when all staff were told well ‘Academics said this’ ‘Admin Staff said this’, oh yes yes yes, there is also great loyalty towards each other. And none of these four views would be particularly challenging, we would all like to have all of these things” (Interviewee 3). Another manager simply agreed, “No I’m not surprised by them” (Interviewee 6). Yet another manager commented, “No I’m not surprised. That’s not to say I would agree with all of them” (Interviewee 4).

Finding that each staff group had a different insight on how to improve AQA and that there was agreement across groups that these views were valid reinforced for me the collaborative approach used. The AQA experts’ responses and manager responses focused on the suggestions for AQA improvement, without reflecting on the value of the collaborative process with complementary views on AQA.

9.4.9 AQA focus not on the Student Experience

AQA experts did not seem happy with the finding that 84% of all staff were of the view that the primary result of Academic Quality Assurance is to Improve Academic Quality, rather than the student experience or the AQA system itself, with one person commenting, “I’m a bit surprised by that because it’s what it’s trying to achieve that is more important than just academic quality in itself. It’s what does it deliver in terms of the student experience and the system. I would consider it’s the end result that we are trying to achieve rather than just academic quality as a nebulous kind of independent thing. I am quite surprised by that, particularly 84%” (Interviewee 1).

A second AQA expert agreed, “The student experience is what the focus should be. I suppose that’s what staff feel, that we’re bogged down in the quality assurance itself. That it’s about improving
the quality assurance rather than the student experience. But the focus should be the student experience rather than the system itself. I suppose given where we’re at in the organisation. I’m not surprised that 84% of Staff would say that that’s what it is. But I think the focus does need to change” (Interviewee 2).

A third AQA expert reflected, “There is a slight bit of confusion between academic quality assurance and academic quality [...] but certainly there’s no doubt that an academic quality assurance system should improve academic quality so in that sense it’s probably correct rather than I think putting down the student experience or the AQA system improvement, it doesn’t exist to improve a system. So I think it’s probably fair enough from that point of view” (Interviewee 5).

A manager provided a different perspective, “Yes, academic quality does need to be the overriding concern. Because the student experience, that’s too input focused. As long as they have a good time then [...] the student experience very much needs to be at the heart of it but it’s the quality which is more of an objective measure as well that needs to take centre stage” (Interviewee 3). Another manager added, “I don’t see the two as being mutually exclusive, to be honest with you, I see them as going hand-in-hand” (Interviewee 4).

Another manager summed up, “Yes, I would have thought that the primary result of or the primary function of the academic quality assurance system was to give assurance to that academic quality not to improve it. Obviously improve it as well, but first of all that it gives assurance. Again, the student experience, I think it’s a good thing that the student experience that that isn’t the primary thing here. The primary thing is that the academic quality system reflects the realities of what students have done and achieved and so on. And that students may or may not like that but the most important thing is that there is integrity in the system. So my comments would be that I think it’s right that the focus is on academic quality and not on the student experience; I’m a bit surprised it’s Improving Academic Quality is the focus rather than just the Quality Assurance system itself” (Interviewee 6).

The AQA experts were clear that the purpose of AQA was to improve the student experience and not a self-serving objective to improve academic quality. They seemed somewhat apologetic that
the objective of AQA was misunderstood. Managers expressed no such apology for the focus on QA, arguing QA not the student experience as the central purpose of the AQA system.

9.4.10 AQA Improves Academic Staff Performance

All interviews agreed with the finding that 79% of all staff agree that the primary result of academic quality assurance on staff is to improve academic staff performance. The AQA experts did so enthusiastically. Management agreed and yet voiced reservations, such as, “Yes, as long as people are open to that. That they also make a genuine effort to apply whatever the academic quality assurance frameworks encourage them to do. That they then genuinely try and apply that within their own individual preparations of class time and so on” (Interviewee 3). Another manager voiced the reservation, “Well I suppose it should improve all staff performance. But fair enough, I agree that’s the important effect of it” (Interviewee 6).

Managers, particularly those managers who have not held academic posts, sometimes struggled to acknowledge the central role of academic staff in AQA.

9.4.11 Managerialism Shifts Focus Away from Classroom

The management respondents tended to be more surprised than the AQA respondents by the finding that 46% of all staff agreed that the primary result of academic quality assurance on staff is “Managerialism – manuals and box-ticking culture have redirected energy away from the classroom.” One AQA expert commented “I’m not surprised by this finding given the present state of the organisation. Away from the classroom, yes. For the reason of all the other pressures that are on the institution” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert added, “I’m not surprised. I mean 46% that are kind of saying, they are viewing the thing, and again it’s probably within the culture of the organisation. Do they perceive Academic Quality Assurance as something that Management are using as a tool, which that seems to suggest” (Interviewee 5).

Management interviewees were surprised in a different way. One manager commented, “Yes I think it is [surprising] actually. Now 46% is not the majority but it’s a very sizeable minority. And to be honest I’m not aware of individual Academics having to tick boxes while they’re doing their
job, don’t think so really. It hasn’t gone as far as that” (Interviewee 3). Another manager added, “Well, I’m surprised in the sense that 46% of all staff would think that the primary result of the quality assurance effect on staff was that. I would be surprised at that. I would because I think it’s a pity, because I think that managerialism maybe is a bit of an easy sort of catch-phrase and I’d be surprised that the people wouldn’t have the depth to look beyond that” (Interviewee 6).

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Table 9.3 – Visual Representation of Interviewee Responses (Section C)

9.5 Academic Quality Assurance Management

9.5.1 Pursuit of Knowledge

The AQA expert responses to the result that 84% of all staff view Higher Education as primarily the Pursuit of Knowledge, as opposed to viewing it as a Public Service. This finding gave rise to different responses with deep personal viewpoints and more than standard role related perspectives. Comments included, “No. One is reflecting what we are trying to achieve and the other is by who. They are two different things. So no I don’t see a contradiction there” (Interviewee
1. Another commented, “Yes I am surprised by the finding. Because it is a public service and we are publicly accountable (Interviewee 2).”

The managers interviewed also varied in their responses, with one commenting, “Yes, it is a public service because it is publicly funded almost in its entirety. And even you could consider the fact the students pay a contribution, that’s actually public funding but it’s funding from the public except its direct funding from the public as opposed to via the State. So it is a public service. And the Pursuit of Knowledge can be quite abstract when we’re trying to be practical and industry focused etc., focused on employability” (Interviewee 3). Another manager gave the opposite response, “No I’m not. Certainly in an academic institution I think that would be a long-standing tradition, long before there were public services” (Interviewee 6).

The interface between interviewees’ personal or political view on the one hand and other staff views would appear to be a challenging space where staff group values do not always hold sway.

9.5.2 Higher Education as a Business

Results to the Delphi indicated that 80% of all staff disagree with the view that Higher Education is primarily a business.

None of the interviewees were surprised by this finding. One AQA expert commented, “I would agree it’s not primarily a business. It’s the pursuit of knowledge as a public service” (Interviewee 1). A manager responded, “I’m not surprised by that. I’d expect that” (Interviewee 6).

9.5.3 Education v. Training for Employment

The Delphi results yielded that 64% of all staff disagree with the view of Higher Education as primarily training for employment.

All managers said they expected this finding. The AQA experts’ views differed regarding the finding. Both groups teased out the meaning of the finding. One AQA expert commented, “I would be a bit surprised by that because what we are trying to achieve is providing knowledge to allow
them to enter the next stage in life. So, I’d be surprised at that” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert took a different view, “I would have expected it to be higher. It’s more than just training for employment. Higher Education is more about developing the whole person as well as training them for employment, is one set of that. So, I would have expected more Staff really to disagree that it was primarily training for employment” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA view tried to understand the response, “I think that’s very high coming from an Institute of Technology, 64%. I mean again if somebody is into the thing of training is just operational improvement. In other words, you’re able to saw a piece of timber. If they take a very limited view of training that makes sense. In other words, they’re differentiating between training and education. I don’t believe that there should be that type of differentiation within our sector” (Interviewee 5).

A manager commented, “Yes because it’s really the word ‘Training’ that would get people. And we really place a high emphasis on employability. But that’s not training for a particular job tomorrow morning. It’s much more than that. It’s employability, transferable skills, developing someone’s professional and personal attributes. I’m sure they would disagree with it because it’s too narrow, even though it’s not untrue partially, but it’s too narrowly defined” (Interviewee 3). Another manager responded, “Yes, I think it’s consistent with the other views” (Interviewee 6).

9.5.4 Staff Understanding of HE

The AQA experts responded to the data that 97% of all staff explain differences in views of the purpose of Higher Education between different role-identity staff groups as due to differences in understanding or perceptions of Higher Education by different groups with the perspective that they would not have expected nearly all staff to hold this view. One AQA expert commented, “No. I wouldn’t have expected that. I would have thought the understanding or perceptions of Higher Education should be more or less the same by the different groups” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert reflected, “That’s probably true, even though again…it’s probably fair enough. Because it would be a comment alright that different people are coming from their own different silos and they’re going to have their different perceptions as a result. I suppose that does make sense but it’s a bit unfortunate at the same time” (Interviewee 5).
Management interviewees expected this finding, stating, “Yes well it’s an easy explanation but it’s quite black and white” (Interviewee 3) and “Yes, I think I would. I would have expected Staff have seen that difference, that nuance” (Interviewee 6).

This finding underlines the significance of the role-group perspectives that are largely unrecognized or ignored in Higher Education QA. The finding confirms the potential value of an alternative integrated, collaborative approach to AQA that explicitly addresses the different perceptions and tensions within the organisation.

9.5.5 Flat Management Structure

The Delphi indicated that 68% of academic staff believe that academic quality is best achieved within institutions with a flat management structure. Administration and student services staff take the contrary view that a hierarchical management structure is best to achieve academic quality. Responding to this finding, one AQA expert said, “So the structure’s being used as a pseudo measure for who is responsible for this. In terms of the general question though I don’t think it’s anything to do with the structure, I think it’s to do with the culture and the practices and processes that reflect that culture, as in, it is everybody’s” (Interviewee 1).

Another AQA expert reflected that for “Administration and student Support staff - because that’s the hierarchical management structure-system that they’re used to and maybe haven’t experienced anything else, that they’re clinging onto that as the best way to achieve academic quality. Because that’s what they are familiar with and that’s what they know and may not have experienced other systems. Academic staff - I suppose I have a different view because as an academic staff member you’re very much responsible and really, once you go in to deliver what is on your course to the students, you’ve more autonomy to do what you want. So the flat management structure, they would probably prefer a flat management structure. I like the idea of a flat management structure over a hierarchical structure myself but that’s based on my own experiences out in industry as well as coming in. So I think maybe the view is influenced again coming back to the experiences of the various groups” (Interviewee 2).
Another AQA expert commented, “Academics operate more within a collegiate system. Administrative and student support operate within more a bureaucratic system. So I would expect that the Administration would favour a hierarchical structure since that’s the one that they operate. But I would also see why Academic Staff would favour a flat one because of the fact that it’s collegiate. They know that in fact they are the relative experts in their own area and that it is a bit ridiculous for an engineer to tell a social scientist what to do academically, even though the engineer might be their Head of School” (Interviewee 5).

One manager seemed a bit irritated by the finding saying, “I don’t think they know what they are talking about. I mean really. We have sort of the flattest structure you can possibly have, which is only three tiers, which is more or less the minimum. And certainly in my experience academic staff want to be crystal clear on who is my line manager and any notion of working with other people in the organisation in a different part of the management structure confuses them utterly. They love hierarchy” (Interviewee 3).

Another manager responded, “I suppose academic staff see themselves as not being accountable to anybody, so the less layers on top the better. The closer they are to the Minister for Education the better for themselves. I suppose the academic staff feel more responsible for academic quality themselves so they need less quality assurance procedures or less hierarchal on top” (Interviewee 4).

A final comment from a manager stated, “Well I think that academics very much value a collegiate approach to their work, academic process. There’s very much an equality among academics, an equality culture based on professional knowledge and experience and qualifications. Administration and student support staff on the other hand, are part of a much more hierarchical structure in terms of their grades, in terms of their promotion prospects and so on. And I wouldn’t be surprised that they’d have different views as to what they would view a management structure to be” (Interviewee 6).
9.5.6 Diversity of Staff and Knowledge

Interviewees were presented with the data that 66% of all staff agreed that the “Greatest asset is the diversity of staff and their professional knowledge. Failure to tap into this is a consequence of a hierarchical management structure.”

The AQA experts appreciated the sentiment in the finding, but not the explanation offered. One AQA expert summed up, “I agree with the statement. But I don’t think the failure to tap into it is a consequence of hierarchical management structure. I think as academics a lot of it is in relation to themselves” (Interviewee 1). Another quality expert added, “I’m not too sure if it’s a consequence of a hierarchical management structure as such. It might be more to do with the culture coming down from the top end of the hierarchical structure” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert picked up on this same point, “that’s why I do believe the Academic Council within our system is the collegiate system, and that’s why when it comes to academic quality and matters relating to academic quality I do think the most positive unit within the institute is the Academic Council and its subcommittees. But I could see why people would feel that and that sometimes academic decisions are taken by Management, which probably is not a great idea” (Interviewee 5).

A manager commented, “Okay, maybe we need to encourage people and challenge them to bring out their potential more if people feel that the diversity isn’t tapped into adequately. Well, let us know and come out with it and bring it up at team development planning sessions and be here during the weeks when you’re not busy teaching 20 hours a week so you can actually have some of these debates rather than clearing the place out and deserting us. Now this is a bit cynical, but its coloured by the experience over the last couple of weeks (Summer holiday period)” (Interviewee 3).

Another manager responded, “I suppose I would have to agree with it yes. You know there are some really diverse staff in there that from time-to-time may have a line manager that they might disagree with and their diversity and their enthusiasm might wane. Yes, I would agree it, I would” (Interviewee 4).
A third manager replied, “Well I think that’s a finding that clearly needs further reflection. Is it something that if the greatest asset is diversity and the knowledge, and we’re not tapping into it because of the hierarchical management structure? Hierarchical management structure is something you can certainly change; you can adapt it certainly. I think there’s a need for accountability within all institutions, whether they are academic or professional or whatever they are. I think it would be important not to confuse accountability with empowerment. I think we need both. So I think our structures should therefore create an empowering culture while maintaining an accountable culture” (Interviewee 6).

While the managers understandably responded somewhat defensively to critique of hierarchical management, they were accepting of the value and importance of engaging the diversity of staff and their professional knowledge. This engagement is a key feature of the proposed integrated approach to AQA.

9.5.7 Legitimacy and Buy-in

An AQA expert commented on the result that 89% of all staff agreed that “Academic Quality is best achieved where the academic standards are legitimate and all within the institution buy into the virtues of the system” with, “Oh I think so. And it again goes back to I think within our own system the strength of the Academic Council. It’s best achieved where the academic standards are legitimate, those standards are set by the Academic Council and once Academic Council agrees those standards then everybody buys into them” (Interviewee 5).

A manager commented, “It couldn’t but indicate value in a collaborative approach because otherwise you won’t have Academic Standards unless you’ve collaborated to create them and to adopt them and then we need to live up to them as well.” Another manager reflected “It does because legitimisation is by definition what one needs, a diversity of views to be heard and a collaborative process. You’ll only get legitimisation in a democratic society anyway where you have a collaborative approach” (Interviewee 3).
All interviewees expressed the view that this finding indicates value in a collaborative approach to AQA. The manager’s comment above indicated the more fundamental basis of collaboration as a principal of legitimacy within a democratic context.

**9.5.8 Collegiate v. Managerial Focus**

Responding to this finding that 99% of all staff believe academic quality is best achieved within institutions with a collegiate focus, rather than a managerial focus, one AQA expert said, “I think it’s incredibly positive actually as a finding. Because it ensures that everybody understands that all the different staff groups have a role. How important it is and even the word ‘the collegiate focus’, is reflective of the culture, so that is very positive” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert reflected from the finding “That the people like to work together rather than to be dictated to from the top” (Interviewee 2). Yet another AQA expert added the comment, “I think what that one tells us is that Academic Council and its subcommittees should be central to the operation of the college and that the management should be seen to be supportive of the positions taken by Academic Council” (Interviewee 5).

A manager commented, “Yes. A good manager will create that collegiate focus and will be part of the collegiate focus” (Interviewee 3). Another manager was less comfortable with the finding and reflected further, “Well again it tells us, going back to the collaboration, legitimisation and so on I think and therefore it does need to have a collegiate focus. It tells us that. The other thing I suppose I think it tells us is that perhaps also there’s a lack of understanding of what a legitimate management role is and how necessary it is, how necessary accountability is, how necessary management by objective is and so on. How important those things are to actually achieving outcomes, good outcomes for the system. I think without those outcomes or without those elements to a system, and I don’t think they’re the only elements, but without those elements in a system, I believe that you’ll actually have what might seem to be a utopian collegiate approach because ultimately decisions have to be made as well and sometimes those decisions won’t be possible to reach by consensus. I think there might be a bit of a lack of understanding of the importance of that” (Interviewee 6).
9.5.9 Management and Academic Measures

During the interview participants were asked to respond to the result that 99% of all staff agree that academic quality is best managed through the use of a mix of management and academic measurements. All interviewees agreed with this finding. However, it did stimulate some discomfort or defensiveness. An AQA expert commented, “Well I suppose what I would like to have seen there is what type of management measurements they’re talking about and academic measurements they’re talking about. But I mean it’s a fair comment” (Interviewee 5). Another AQA expert reflected this view, “Well I think it has to have a mix of Management and Academic measurements. But it’s getting the balance would be the important thing within that” (Interviewee 2).

All managers interviewed agreed with the finding, with one manager commenting, “Well that’s very interesting given the finding of the 99% believed it was collegiate and now they’re saying they want management and academic measurements. Well I suppose that’s really what I’m saying. I think it’s a mixture of both needed. I think that’s right” (Interviewee 6).

9.5.10 Student Results a weak Quality Indicator

The Delphi yielded a result that 78% of all staff do not agree that Students Results is a good Performance Measurement.

The manager interviewees were very surprised by this finding and the AQA experts were not. An AQA expert commented, “No I’m not surprised at that finding. Student results need to be put within a context. Just pulling student results out and presenting them just as figures isn’t enough. Any student results have to be put within a context” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert commented, “I would have thought it would be higher. Well I suppose ‘all staff’, maybe that’s okay. But most of us who have been involved in the teaching have good classes and we have bad classes and we have mixed classes, where half the class are geniuses and the other half are just struggling. And that if you just looked at academic performance measurement like pass rates that may not be the best measurement. We have to look at what the students maybe came in with and then see how far they’ve progressed, maybe we’ve taken somebody who came in with 180 points
and we’re now getting them to a 2.1 and we think that’s not good enough, they should’ve been a first. Well in fact it’s an absolutely enormous leap. While somebody came in and they had 500 points and we’d only get them to a 2.2 or a 2.1 and we say oh isn’t that fine. In fact that’s a failure. I do think that one has to be a little bit careful with performance measurements. And if you look at things like the American system. They’re very much conscious that the state pushes performance measurement and yet it doesn’t recognise the cohort that you’re dealing with. The student cohort. So I do think that it wouldn’t have surprised me if the 78% had been higher up in the 80’s. I’m not surprised at all really” (Interviewee 5).

The managers took a different view of the finding. One manager commented, “It has to be a performance measurement. Now of course if there are anomalies you need to dig into them, delve into them, not only by analysing data but talking to people. But it has to be a performance measurement, it’s got to be part of it” (Interviewee 3). Another commented, “Yes that’s high. I think that I’m surprised that it’s that high” (Interviewee 4). Another manager expressed the most surprise, “I’m flabbergasted. Why have we got these exams, why do we bother with assessment and exams and everything else? Because if it isn’t any good and 78% believe it’s no use. I can’t believe this. You can write that down” (Interviewee 6).

This question displayed the tensions that can arise between the two very distinctive views, a managerial view that anything that can be measured is a performance indicator and an academic perspective that performance measurement in Higher Education is more complex and nuanced. With an integrated approach to QA there is an opportunity to identify points of tension.

### 9.5.11 Staff Ownership of Academic Quality

In the Delphi 91% of all staff agree that academic quality is primarily driven by staff ownership of academic quality. All interviewees also agreed with this finding. One AQA expert added, “Yes, as long as when you say staff ownership it does include all staff. It’s not just academic staff, it’s the other groups as well” (Interviewee 2). A manager summed up, “Oh absolutely, I think that’s right” (Interviewee 6).
9.5.12 Management Driver of Academic Quality

All interviewees agreed with the finding that 75% of all staff agree that management commitment is a driver of academic quality. An AQA expert reflected, “I think management have to be committed to whatever the quality system is within the organisation. If it’s not, it’s not going to work really. They’re an important key element in it. But are they the main driver? They are a driver, but should they be the main driver? Probably not the case. But they have to be committed to it and they have to be a part of it” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert responded, “Like I’ve said a number of times already, ‘What management inspect, employees respect’. So I do think management commitment is of course important. And if management aren’t seen to be committed to the decisions of the Academic Council and to the standards adopted by Academic Council then we have a serious problem within the college” (Interviewee 5).

A manager commented, “Management commitment does need to be there as much as the staff ownership of academic quality and we should be on the same page, even though of course we don’t always agree on every detail of how things are done. 75% of staff agree so 25% think it makes no difference. I do think it makes a difference. And I challenge the 25% of staff who were of the view that it didn’t matter. What that would mean in terms of how we actually deliver the quality, how we resource it, how we take decisions” (Interviewee 3). Another manager responded, “Yes, management commitment is absolutely essential to it and is the driver to ensure that the academic staff take ownership of their assessment and their academic quality” (Interviewee 4).

Another manager teased out a response, “It appears that a majority of staff think that a management commitment is very important and is a driver. I think it’s important. And I think also actually it recognizes to some extent the tension between that and earlier views around collegiality. That clearly while people are attributing great importance to collegiality, they also see an important role for management in academic quality actually, even if they’re saying elsewhere that they don’t think that’s important. I think that’s what it tells me” (Interviewee 6).
9.5.13 Front-line Staff Activities

The AQA experts were asked for their view on the finding that 65% of all staff agree that activities of front-line staff are a primary driver of academic quality. Only the management staff group had disagreed with this finding. One AQA expert commented, “That’s interesting. And whether or not it’s a concern that management hold that the front-line staff mightn’t be responsible enough to ensure academic quality? But I certainly would think that they are part of the primary driver of academic quality” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert commented, “I would agree the activities of front-line staff has to be the main driver of academic quality. ‘Only the management staff disagreed with this finding’. I’m kind of surprised at that, as to why, because it is the people on the ground really at the end of the day that have to drive it” (Interviewee 2).

Another AQA expert responded, “Why am I not surprised? No, on a serious level apart from the smart comment, of course it is the quality of our front-line staff, particularly our academic staff that’s the primary driver of the academic quality in the sense of its implementation. But I also think that they’re participation in the development of policies and procedures through the Academic Council method is a huge factor in academic quality. Interesting as to what the management staff felt was the primary driver of academic quality if they didn’t think that academic staff were, but I don’t know what they’re position was” (Interviewee 5).

The manager responses showed equal surprise at the finding. One manager rationalised the finding, “There might have been a little bit of confusion on definition on this question” (Interviewee 3). Another manager responded, “I would put academic staff as the primary driver of academic quality. So I disagree with the finding. I’m agreeing with the management position. Yes” (Interviewee 4).

Another manager reflected on the finding, “Maybe I need to back pedal a bit on that now. What’s my view of that finding? Going out on a bit of a limb, I think that maybe what staff were thinking about when they answered that question was the student experience rather than academic quality. I think that front-line staff is crucial for student experience, but for actual academic quality itself I would agree with the management view” (Interviewee 6).
9.5.14 External Scrutiny and Accountability

When asked to respond to the finding that 66% of all staff agree that external scrutiny and accountability is a driver of academic quality, an AQA expert commented, “I would agree with it because it ensures external checks and balances and gives independence” (Interviewee 1). Another commented, “Well external scrutiny and accountability has to be part of it, yes” (Interviewee 2). One AQA expert added, “I’m surprised it’s not higher. It should really be higher. With the best will in the world we will always see ourselves through rose-tinted glasses and I do think that the external scrutiny and accountability is absolutely vital for academic quality” (Interviewee 5).

A manager dissected the finding, stating, “Yes, so that would include External Examiners and the periodic programmatic reviews. That’s ‘External Scrutiny’. ‘Accountability’? Maybe less so because Accountability really is at a different level of the organisation, and that’s through the Performance Compact for instance. That’s where for instance retention is, in the Compact” (Interviewee 3). Another manager responded, “Well I’m surprised. I think External Scrutiny and Accountability are a driver. I’m surprised that one-third of people felt it wasn’t” (Interviewee 6).

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Table 9.4 – Visual Representation of Interviewee Responses (Section D)
9.6 Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in your Institution

9.6.1 Quality Enhancement

All AQA experts responded positively to the result that 61% of all staff agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in their institution is on quality enhancement, while some managers found it more difficult. When asked to explain the finding One AQA expert commented, “Because that’s what it should be really. In a way I’m surprised it’s not higher” (Interviewee 2). Another added, “Yes I think 61% is a reasonable figure. And I do think that we’re committed to, and this is particularly evident again in the Academic Council and in the subcommittees, we are committed to continuous improvement. So I do think that the emphasis on ‘quality enhancement’ is valid” (Interviewee 5).

A manager commented, “I don’t think it’s as high as it should be. The ‘quality enhancement’ needs to acquire more prominence. Currently, because of maybe the distance between QA and teaching & learning in people’s perception, that is why it is still relatively low” (Interviewee 3).

Another manager explained the finding with the response, “Well again I think people would see the academic quality assurance system as wanting to enhance quality and one would hope that that would be part of it. What do I think about this? I suppose at one level I’m wondering why only 61% thought it. I’m surprised on kind of two levels I suppose. One is that that would seem to be the main focus rather than that the academic quality assurance system actually delivers academic quality as distinct from enhancement. I hope you know what I’m saying. That it just delivers the results it’s supposed to do, just like any system delivers what it’s supposed to. You can improve it later. But basically, is it doing what it’s supposed to do. And I’m sure you could philosophically argue about this that it’s all part of enhancement anyway. Why do I think this is the case? Okay, I think why such a high number would make that the focus might be that there’s maybe an avoidance of the main thing it’s there for” (Interviewee 6).
9.6.2 Quality Monitoring

AQA experts explained that 54% of all staff agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on quality monitoring, with the comment “Because I think staff in some cases do feel that they are being overly bogged down with paperwork and well see the paperwork feeds into the quality monitoring. I suppose they feel that it has moved away from the front-line delivery” (Interviewee 2).

Another explained the finding with the response, “I suppose it may be the perception that we focus too much on statistics. You know the pass rates or on retention rates or on completion rates and that we don’t actually take a qualitative view rather than a quantitative view from time-to-time. I could see why some Staff would feel that way” (Interviewee 5).

Manager responses were somewhat defensive, with one manager commenting, “Yes, but we’re not ‘Monitoring’. ‘Monitoring’ isn’t the emphasis. I think 54% is still clearly less strong than the first one” (Interviewee 3). Another manager commented, “I’m kind of surprised at that. I would have thought that should be higher. I would have thought that’d be the main thing it actually does. Again, I sense that the 54% really are maybe not focused on the main thing” (Interviewee 6).

9.6.3 Assessment of Quality

One AQA expert responded to the finding that only 4% of all staff, including 33% of management respondents, agreed that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on assessment with the comment, “Because I don’t think it is. But if you wanted to look at the difference between 4% of all staff though and 33% of management. I suppose management would like it to be higher. Is that reflecting a view? If you want to put it that way, management would like it to be higher in terms of the assessment of quality” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert offered a similar view with the comment, “We don’t. The Quality Office here does not have any function across the institute. The Quality Office here does not report to the Governing Body. The Quality Office here is very much seen as purely an Administrative role. It doesn’t have an active role in the assessment of quality and we don’t do quality statistics of any kind or audits” (Interviewee 5).
A manager responded: “Because actually ‘assessment of quality’ isn’t the focus. It’s really creating the frameworks, reviewing, which isn’t the same as assessment. We’re not constantly rigorously testing it and we probably shouldn’t because you’d tie yourself in knots trying to find the metrics on how to do it.” Another manager commented: “Again, maybe just these three questions to some extent. The word that just keeps coming to my mind is maybe avoidance of the core issues” (Interviewee 3).

9.6.4 Combination of Quality Enhancement, Monitoring and Assessment

The AQA experts tended to go along with the view in the Delphi results that 78% of all staff agree that the focus of academic quality assurance is a combination of quality enhancement, quality monitoring or assessment of quality, but not completely. One AQA expert commented, “Yes because that is the cycle of how you manage quality. You plan it, you organize it, you control it, and you measure it. So I think it would and has to be reflective of those three elements (Interviewee 1).” Another AQA expert responded, “I think it is yes. I think that’s what we have been striving to do. There’s still room for improvement, or enhancement” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert was not fully in agreement with the finding, responding, “I would say Quality Enhancement yes, the Quality Monitoring to a lesser extent and the Assessment of Quality certainly not” (Interviewee 5).

Managers all agreed with the finding. One commented: “Yes, and so it is those three. But it’s also then the sort of the basic bread and butter procedures and policies and the clarity around those frameworks. Unless you consider that that is embedded within the quality enhancement as well. But that’s not mentioned here but I think it’s also part of it” (Interviewee 3). Another manager responded, “Yes, well clearly that’s beginning to make sense now from what I was saying earlier on” (Interviewee 6).

9.6.5 QA Not about Impression Management

The results of the Delphi indicated that 61% of all staff disagree that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on impression management. 58% of academic staff and 50% of management staff disagree with the statement.
When asked during the interview if the views of the academic staff and management staff were a concern, one AQA expert responded: “I'm very concerned with the 50% of management staff on impression management” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert replied, “Yes, the fact that the low number disagreed. I mean the whole thing isn’t on impressing management, it’s the greater good. The fact those figures are that half the staff would agree with the statement I think is of concern” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert agreed, “Oh it is a concern. It is a concern if that’s what they’re thinking that the focus of academic quality is then they should do something about it” (Interviewee 5).

A manager responded, “Well the gap isn’t that great, that’s the first thing. 39% agree AQA is on impression management. That’s too high” (Interviewee 3). Another manager said, “Yes. That’s high. So, it’s a concern in some ways, yes” (Interviewee 4). Another manager was more concerned, stating, “Yes. In fact, my sense would be that it’s all a concern. You know I mean that, well 39% of all staff, 42% of academic staff and 50% of management staff basically think what we’re doing is Impression Management and that is a worry. That is a concern for sure” (Interviewee 6).

9.6.6 QA misfit of Industrial Models

All interviewees agree that the traditional industrial models of QA do not fit well to Higher Education. An AQA expert commented, “I think the traditional industry model wouldn’t fit well no. It’s a different environment” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert added, “Yes, the traditional industrial models don’t fit perfectly with Higher Education. Higher Education is a different discipline” (Interviewee 5).

A manager similarly responded, “I agree, they have no role. Discipline and technology would be part of the ISO methodology for instance. No, it doesn’t fit that” (Interviewee 3). Another manager added, “I would agree, yes, absolutely […] it doesn’t fit” (Interviewee 4). Another manager added the qualifying comment, “Well, I suppose my view would be that we have something to learn from those models. But that I would agree with the staff, the 77% of staff, that they shouldn’t be the focus” (Interviewee 6).
9.6.7 QA Not about Meeting Staff Expectations

73% of all staff disagreed with the statement that the focus of AQA is on Meeting Staff Expectations of a quality work environment. Two of the three AQA experts were surprised by this. One commented, “No it’s not what I would have expected. Because I would have thought we were trying to meet staff expectations of a quality work environment. That would be the whole purpose of it, wouldn’t it, of quality assurance?” (Interviewee 2).

Managers, on the other hand, expected this finding. One manager commented: “Yes the two are different things altogether” (Interviewee 3). Another manager responded, “Yes. I would have expected that finding yes” (Interviewee 4). However, another manager added: “Well I would have expected the majority of staff would disagree. I would have expected nearly all staff to disagree with that. Bit surprised that 27% thought that meeting staff expectations was what it was about” (Interviewee 6).

9.6.8 QA Not about Management-Staff Agendas

82% of all staff disagreed that the focus of academic quality assurance in the institution is on Breaking Staff Expectations of Management’s Responsibilities. 47% of staff skipped this challenging question and only 12 participants agreed with the statement. An AQA expert commented: “I’m worried about even the 12 Staff agreeing with it. Because that’s very much controlling” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert reflected, “The fact that 47% of Staff skipped the question is surprising. But the fact that of the ones that answered, 82% of them disagreed with the statement, I think is probably good” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert replied, “I can see why a number of people skipped it alright. Yes, because it, ‘Breaking Staff Expectations of Management’s Responsibilities’, I mean that’s very subjective” (Interviewee 5).

A manager responded, “Yes it’s very much a left-field one and I’m not surprised that the vast majority disagreed or even shied away from it altogether” (Interviewee 3). Another manager commented, “Well, yes it’s a very controversial way of putting a question. I think that the fact that only 12 Staff agree with it indicates that Staff have a fairly thoughtful view about academic quality. That they’re not seeing it as some kind of a Management Trojan Horse or something. And the fact
that 47% skipped it is interesting. I suppose giving a view on such a statement either way draws one into a domain that one doesn’t want to be in at all. And the fact that 82% disagreed completely, of those who did, also shows an appreciation of what the issues are” (Interviewee 6).

9.6.9 Adapting, Not Adopting External Quality Policies

All interviewees agreed with the 78% of staff who confirmed that the focus of academic quality assurance was on adapting external quality policies, rather than on adopting external quality policies. An AQA expert commented, “Yes. Because you must make them your own and see how they actually fit in. Because you may already have policies and procedures that achieve what the external quality policy may be trying to achieve as well” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert replied, “It is accurate, you know. I mean you’d expect that, you would expect that we would be adapting to our own needs, provided we do not in any way diminish the standards involved. I’ve no difficulty with that. I don’t think that every institution is the same and I do think we should have the freedom to reflect the needs that we have in-house provided that objective standards are not diluted” (Interviewee 5).

Similarly, a manager responded, “Yes because we don’t really tend to blindly copycat whatever we pick up elsewhere. We do have a culture of tailoring it and having our own debate. That’s good” (Interviewee 3). Another manager said, “Yes I think we adapt, we localize” (Interviewee 4). Yet another manager commented, “Yes I would think that that’d be a practice I would have seen here over the years. Of maybe using templates of other institutions but adapting them to our conditions and all that kind of thing” (Interviewee 6).

9.6.10 Focus on Substance v. Form

The Delphi results indicated that 54% of all staff perceive the focus of academic quality assurance is on substance rather than form. 46% of staff perceive the focus of academic quality assurance is on form rather than substance.

The interview explored why this is a point where views differ. One AQA expert reflected: “Perhaps because it’s all staff it may be reflective of the practitioner side versus the administrative
side and the management side. I think the practitioner side would consider that it's more about substance, whereas administration and management, a lot of that is trying to provide the evidence of what we are doing that might be more reflective of the form side” (Interviewee 1).

One AQA expert commented similarly: “I suppose it depends on your perspective of it and how it has affected you. Is it in some ways the balance that we have achieved? Then so in relation to the quality that’s in the institute, if people can’t decide whether it’s more Substance or Form, are both included, if you want to put it that way, in what we have in operation within the institute. And then depending on your own perception or your own position you view it as either Form or you view it as either Substance. You pick out the bits of it that are more relevant to you and your discipline and your own background” (Interviewee 2).

A manager responded: “Well I would expect that some people might have interpreted the word ‘Substance’ as content of what I deliver, which is not really in question. It’s more the way that the syllabus is put together, the learning outcomes, the competences as they are described and making sure that the National Quality Framework of competency, skills, knowledge and learning outcomes, that that is adequately described and assessed. Some people might interpret that as Form rather than Substance” (Interviewee 3).

Another manager reflected, “Well I suppose there’s clearly a strong view elsewhere in the survey that we are looking more at a tick-box type exercise, to show that we have done what we said we’d do and that kind of approach. So, it’s not surprising then that when people are asked a question of substance over form that they would divide along the lines of those who think that there’s an overall philosophy being implemented here that’s important to the institution or there’s a compliance with operation. For example, earlier on we saw that up to half of the people thought that quality was about operational procedures and policies and it’s not surprising then that again half of the people would think that quality was more about form over substance. Not one that I’d be happy to see myself but not surprising to see it if that is the understanding that’s in the system” (Interviewee 6).

This interview question explored the potential issues with respect to the perceptions of the QA system. While staff across all groups recognized value in the QA system, they differed on the
nature of that value and whether the system was substantive or based on box-ticking. Academics appeared to value the system yet resented the extent to which it controlled or monitored their work. Administrators and Management on the other hand valued the control provided by the system yet resented the extent to which the academic process was outside the control of the system, for example, with no monitoring of provision within the classroom.

9.6.11 Focus on Accountability versus Improving Operations

The Delphi results indicated that 54% of all staff perceive the focus of academic quality assurance is on accountability rather than on improving the quality of operations.

In exploring why a majority of staff hold this view an AQA expert responded, “Again I’m surprised by the percentage. But I would see the accountability as part of trying to improve rather than distinctly separate, that it’s part of improving quality is actually the assurance side and the accountability side” (Interviewee 1). Another AQA expert responded, “I’d say [the majority of staff hold this view] because they do just view it as an accountability” (Interviewee 2).

An AQA expert commented, “Well I’m sorry to see that really. And I’m not quite so sure why the majority of staff would hold that view. I mean the explanation I might have is again that maybe there’s a little bit of remove from the Academic Council. And it also goes back to probably the thing I said at the beginning, where the programme boards do not have an interface directly to Academic Council or to the academic subcommittees. I believe if they had an interface to the subcommittees or to the Academic Council itself it probably would relieve that somewhat because then they would see that it is in fact improving the quality of the operations and continuous improvement right across the board” (Interviewee 5).

A manager responded, “I don’t know. Firstly, I think the focus on Academic QA is not really on ‘Accountability’ at all. Because you would have to have an annual measurement then on particular dimensions if it was on accountability and it’s not. So, they’re actually wrong. They probably just didn’t understand the question” (Interviewee 3).
Another manager replied, “It’s a sad statistic. I’m disappointed by it. I’m disappointed that 54% of staff would think that it’s just because ‘Big Brother’ is watching us that we need to get things right, that we need to have our I’s dotted and our T’s crossed, rather than 80% thinking that what we are actually doing is improving our organisation. Disappointed, would that be fair enough to say to you? Why? I don’t know why…culture” (Interviewee 4).

Another manager reflected, “Well you know, I think as we’ve already seen, academic quality assurance is a mixture of things. There’s quality assessment, there’s quality improvement, there’s quality…and so on. It’s not surprising that there’d be different views. My sense for what it’s worth is that I think there is a focus on accountability, because it should be there and I think before you can improve something you have to have accountability. So, if I was asked to rank the two I’d be putting accountability first myself” (Interviewee 6).

The AQA expert’s comments about the lack of integration between programme boards and the wider AQA system of subcommittees and Academic Council was particularly insightful. A second AQA expert referencing culture as the basis of staff views was directly consistent with the view taken in this research that culture is the conceptual framework within which an organisation exists and functions. A manager response summed up the findings of this research and the proposition for an integrated approach to AQA with the words, “Well you know, I think as we’ve already seen, academic quality assurance is a mixture of things. There’s quality assessment, there’s quality improvement, there’s quality, and so on. So, it’s not surprising that there’d be different views.” The multi-factorial, multi-faceted, multi-view nature of AQA had revealed itself to this interviewee through the interview process. This sense of AQA is what most supports the need for an integrated, collaborative approach to define an AQA system that matches the culture of the organisation.

9.6.12 Staff Positive View of Academic QA

Delphi results reported that 73% of all staff confirmed that staff have a generally positive view of academic quality assurance.
All interviewees confirmed that they would have expected this finding. One AQA expert commented, “Well I’m sorry it’s not higher. But it’s good” (Interviewee 5). A manager added, “Yes, I would have expected a majority view there. That’s generally positive, absolutely. And I think the QA system is actually quite soft. So, they wouldn’t be inimical towards it. You would expect that” (Interviewee 3).

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Table 9.5 – Visual Representation of Interviewee Responses (Section E)

9.7 Expert Group Comments of Staff Views of this Research

9.7.1 Different Staff Group Perceptions of Academic QA

During the Delphi 99% of all staff concluded from the research findings that there are different staff groupings within LIT with different group perceptions of Academic Quality Assurance.

All interviewees agreed with this finding. An AQA expert commented, “Yes, because it reflects the nature of the work they do every day” (Interviewee 1). A manager added, “Yes, you can see some certain fault lines between the different groups but not totally, not diametrically opposed in
all cases. And there’s also quite a lot of agreement between them. But you can recognize them, yes” (Interviewee 3). Another manager commented, “Well yes I think we’d have to agree based on all what we’ve seen” (Interviewee 6).

**9.7.2 Different Views and Perceptions are role related**

The Delphi results showed that 90% of all staff concluded from the research findings that it is reasonable from the evidence to conclude that differences in views and perceptions are role related.

All interviewees agreed with this finding. One manager commented, “Yes, it is reasonable” (Interviewee 3). An AQA expert said, “Yes that would reflect my view” (Interviewee 1).

**9.7.3 Organisation Culture Consists of Subcultures that are Role Related**

The Delphi results also identified that 96% of all staff concluded from the research findings that it is reasonable to conclude that the culture of the organisation is in fact composed of subcultures that are role related.

All interviewees agreed with this finding. One AQA expert added the observation, “I 90% agree. But there is an element of the culture coming from the top down as well as the subcultures within the role” (Interviewee 2). Another AQA expert expressed the view, “We have a very poor tradition of that type of collaboration and it goes back to the culture from the foundation of the college” (Interviewee 5). A manager commented, “I agree. But it’s a dangerous one too. So you wouldn’t then make the next conclusion that these subcultures are therefore not reconcilable, because that’s not true” (Interviewee 3).

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**Table 9.6 – Visual Representation of Interviewee Responses (Section F)**
Chapter 10: Conclusions

10.1 Overview of the Research and Thesis

The aims and objectives of this research project were set out in Section 1.4 of Chapter 1. The study was an exploratory one to investigate the QA systems in operation in one Higher Education institution to determine what quality means to the different stakeholder groups in this institute. The research sought to discern the range and diversity of perceptions and attitudes towards quality and the extent to which perceptions and attitudes of staff groups and students in the institution differ or agree on the process of AQA, as a basis for QA process improvement. The research explored perceptions of the QA systems, with particular focus on the differences and possible tensions between management, administration, academic and student support staff perceptions, values and cultures. The research examined the perceived value placed by the different staff groups in the Higher Education institution on the approach to QA in operation. This analysis shed light on the perceived strengths, weaknesses and potential for improvement in the QA system and their implications.

The findings of the research project have helped to guide and enhance the process of QA in the institution. The work in this research project was disseminated at the European Conference on Education Research (ECER) in September 2019 (Twomey 2019) and at the Education Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) conference in September 2020 (Twomey 2020). The integrated approach to AQA developed here is being used as the organisation culture development work package for a new Technological University proposal. The findings of my research are currently informing a new integrated approach to AQA as two Institutes of Technology merge to obtain Technological University status.

10.2 Revisiting the Research Aims and Objectives

This study set out to achieve a better understanding of the QA systems in operation in Institutes of technology in Ireland. Four general objectives provided the general focus for this research (see Section 1.4). The first objective was “to investigate the QA systems in operation in Irish Higher
Education, with particular reference to the Institutes of Technology.” This objective has been achieved by enquiring into those systems through the inputs of key players who develop the primary data within the institutes. The Delphi Method enabled the research to delve into views, values, beliefs and opinions of the different actors and role groups within the Institute of Technology studied. Insight was gained into the AQA systems in operation in this institution, which operates under the same statutory requirements and QA systems as other Institutes of Technology. It is this depth of insight, achieved through the research methods employed, that provided a new understanding of AQA in Institutes of Technology.

A second research objective was “to establish Higher Education provider views on the concepts of quality, quality assurance and quality enhancement.” The research instrument sections were constructed so as to answer these questions, returning in each stage of the research to the fundamental questions in this objective. An advantage and innovation of the research design was that the views of the different role groups in the institution were included in determining the concepts studied.

The third objective was “to evaluate the operation of the QA systems with particular focus on the differences and possible tensions between managerial, administrative, academic and student support staff perceptions, values and cultures in Institutes of Technology.” Here the research was most valuable for the management of AQA. It provided a process that progressed beyond the normal perceptions and assumptions of other interest group views, to identify the common ground basis for an integrated approach to AQA. The research created consensus, reducing differences and tensions, through a highly collaborative process. This process supported identification and exploration of difference and tension between the role group sub-cultures under investigation. Through the anonymity of the Delphi process and separated from role group context, research participants were better equipped to reflect on their role group perceptions and views in light of inputs from other role groups.

Objective four cut to the core question for management of AQA within a Higher Education context where role groups and sub-cultures exist. The objective was “to make recommendations on the basis of this research for development of a collaborative approach to QA in Higher Education in
Ireland.” While the Delphi Method was developed in the social sciences for research purposes, this study demonstrated how it can be used in the complex environment that is Higher Education to improve understanding, improve participant listening and communication, build consensus views, identify and explore differences and tensions, integrate organisational thinking and policy on AQA. In so doing, the integrative approach demonstratively dissipated the sub-culture energy that can stand in the way of collaboration within Higher Education.

Each stage of the research provided research participants with increased knowledge and access to evidence on organisation-wide views. In a work environment of knowledgeable and professional staff groups, this evidence in itself was sufficient to stimulate thinking and reflection and to arrive at a basis for consensus and an integrated organisation policy on AQA.

### 10.3 Major Findings of the Research

In Chapter 9 the findings of the research were collated and integrated. This involved reflection on the survey findings from Chapter 8 in semi-structured interviews. The management rhetoric and belief that QA is the responsibility of all was not shared by other role groups, who were forceful in resting QA responsibility with management and with academic staff. This inconsistency in perceptions of ownership is critical to QA. The rhetoric-practice gap needs to be addressed. Management perceived that QA is part of everyone’s responsibility, while other staff groups did not. A consensus-based approach has been tested in this research and is a viable technique for developing stronger shared understanding of collective responsibility. The Delphi Method had an impact on the collective beliefs and perceptions of the participants. There was strong consensus on the value and importance of student feedback. There remained a diversity of views on whether QA was defined by operational procedures or a collegiate system of excellence. This is perhaps a reflection of the dominance of a managerial perspective over a collegiate perspective in the institution.

It was evident in the research that a person’s role within HE links that person to a role group identity. The degree of consensus within groups in the Round 1 survey indicates a significant level of role group identity in respondents’ initial response. When this group identity data were shared
across groups in the Round 2 survey, there was a general willingness to reconsider based on the views of others. This finding indicated that a consensus based, integrated approach to AQA is viable. Group identity situates the individual within a group subculture, which impacts on the individual’s views and perceptions of AQA. The different group identities potentially give rise to tensions between group subcultures within HE institutions. The integrated approach to AQA investigated by this research presents a novel model for addressing the perceptions and tensions associated with role group and subculture identities, to shift HE institutions towards a QA culture based on an integrated organisation level view of AQA.

The analysis of survey data in chapter 8 and the experts’ review of survey findings in chapter 9 confirm a high level of consensus in relation to the four research questions in the research theme. It proved possible using the Delphi to arrive at a widely shared understanding of quality and to reach widespread agreement on the process of AQA. Similarly, the critique of the current approach of AQA identified common strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement across the different staff groupings. With all groups acknowledging the value of the integrated approach to QA proposed in this research, the potential to guide and enhance AQA was confirmed.

By engaging the different staff groups in AQA it was possible to uncover a high level of consensus. This consensus arose not through suppressing different views, but through the Delphi Method providing a means of sharing differing viewpoints. The communication and sharing of opinions facilitated reflection by the different actors and an adjustment of their own views in response to the views of others. Whether this adjustment in views leans toward or moves away from what the Swiss psychiatrist Karl Jung termed the collective unconscious, the beliefs we hold which are based on what others have taught us, could form the basis of a further psychological study of this perception change process. This study confirmed that the collaboration approach to QA proposed facilitated the consideration of different views and the adjustment of individual and staff group thinking, resulting in altered perceptions, with greater coherence and consistency between the differing staff group perspectives. It was this proof of potential for understanding, collaboration and integration between different staff groups that was central to the integrated approach to AQA that was the thesis of this research. The key findings of this research support a response or solution
to the issues of staff group and subculture perspectives that undermine collegiality institution-wide responsibility for QA.

This final chapter, Chapter 10, includes recommendations for utilising this research and proposals for further research on the application of an integrated approach to AQA. The integrated approach of sharing perceptions and views across role groups resonated with the different group experiences and facilitated reflection. There was evidence that participants perceived the process to be trustworthy, authentic and transferable. Different role groups were both able and willing to develop and refine their own views based on their reflections on the views of others. The anonymity of the survey responses guarded against this movement towards an effective shared understanding being based on a repression of divergent views.

There was 78% agreement between all staff subgroups that primary responsibility for AQA rests with academic staff. Further questioning confirmed the less widespread view that responsibility also rests with management. The maxim that QA is the responsibility of all, is a good reflection of quality in HE when nuanced with the different levels of responsibility attributable to different groups.

97% of participants agreed that student feedback on their programme is important for AQA, supporting the case for inclusion of the student voice in programme development, review and operation. Management commitment was perceived by 91% to be a key element in establishing a viable QA culture, confirming the value of a buy-in from management to the AQA system.

Areas of disagreement identified included differing views on whether the AQA is fundamentally a collegiate system of excellence or a system of operational policies and procedures. This reflects the different mission, vision and values of an Institute of Technology from those of a university, where AQA is intended more explicitly to be a collegiate system and that operational policies and procedures are provided to support and help standardise collegiate decision making. The managerial culture in institutes of technology emphasises the centrality of policies, procedures and processes and de-emphasises the importance of academic structures and collegiate process.
Conflicting views on whether academic staff are perceived as the primary strength or the primary weakness of AQA was notable in the study. This was seen as a concern by the AQA experts and management expert interviewees. There was general agreement that academic staff specifically are central to academic quality. The experts concern was further reflected on variation across the different staff groups on whether the focus of AQA is on substance or form. The focus of AQA on substance, supported by form, should be evident to all if the QA system is functioning appropriately.

These findings provide a basis for understanding the perceptions and tensions around AQA within an organisation. This understanding creates a need for response. My research confirms that a response based on an integrated approach to QA can address the different staff values and beliefs and the different organisation cultures that support the implementation of AQA.

A number of overarching themes cut across the particular fine-grained questions:

- the existence and evidence of distinct subgroups and subcultures
- the existence of a diversity of views that reflect these subcultures
- the evidence of tensions between subcultures
- the predominant views that define these subcultures
- where differences were most marked and where there was little difference in views
- confirmation, discussion and insights on findings by AQA experts and experienced managers.

These overarching themes confirm the potential of the integrated approach to AQA. However, for this approach to add value to an organisation, enhance collegiate collaboration and improve AQA there was widespread agreement that the support of management was essential. Collegiality and collaboration work best when management support and promote this approach. Where management insist on operating hierarchically and reinforce management metrics over academic metrics then collegiality is not valued by an organisation. An organisational culture focused solely on student numbers, revenue streams, job opportunities, organisational efficiency or quantitative performance will find itself at odds with the collaborative, academic and collegiate values of the Higher Education experience, developing social capital, research innovation, critical thinking and the importance of process as much as outcomes. The neoliberal, managerialist philosophy flourishes by promoting constant change and action, even when that change and action serves no
obvious or rationale objective. Stopping to think, critique and reflect are not values that sit well with neoliberal managerialism, yet are at the heart of academic culture. Not surprising then that literature on Higher Education management includes a theme of academics critiquing management and a theme of management critiquing academic values. In many Higher Education organisations one can observe the management policy, conscious or unconscious, of dividing the different staff groups to work against each other to the detriment of academic quality and student educational experience.

The overarching themes above provided me with the evidence to answer the research questions. Key observations from the interviewees were particularly insightful for exploring the perceptions and tensions that needed to be understood in AQA. In particular, the interviewees drew my attention to:

- conscious and unconscious orientations
- differing interpretations and their basis
- divergence on issues of implementation
- Academic Council as the structural apex of AQA
- Confirmation of widely agreed basic principles of AQA.

Reflecting on these perceptions and tensions, I would argue that the training of Higher Education management must be explicit about academic culture and values. Higher Education management differs from generic management. The managerial principles that might apply well to manufacturing do not apply in the same way to Higher Education. While there is an overlap between service delivery management and Higher Education management, it should be noted that the latter has more complex objectives requiring more nuanced and thoughtful consideration of the organisational culture and objectives. Education is about provision rather than delivery, “not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”

An over-arching finding of this research beyond the research questions is evidenced in the findings in Chapter 8 and Chapter 9. The difficulty of defining quality in Higher Education appeared to flow from the multi-faceted, complex and subtle nature of perceptions of academic quality. Many factors are identified in this study contributing to perceptions of academic quality, with complex relationships between these factors and subtle defining influences arising through organisational
culture, management structure and collegiate governance. The acceptance of this complexity and subtle nature of QA in Higher Education is reflected well in a report by QQI (2019) on quality in Irish HE. To describe AQA as it exists across the HE sector, the report narrative weaves a complex and subtle synthesis and amalgam of different quality practices across HE institutions. In this way the report captures the range and commonality of concepts which underpin variations in QA practices within organisations.

The management of Institutes of Technology is often focused on operational efficiency and finance-led decision making, with limited regard for the higher order thinking and research that are core to the value of Higher Education. Higher order thinking is consistently identified as an area of difference between Institutes of Technology and universities in the findings of the annual Irish Survey of Student Engagement (StudentSurvey.ie). With managerial decision-making taking precedence over academic ambition, as well as staff trade unions’ definition of the academic role limited to number of teaching hours, length of holidays and levels of remuneration, the institutes’ claim to a strong academic or collegiate culture is open to critique. The criteria set down by the HEA international panel in 2011 for a Technological University and set out in the Technological Universities Act 2018, provided a stark contrast to the academic standing of most Institutes of Technology in 2011. The success of only one consortium of the institutes out of five consortia to attain Technological University status by 2020 reflects the gap to be bridged from Institute of Technology to university and the extent of the cultural change required.

10.4 Contribution to Knowledge of QA in Higher Education

My research makes four primary contributions to knowledge. A clear and measurable diversity of views dependent on staff subgroups has been demonstrated. In documenting this diversity of views my research has in effect carried out a due diligence to confirm not just this diversity of views, but the extent to which that diversity exists. The research demonstrates that through discourse and reflection these views can be revised in constructive ways to give rise to a stronger shared understanding. This understanding in turn can have an impact on the organisation and the approach to AQA.
In Section 1.4 research questions were detailed to fill a gap in the literature and to contribute new knowledge. My aim was to develop an integrated, collaborative approach to QA that addressed the identity nexus in Higher Education discussed in Chapter 5. By addressing the four specific research questions the depth of understanding gained of AQA in Institutes of Technology and Higher Education in general lays the ground for future post-doctoral work that uses this integrated, collaborative approach to address the differences in perceptions and views that undermine AQA in Higher Education.

The first research question, at the concept level, asked, “What does Quality mean to managers, administrators and academics in the Institutes of Technology?” Implicit in this question was an assumption that quality could mean different things to these different groups. Pretesting of the research instrument indicated that there might be an additional group identity around this question, Student Services. This group was included as a role group identity in the survey instrument for coding purposes, professional and support staff who work directly with students do not identify themselves as administrators. The research question (A1B) confirmed that these four role group identities do exist. While they initially held different views on what quality means, they converged in their views as the research progressed through the Delphi rounds (A2A, A6B). In so doing, the different staff groups reflected on the influence of organisational culture and staff group identities on understanding of quality and responsibility for quality (A2B, A2C). The different groups placed different emphasis on the importance of AQA (A3A). The focus on AQA as “A collegiate system of Excellence” and less so as “Operational policies and procedures” raised important questions for the view of quality implicit in the organisation’s Quality Policy (A4A, A5A). Views on the effectiveness and impacts of the AQA system is where tensions between role group views were most apparent (A5B, A6A). This basis for tensions was explored further through in-depth interviews with experts (A6B, A6C), generating further insights in Section 9.2 on AQA process in Higher Education and the value of the integrative process used in this research to lead to better ideas and approaches. The Delphi Method helped staff groups to engage more meaningfully and effectively and to adjust their positions, rather than think the same way. The Delphi method is not a naïve process to help to reduce the perceptions of difference and tensions between staff groups. It is a communication tool that provides a safe environment for the exploration of differing views.
The second research question delved deeper to consideration of process, asking, “to what extent do the different staff groupings in Institutes of Technology agree on the process of quality assurance”? The research instrument and Delphi method were used to explore the level of agreement or disagreement on AQA processes. There was a high level of cross-group support for the importance of AQA policies and procedures (B1A), of academic critical self-reflection (B2A), of management monitoring of quantitative outputs (B3A), of external examiner monitoring of assessment (B4A), of student feedback on their programmes (B5A), of student feedback on assessment (B6A), of industry feedback on academic programmes (B7A) and of the importance of management commitment to AQA (B10A).

Outlier findings within the above consensus were identified by the research. These were explored in the expert interviews (Section 9.3). While the majority of academic staff and management staff supported “collegiate professional judgement” the majorities were not decisive among these two groups (B1B). An interesting expert reflection was that the term “professional judgement” is wider and not as defined as the term “academic judgement”, which might have received more support. Attitudes of different groups to the role of the Academic Council were also explored with the experts (B8A, B9A). In these detailed interviews the differences between AQA expert and management views were highlighted, mirroring the wider issues of the importance of process and integration of perceptions of AQA.

The third research question shifted the focus to AQA operations and asked, “what is the perceived value among different staff groups in Higher Education of the approach to quality assurance in operation, in terms of its strengths, weaknesses and potential for improvement?” Four main strengths of the AQA systems in operation were identified. In order of importance, these were specified as academic staff, quality standards, external examiners/external reviews and student feedback (C1A). Delving further into the primary strength, the identity of academic staff in the Institutes of Technology was almost unanimously agreed as teacher or lecturer, rather than researcher (C1B), whose primary relationships are with their colleagues and students (C1C).
Five main weaknesses of the AQA systems in operation were also identified. In order of importance the weaknesses identified were academic staff, students, quality system, management and teaching. The expert group explored the identification of academic staff as both the primary strength and the primary weakness of AQA in operation (Section 9.4). With the exception of one of the management experts, all other experts agreed that only in exceptional circumstances would academic staff be considered a primary weak point in AQA. One interviewee referred to issues of performance and underperformance in the public sector having limited means of acknowledgement and remedy. Another spoke of resistance to change in teaching methods. Another manager disagreed with the view of academics as a primary weakness in AQA. However, the manager pointed out that this finding in the research is valuable as an indicator of where further improvement in AQA operations might begin. This expert view was supported by the opinion among 84% of all staff on “the quality of teaching varying widely” (C2B), a view shared by all but one of the expert interviewees.

There was over 80% awareness and acknowledgement between groups of AQA weaknesses as perceived from the position of other role groups (C2C, C2E). This awareness among participant groups of other role groups within the institution was evident throughout the research. The staff group identities extant were generally known and understood. It was the self-reflection on a participant’s own sub-culture influence and behaviour that needed the Delphi and survey support process for cross-group communication and integration around AQA.

In addressing the potential for improvement, respondents were decisive in shortlisting the key issues. Resourcing, speedier reaction times to external change, external benchmarking, student feedback and stronger links with employers were identified as potential areas for improvement. While confirming the perceived value of AQA in improving academic quality and staff performance, only 25% saw improvement in the student experience as the primary outcome of AQA (C4A, C5A). While institutes of technology provide significant levels of student services, academic and personal supports, the domain of AQA does not offer a role for the student voice.
Another outlier result was agreement from 46.4% of all staff that the primary result of AQA on staff is “Managerialism – manuals and box-ticking culture have redirected energy away from the classroom” (C5F). The expert group understood where this view might come from. Nonetheless, they were uncomfortable with the finding itself. In institutes of technology there can be an imbalance between management culture and academic culture, with the primary focus on management of the institute rather than the academic mission. The refocusing of national policy by the HEA on enhancement of teaching and learning in the classroom is going some way to address this concern raised in finding by providing a place within the institute management specific to considerations of teaching and learning. The change in status of institutes to technological universities, will also help to make explicit the academic mission of these organisations, with the potential to rebalance managerial tendencies.

It was a revealing finding that 84% of all staff in the institutes of technology sector continue to view Higher Education in terms of Newman’s definition of the pursuit of knowledge rather than as a utility value public service provided to students (D1A). Despite decades of public policy and investment promoting the economic value and outputs of Higher Education, the belief persists among those working in Higher Education that Higher Education is more than this. Echoing this finding, 80% of staff confirmed the view that Higher Education is not a business and 64% disagree with the view that it is primarily training for employment (D1B, D1C). Nearly all staff (97%) agreed that differences in views about the purpose of Higher Education are role identity group related (D1E). I conclude from this finding that the role group sub-culture model proposed here for integrating AQA is also a useful lens through which to reflect on one’s own views on Higher Education and how these may be influenced by role related sub-culture values. It was very striking that despite decades of managerial conditioning in an educational organisation, staff insisted on a raison d’etre that does not reduce or minimise the scope of their sense of purpose to purely economic or utilitarian concerns. The integrative approach to QA surfaced these strongly held views among staff. This interesting insight into attitudes and perceptions of the purpose of HE in general can be incorporated within the approach to quality to frame and influence a values-led approach to quality.
The research examined views of the different groups on the relationship between management structures and AQA (D2A). While a range of views were evident, there was a tendency among academic staff to see a flat management structure as helpful for AQA, while administration staff and student support staff viewed a hierarchical structure as better for AQA. The expert group were not surprised by this finding seeing it as a reflection of the difference in management approach by academic and non-academic management. The staff groups each confirmed that their current management approach works in their role group context (Section 9.5). A key point was that whatever management structures are in place in HE, they need to be capable of tapping into “the diversity of staff and their professional knowledge” (D2B). A specific approach to management training in HE would be needed to achieve this objective. The current training of academic managers in managerial beliefs, values and techniques through standard management training would need rebalancing with a training specific to academic management principles, provided to academic and non-academic managers alike in HE.

The fourth research question focuses directly on the thesis at the core of this research, “How can the different staff groups in Higher Education work collaboratively to incorporate academic, managerial, administrative and student support cultures into Higher Education QA?.” There was a consensus across all role groups on some of the fundamental requirements for AQA. The need for legitimacy of academic standards (D2C), for a collegiate focus rather than a managerial focus (D3A), for a mix of management and academic measurements (D4A), for staff ownership of academic quality (D5A) and for management commitment to AQA (D5B) gained widespread agreement. There was also a consensus that student results are not necessarily a good performance measurement (D4B) and the expert group elucidated on that finding (Section 9.5). Though the level of consensus was lower, two thirds of respondents saw the activities of front-line staff (D5C) and external scrutiny and accountability as important drivers of AQA. These findings offer a strong policy basis for cross-group collaborative working on AQA. An integrated approach to AQA helps address the rhetoric-practice gap in different staff groups perceptions of responsibility for quality. Regarding AQA operations one might have expected the integration of sub-culture views and areas of tension to be more difficult. This was true to some extent, yet much less than one might have assumed. There was 78% agreement that the focus of AQA operations is on enhancement of quality
(E1A), monitoring of quality (E2A) and assessment of quality (E3A), with the emphasis in that order (E4A).

For completeness, the research explored what was termed by one expert as “left of field” views of AQA. The consensus view was that the focus of AQA operations is not on impression management (E4B), not on industrial models of QA (E6A), not on meeting staff expectations of the work environment (E7A) and not on breaking staff expectations of management responsibilities (E8A). These latter views were taken from the literature relating mainly to government Higher Education reform programmes in the UK and Australia, when these representations of AQA were quite common in academic research papers.

A finding from the research that could have challenged a collaborative approach was the split view on whether the focus of AQA is on Substance, with 54% agreement or on Form, with 46% agreement (E11A). These differing views were explored with the expert group (Section 9.6). The experts reflected that perspectives are related to how the AQA system affects a person in their role, with a difference between administrative and practitioner roles. So the finding was not a surprise to the experts, though they would have preferred a stronger acknowledgement of the focus of AQA to be on Substance. Similarly, and perhaps for the same reason, the research found that 54% of staff perceived a focus of AQA “on accountability rather than on improving the quality of operations” (E11B). In developing an integrated approach to AQA these differences need to be teased out at policy level, so that they do not hinder organisation wide integration and operation of AQA.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the research findings provide an evidence-based approach through which the different staff groups in Higher Education can be supported to work collaboratively to integrate academic, administrative and managerial cultures within AQA. 78% of staff endorsed the maturity and confidence of the AQA system in operation, confirming the approach of Adapting External Quality Policies rather than Adopting External Quality Policies (E9A). Moreover, with 73% of staff confirming a generally positive view of AQA. This positive view was seen as no surprise by the expert group. This positive view indicates that institutes of
technology are well positioned for developing an integrated approach based on institute-wide participation and working collaboratively.

10.5 European Context of Academic Quality in Irish HE

Change has continued in Irish Higher Education while this research project was underway. Following the publication in 2011 of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills 2011), the Higher Education Authority in 2012 published its vision for the Higher Education Landscape and established the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (Higher Education Authority 2012). The HEA also led the Transitions Agenda nationally (see www.transition.ie). In 2015 the revised European Standards and Guidelines for QA were published (EURASHE 2015), QQI published its White Paper on Core QA Guidelines (QQI 2015) and the National Forum for Enhancement of Teaching and Learning published a Professional Development Model for academic staff. In 2016 a draft of the Technological Universities Bill was first published on the government website (www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/bills/2015). This was passed into law in 2018. A Technological Sector QA Framework was published in 2017 by the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA 2017). All these developments impacted on AQA in Higher Education in the Institutes of Technology. The continuous change in Higher Education requires scaffolding of fundamental values, including through an integrated approach to AQA, to ensure that the core value and quality of Higher Education is not eroded within the ongoing change process. Professional engagement within Higher Education is increasingly recognised as central to AQA (High-level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education 2013; Ingersoll & Merrill 2011).

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area Section 1.1 sets down the “Policy for Quality Assurance” Standard as follows:

Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.
The guideline supporting this standard clarifies that “The policy translates into practice through a variety of internal quality assurance processes that allow participation across the institution.” My research speaks to this standard and supporting guideline. Furthermore, it enabled me to develop a participative approach to AQA policy and practice in a specific institutional setting. Within the group cultural structures that permeate Higher Education, my research supports the assertion that this integrated approach reinforced acceptance, legitimacy and participation for AQA across all groups. This participative approach to AQA used a methodology that avoided any potential for a nuanced, manipulative approach to repress dissent and enforce compliance. The methodology offered a genuinely discursive environment in which to develop shared consensus.

From the literature review of European and Irish AQA in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, it was evident that the changes in QA management taking place in Ireland were often motivated by Europe and often replicated the changes in Europe with a distinctive national flavour. The international drivers established through the European Council meetings in Bologna and Lisbon and considered in earlier chapters, are identifiable as the basis of implementation of the QA management systems detailed in this thesis. As Ireland addressed the recession and financial collapse from 2006 to 2014, with sustainability implications for HE, the wider EHEA context of AQA was a source of stability within the uncertain landscape of the national HE strategy. This thesis builds on the integrative work within this Pan-European project seeking greater consensus and alignment of QA systems, by referencing the European Standards and Guidelines for QA. The research also looked outside of Europe for best practice models that offered opportunities for further integration in Higher Education QA beyond the mammoth task of cross-cultural and cross-country integration of AQA in Europe.

Since the 1990s there has been a shift in demand towards high-skilled and computer literate workers in the majority of industrialised countries, driven by technological change (Machin 2004; Cahuc & Zylberberg 2004). Without much empirical evidence, there was a growing feeling among many commentators, such as the German Council of Economic Experts, that systems of Higher Education run under state control and management were lacking in quality assurance and efficiency (Psacharopoulos 2005; Lowry 2004). Government led HE reform programmes in Europe and beyond proposed increased freedom from bureaucratic interventions and giving
incentives for superior performance and quality (GCEE 1999). These proposals found their way from Europe into the Irish Higher Education landscape in the form of institution defined performance compacts between the HEA and each HE institution. Thus, increased state control in HE was an international phenomenon that Ireland also experienced through performance management and budget controls. The Irish government participated in a rebalancing of institutional freedom in a manner that was broadly supportive of the continuing professionalisation of academia and participation of the collegiate in AQA.

In a HE AQA system there can arise a conflict of objectives between external bodies who view AQA evaluation as the basis of transparency and accountability of academia to the outside world and the objectives of institutes and their staff who continue to see the value of AQA evaluation in open and frank self-evaluation leading to improvement across a range of operations and outputs. According to Hamalainen, Pehu-Voima and Wahlen (2001), “Evaluations do not have a value in themselves and are useless unless process and results lead to improvement of Higher Education institutions.” Perhaps the implication here is that QQI and HE institutions are correct in insisting that AQA systems and reviews be planned and implemented by institute staff in accordance with institution values and objectives, as a means of motivating and generating commitment to the AQA process. Unless the members of an institution collaborate and participate with full ownership and commitment to the AQA systems, such systems risk becoming expensive bureaucratic exercises whose potential to deliver real improvements is questionable.

The quality control and assurance challenges posed by new modes of provision are not discipline or subject based. The central questions for Higher Education quality are also relevant to new modes of educational provision. This is particularly true of course design, integrity of student assessment, competence of academic staff, quality of teaching and the management of course provision. What has changed in AQA is the growing focus on the wider student experience, the international dimension and the need to take account of the views of many stakeholders, including regional authorities, industry, graduates and students. The HE mission has evolved and HE institutions have responded by becoming more permeable institutions that engage externally and serve regions. With the growing number of external stakeholders and demands on HE institutions there is the
potential to lose sight of the importance of the internal stakeholders and the mission to create new knowledge. The collaborative approach to AQA legitimises the internal voices in HE.

Globalisation used to be seen as a threat by European Higher Education institutions, because it represented change and was difficult to control (Barblan 1999). European Higher Education responded by increasing transparency, attempting to maintain diversity and by emphasising high quality rather than competing internationally on price alone (Edwards 1999). So for Ireland and Europe, the management of quality was a key instrument of the EHEA vision for Europe set out in the Bologna Declaration. Yet the concept of quality was sometimes as elusive as it was pervasive. In a Higher Education context, traditionally characterised by diffusion of decision-making and low authority levels at the top, an effective quality assurance system was somewhat different from the standard industry approaches, as confirmed by the staff views on the nature of AQA in Section E of the survey questionnaire, rejecting the relevance of industrial QA models to HE.

This research recognises the subjective perceptions and multi-dimensionality of QA in Irish Higher Education. Higher Education quality as perceived by the academic community related to such outputs as knowledge development and academic excellence as exemplified in research. Wider interests in Higher Education were often defined in terms of accountability to society, value measured in terms of student output, responsibility to the region and value for money. HE institutions, while benefitting from addressing this external social and political perception of quality in Higher Education, have struggled to sustain the academic and collegiate dimensions of quality. From the perspective of education policy, the knowledge perspective and the value perspective on education quality both have a place in a multi-dimensional education system. This education system must address a range of academic and societal needs, from access to education for a wide audience, to offering research opportunities for a smaller group, to extending the frontiers of human knowledge as well as serving external stakeholders and regions. The internal stakeholders are well placed to understand the multi-dimensional complexity within their organisation and collaboratively address QA in that context.
The concept of AQA and the approach to AQA in Higher Education across Europe, including Ireland, has been standardised to a large extent. The ESG is a standard for AQA that gives ownership to the institution and starts from institutional self-evaluation. From institution to institution AQA implementation, monitoring and revision are envisaged as “the institution’s decisions.” In terms of consistency with the philosophy of AQA ownership in the ESG, the integrated approach to AQA proposed by this research implements and further develops that philosophy of ownership within the institution.

The changing nature of HE has developed an AQA agenda in European Higher Education. Internal pressures to Europe, such as the increasing mobility of students in Europe and increasing competition in the Higher Education marketplace, coupled with external pressures such as the globalisation of education and the development of flexible learning modes are creating their own motivation and demand for international standards in quality assurance (Lenn, 1994). AQA in Ireland has benefitted from these international developments in HE:

“Ministers call upon ENQA through its members, in co-operation with the EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Follow-up Group to Ministers in 2005.”

(Berlin Communique, 19 September 2003)

Many developments coming from the HEA and QQI in Ireland echo EHEA policies. Through its QA agencies Europe is developing an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on QA relating to:

1. **Academic Programme Focus**
2. **Location of QA in teaching and learning**
3. **Application of QA in learner assessment**
4. **Application of QA teaching and learning support structures**
5. **Promotion of continuous improvement**
6. **An appropriate and consistent internal QA system**
7. **An external independent perspective**
8. **Total institutional engagement**
9. **Public assessment and intelligibility of the QA system**
10. **Clarity of students’ roles in QA**
A European openness to diversity feeds through to policy in HE, supporting this type of action research that both studies the natural setting in HE and explores interventions, such as the Delphi Method, and their impact. In keeping with other education research, my study sought knowledge discovery as well as evaluation of effect of intervention.

10.6 Limitations of the Research

Marshall and Rossman (1999 p.42) remind us that “no proposed research project is without limitations.” My research was carried out in one institution to test a specific approach to QA and I can only claim the participant sample to be representative of that institution. The same study and methodology could be applied to another Institute of Technology or university to provide comparative evidence. Such a replicated study in a comparable or different Higher Education setting with different people could support my findings or provide some differing results to consider.

There was a particularly strong finding in Section 9.2.2 that raises questions about how individual identity changes as staff role group changes. What may have been considered by one interviewee as group overlap could also be linked to the identity transition process. My observation of variations in identity transition from academic to manager had not been captured in previous studies. Further study of this identity transition is needed where expectations of individual identities in different roles may not be well understood or given enough thought as to the changing nature of role identity.

Having defined a process of integrated AQA there is further scope to implement QA based on this approach within the organisation to better understand any strengths or weaknesses of an integrated approach that supports collegiate culture. Though in-depth interviews with a small group of experts was an appropriate research method for this study, perhaps interviews should be complemented with role-based focus groups in any future study, to gather the role-group feedback on the research findings. I was conscious as a researcher of the dangers of becoming a co-constructor within the one-to-one interview context. The research risk identified by Braun and Clarke (2013) of losing
individual voices when analysing for consensus or patterns across datasets could be further mitigated against by focus group review of findings.

My senior position within the institute as the lead academic was of benefit for access and execution of the research. It may have impacted the study at different levels without my awareness of this. The research attracted a huge amount of goodwill, responsiveness, curiosity and commitment to the learning process. Acknowledging the agency of all staff groups in AQA may have influenced the desire to be involved and to reflect on the purpose of AQA being utilitarian or values-led.

10.7 Implications for Practice and Future Research

Higher Education ownership can be contested between the state, institutions, academia, managers, administrators and external stakeholders. Bodies of literature on academic culture, on managerialism and technical rationalism in education and on government education policy and reform indicates the potential for this power struggle. While cognizant of these differing viewpoints I have attempted to limit the influence of ideological reasoning, to maintain a focus on the approach to achieving the stated objectives of Higher Education quality and quality assurance. Through engagement with four role specific subgroups of staff and with students within Institutes of Technology, different lenses were availed of through which to view quality assurance.

A study of one Institute of Technology is not strictly generalisable to others, particularly as the organisation culture is so important to this research. That said, the Institutes of Technology are a relatively recent development, with all following the same trajectory of development since 1970 and operating standardised national procedures and systems that suggest the significance of this research may apply beyond the institute studied. Importantly, the study puts paid to the laissez-faire view of academic quality in some of the literature by specifying the complexity and range of academic quality based on the strongly held views and experiences of those who operate academic quality systems in Higher Education. This contribution to the body of knowledge makes academic quality more tractable for those working in Higher Education.
The research design supported the exploration of differing managerial, administrative, academic, student support and student views on the nature of QA systems and how they operate in practice in an Institutes of Technology. Two hundred and forty-four (244) of the 500 staff surveyed responded and 22 of the 80 postgraduate student population participated in the research. The breakdown of respondents across all stakeholder groups was 168 academic, 56 administration, 23 student services, 21 management and 22 students. The research comprised a novel process for eliciting the views of the different role group sub-cultures and thus develop an understanding of group identities so as to make recommendations for a more integrated approach to quality assurance in Higher Education. This novel approach to QA was designed to address the identity nexus and tensions between different role groups in Higher Education.

A mixed-methods approach using qualitative and quantitative structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews comprised the methodology toolset of the research, within a Delphi process with its multi-phase approach. An interesting finding in this study was that the Delphi Method was an effective tool for bringing people closer together and for developing shared understanding. The research confirmed that the staff subgroups in HE hold different cultural values, yet appreciate the need for convergence across groups with regard to AQA. The possibilities for developing a culture and climate of responsiveness to a process of AQA was confirmed. Quality can be owned more successfully, more energetically and more impactfully when it is driven by the people within rather than people external to the organisation. While academic quality assurance is complex, it is not intractable.

This research addresses the current discourse around quality assurance in Higher Education in Ireland. It acknowledges distinctive staff group values and tensions impacting on current approaches to QA. The research proposes an integrated approach to QA that addresses these viewpoints. The findings of the research provide an evidence base for the development of an overarching Quality Policy that is integrated, institute-wide and institute specific.
10.8 Conclusions & Recommendations

The thesis of this research was that an integrated approach to quality assurance in Higher Education is valuable and meets the requirements of the European Standards and Guidelines for QA (EURASHE 2015). It was proposed that a collaborative AQA process supports collegiate culture and the adoption of responsibility by all for QA. This integrated approach builds an integrated culture of QA that addresses the identity nexus in Higher Education.

Lipsky’s (1980) theory of ‘street level bureaucracy’ and Gummesson’s (1990) definition of quality as a ‘fussy social consensus’ provided early indications that Higher Education QA is culturally and contextually different to standard approaches to manufacturing QA and non-academic service quality. To fully understand QA in Higher Education requires an appreciation of the importance of context and culture within Higher Education. For example, I undertook a study visit to Algonquin University in Canada in 2016 where the Lean quality method was adopted by the organisation management. This university was experiencing QA difficulties with its overseas operations at that time and Lean was not proving effective to address the academic quality issues. There have been widely publicised cases in the UK (University of Wales 2012; Glyndwr University 2014; University of Buckingham 2015) of managerialist QA processes that failed to deliver academic QA.

The approach to AQA in HE needs to be tolerant of conflict and diversity within the process. A consultative, integrative approach using the Delphi Method provided an understanding of different groups’ perspectives, articulated the basis of cynicism within the system and engaged staff in the AQA process. The approach eliminates any tendency to suppress dissent by engaging that diversity and dissent constructively towards understandings of quality that can have a greater institutional impact. An approach that is committed to integration of diversity addresses the discomfort with diversity that can arise between the different staff groups.

When dealing in organisational cultural matters there is a value for management in adopting an arms-length principle as a starting point for development, to balance the centralisation tendencies in management. Particularly within public services such as Higher Education, where continuity and sustainability are a pre-requisite, it is imperative to take a long-term view and not to float on
the changing tide of management trends, such as outsourcing, managerialism, privatisation or centralisation (Zan et al. 2007).

Higher Education institutions in Ireland are required by QQI to have an overarching Quality Policy in place that sets down the vision of the institution for AQA. These quality policies are often written in a vague language and at a level of abstraction that makes it difficult to relate the Quality Policy to the AQA system in operation. For example, when a Higher Education institution refers to its staff as its greatest asset and then does not include its staff in its quality system, there is a disconnect between the quality rhetoric and QA.

The findings of this research convey a depth of information on the quality culture of the organisation and AQA. These findings provide the information that could give life to an institute’s overarching Quality Policy. Coming as these findings do from the staff of the institution, a Quality Policy developed around these findings would reflect the distinctiveness of an organisation’s context and culture of AQA. The findings of this research are currently being applied to a review of the Quality Policy and QA system of the case study institution. The research provides an institute-wide basis for redefining AQA policies and procedures that represent the integrated views of the different staff grouping responsible for ensuring and implementing AQA.

The methodology used to conduct this research proved most effective in dissipating the differences and sub-culture tensions that can hinder the development of institute-wide AQA. By feeding into the AQA development process independently and at arms-length from their role group and taking account of the other sub-cultures, respondents were better able to put forward their views, take cognisance of the views of others and reflecting on their own views accordingly. Thus, the process proposed by the research for exploring AQA supported the development of an integrated approach and the building of a consensus.

In addressing the research questions set out in Section 1.2 this research postulates a need for an integrated approach to QA in Higher Education encompassing the requirement for managerial accountability and academic quality measurements. The strength of existing Higher Education systems in measuring managerial outputs is acknowledged. The argument presented is that Higher Education QA systems must include measurements of academic quality as well as managerial
measurements of performance to provide an integrated approach to QA that is fit for purpose in the context of Higher Education.

Further case study research is needed with this approach to widen the evidence base across other institutes of technology so that the findings are generalisable across the sector. The development of this integrated approach into a cross-institutional sectoral model would be of particular value for national Higher Education agencies, such as QQI in Ireland or the QAA in the UK. There is potential also to carry out case studies in a university sector to understand to what extent the research findings here are valid across the sector divide in Higher Education. It would be particularly valuable to know how the integrated approach proposed functions in different institutional and AQA contexts. There may be additional value in the approach beyond the development of AQA, both in terms of improving student and staff communications and engagement within an institution’s policy development processes in general.

As the expectations of varying external stakeholders widen and increase, Higher Education institutions endeavor to balance the requirements of internal and external control and to maintain academic freedom and institutional autonomy. In this endeavor, Higher Education institutions require internal unity of purpose among their staff. Internal divisions between academics, management, administrative and student support staff sub-cultures leave Higher Education institutions porous to external influences. This research postulates an evidence-based internal culture that supports the manifestation of a new QA process to strengthen organisational culture, academic culture and AQA systems.

It addresses the need to build an integrated approach to AQA that encompasses the different viewpoints identified in Section 1.2 in a manner that meets the overarching requirement for evidence of impact on Higher Education QA.

The conclusions and outputs of the research include a recommendation on an integrated process and collaborative approach to AQA in Higher Education.
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348


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**Appendix A – Academic Quality Assurance Survey**

**Survey of Views on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in LIT**

**Section A - What is Academic Quality Assurance**

* A1. My role in my organisation is:
   (Tick all responses you consider appropriate - more than one if appropriate)
   
   - [ ] Academic
   - [ ] Administration
   - [ ] Student Services
   - [ ] Management
   - [ ] Other (please specify)

* A2. Primary responsibility for academic quality assurance in a higher education institution rests with:
   (Tick the response you consider most appropriate)
   
   - [ ] Academic Staff
   - [ ] Administration Staff
   - [ ] Student Services
   - [ ] Management
   - [ ] External Quality Body
   - [ ] Other (please specify)

* A3. Academic Quality is:
   (Tick the response you consider most appropriate)
   
   - [ ] the primary measurement of a higher education institution
   - [ ] an important secondary measure of a higher education institution
   - [ ] just one of many measures of a higher education institution
   - [ ] not an important measure of a higher education institution
   - [ ] Other (please specify)
A4. The academic quality assurance system is based on:
(Tick all responses you consider appropriate - more than one if appropriate)

- [ ] A fuzzy social consensus
- [ ] A collegiate system of excellence
- [ ] Operational Policies & Procedures
- [ ] A system of Public Accountability
- [ ] Control by External body
- [ ] A system of measurements
- [ ] Best practice benchmarks
- [ ] Top-down interests of Management

Other (please specify)

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A5. The academic quality assurance system has helped to improve academic quality:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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<th>1: Strongly Agree</th>
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A6. The academic quality assurance system has helped to improve the student experience:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with this statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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Survey of Views on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in LIT
Section B - What are the best processes of Academic Quality Assurance

B1. The best processes of academic quality assurance in higher education are:
(Tick all responses you consider appropriate - more than one if appropriate)

☐ Policies & Procedures
☐ Standard Operating Practices
☐ Quality Audits
☐ Benchmarking
☐ Local Decision Making & Responsibility
☐ Local Work Practices
☐ Business Unit Structure
☐ Customer Service Culture
☐ Formal Quality Methods (Lean/Sigma)
☐ External Standards and Policies
☐ Collegiate Professional Judgement
☐ Follow-up on recommendations of review

Other (please specify)

B2. Critical self-reflection on their teaching by academic staff is important for academic quality assurance:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with this statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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B3. Management monitoring of quantitative outputs is important for academic quality assurance:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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B4. External Examiner monitoring of assessment is important for academic quality assurance:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree)

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B5. Student feedback on their programme is important for academic quality assurance:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree)

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B6. Student feedback on assessment is important for academic quality assurance:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree)

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B7. Industry feedback on academic programmes is important for academic quality assurance:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree)

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B8. Academic Council monitoring of academic programmes is important for academic quality assurance:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree)

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B9. Academic Council monitoring of assessment is important for academic quality assurance:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree)

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B10. Management commitment is a key element in establishing a viable quality assurance culture:

(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)

(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree)

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Survey of Views on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in LIT

Section C - Assessment of the Academic Quality Assurance System

C1. What are the three main strengths of the academic quality assurance in operation in higher education in Institutes of Technology:

1
2
3

C2. What are the three main weaknesses of the academic quality assurance in operation in Institutes of Technology.

1
2
3

C3. Is there potential for improvement in academic quality assurance?
(Please explain in detail)


C4. The primary result of academic quality assurance on quality is:
(Tick the response you consider most appropriate)

- improvement in academic quality
- improvement in the academic quality system
- improvement in the student experience
- improvement in management monitoring
- increase in management monitoring

Other (please specify)


C5. The primary result of academic quality assurance on staff is to:
(Tick the response you consider most appropriate)

- [] improve academic staff performance
- [] disimproved academic staff performance
- [] increase academic staff commitment
- [] decrease academic staff commitment

Other (please specify)
D1. Higher Education is primarily:
(Tick the response you consider most appropriate)

- [ ] a business
- [ ] a public service
- [ ] the pursuit of knowledge
- [ ] training for employment
- [ ] Other (please specify)

D2. Academic Quality is best achieved within institutions with a:
(Tick the response you consider most appropriate)

- [ ] hierarchical management structure
- [ ] flat management structure
- [ ] Other (please specify)

D3. Academic Quality is best achieved within institutions with a:
(Tick the response you consider most appropriate)

- [ ] managerial focus
- [ ] collegiate focus
- [ ] Other (please specify)

D4. Academic Quality is best managed through the use of:
(Tick the response you consider most appropriate)

- [ ] academic performance measurements
- [ ] management performance measurements
- [ ] a mix of management and academic measurements
- [ ] student results performance measurement
- [ ] Other (please specify)
D5. Academic Quality Assurance is primarily driven by:
(Tick the response you consider most appropriate)

☐ management commitment
☐ management pre-occupations
☐ activities of frontline staff
☐ external scrutiny and accountability
☐ staff ownership of academic quality
☐ tokenism and form filling

Other (please specify)
Survey of Views on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in LIT

Section E - Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in your Institution

E1. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Quality Enhancement: (Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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E2. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is Quality Monitoring: (Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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E3. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Assessment of Quality: (Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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E4. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Impression Management: (Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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E5. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Quality as Improvement: (Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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E6. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Quality as Discipline and Technology:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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E7. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Meeting Staff Expectations of a quality work environment:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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E8. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Breaking Staff Expectations of Management's Responsibilities:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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E9. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Adopting External Quality Policies:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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E10. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Adapting External Quality Policies:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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E11. The focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Form rather than Substance:
(Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement)
(1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

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Appendix B – Academic Quality Assurance Survey (Follow-Up)

Quality Assurance in Higher Education Earlier Survey Follow-Up Questions

Section A - What is Academic Quality Assurance (AQA)

A1A. How would you describe your primary role in your organisation?
- Academic
- Administration
- Student Services
- Management

A1B. How would you rate your understanding of Academic Quality Assurance in Higher Education?
- Expert
- Experienced
- Some understanding
- No understanding

A1C. Do you think your views on AQA have been influenced more by your work role staff group identity or by your personal views?
- Work role staff group identity
- Personal views

A1D. Do you think your views on AQA are consistent with others in that role in the Organisation?
- Yes
- No
A2A.

- 71% of staff said primary responsibility for academic quality assurance in a higher education institution rests with Academic Staff.

- 42% of staff attributed primary responsibility to Management.

- 11% of all staff referenced External Body primary responsibility for AQA.

- 6% referenced Administration staff primary responsibility for AQA.

- Some staff chose more than one option.

Choose the one group that you attribute with primary responsibility for academic quality assurance (AQA) in higher education:

- [ ] Academic Staff
- [ ] Management
- [ ] External Body
- [ ] Administration Staff

A2B. Is the above difference in staff views of responsibility for AQA due to:

- [ ] Overall Organisation Culture
- [ ] Staff Grouping Identities

A2C.

23% of Academic Staff referenced Management or External Body responsibility for AQA.

Does this referencing of Management responsibility for AQA by Academic staff indicate a weakness or strength in collegiate academic culture in the organization?

- [ ] Indicates a weakness in collegiate academic culture.
- [ ] Indicates a strength in collegiate academic culture.

A2D.

80% of Management believe that primary responsibility for academic quality rests with Academic Staff.

Does this referencing of Academic staff responsibility for AQA by Management staff indicate a weakness or strength in collegiate academic culture in the organization?

- [ ] Indicates a weakness in collegiate academic culture.
- [ ] Indicates a strength in collegiate academic culture.
A2E.

80% of Management believe that primary responsibility for academic quality rests with Academic Staff.

Does this referencing of Academic staff responsibility for AQA by Management staff indicate a weakness or strength in management culture in the organization?

☐ Indicates a weakness in management culture.
☐ Indicates a strength in management culture.

A3A.

• 70% of Management view Academic Quality as the primary measurement of a higher education institution.

• 30% of Management see Academic Quality as just one of many measures of a higher education institution.

What's your view?

☐ 1. Academic Quality is the primary measurement of a higher education institution.
☐ 2. Academic Quality is just one of many measurements of a higher education institution.

A3B.

The Management and Student Services Staff placed a stronger emphasis on the importance of Academic Quality than did either the Academic Staff and the Administration staff.

Is this a positive finding or a negative finding?

☐ This is a positive finding.
☐ This is a negative finding.

A4A.

Staff supported three different definitions of the academic quality assurance system in operation.

Which definition do you think is most accurate?

☐ 65% of all staff supported the definition of AQA as "Operational Policies and Procedures".
☐ 53% of all staff supported the definition of AQA as "A collegiate system of excellence".
☐ 15% of all staff supported the definition of AQA as "The top down interests of Management".
A4B.

67% of Management supported the view that the academic quality assurance system was based on “A collegiate system of excellence”.

Does this surprise you?

☐ Yes
☐ No

A4C.

71% of Management supported the view that the academic quality assurance system was based on “operational policies and procedures”.

Does this surprise you?

☐ Yes
☐ No

A5A.

63% of all staff agreed that the academic quality assurance system has helped to improve academic quality.

Do you agree?

☐ Yes
☐ No

A5B.

25% of staff across all staff groups “neither agreed nor disagree” that the academic quality assurance system has helped to improve academic quality.

In your view has the AQA system:

☐ Helped to improve academic quality.
☐ Not helped to improve academic quality.
A6A.

37% of academic staff “neither agreed nor disagreed” that the academic quality assurance system has helped to improve the student experience.

In your view has the AQA system:

- [ ] Helped to improve the student experience.
- [ ] Not helped to improve the student experience.

Quality Assurance in Higher Education Earlier Survey Follow-Up Questions

Section B - What are the Best Processes of Academic Quality Assurance

B1A.

70% of all staff identify “Policies and Procedures” as the best process of academic quality assurance in higher education.

Is that an endorsement of the current system?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

B1B.

The majority of Academic staff alone are supportive of “collegiate professional judgment” (54%) as the best process of academic quality assurance in higher education.

In your view, is “collegiate professional judgment” the best process of academic quality assurance in higher education?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

B1C.

Student Services staff support different views on the best process of academic quality assurance in higher education. They are supportive of “customer service culture”, “external policies and standards” and “follow-up on recommendations of review” as the better processes of academic quality assurance than “collegiate professional judgement”.

Do you agree?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
B2A.

95% of Academic Staff agree that Critical self-reflection on their teaching by academic staff is important for academic quality assurance.

Do you agree?

☐ Yes

☐ No

B3A.

49% of Academic Staff agree that Management monitoring of quantitative outputs is important for academic quality assurance.

Do you agree?

☐ Yes

☐ No

B4A.

94% of Academic Staff and 94% of all Staff agree that External Examiner monitoring of assessment is important for academic quality assurance.

Do you agree?

☐ Yes

☐ No

B5A.

90% of Academic Staff and 93% of all Staff agree that Student feedback on their programme is important for academic quality assurance.

Do you agree?

☐ Yes

☐ No
B6A.

84% of All Staff agree and 6.2% of All Staff disagree that Student feedback on assessment is important for academic quality assurance.

In your view:

- Student Feedback on assessment is important for AQA.
- Student Feedback on assessment is not important for AQA.

B7A.

Management are less supportive than other staff groups (academics, administration, student support) for the statement that Industry feedback on academic programmes is important for academic quality assurance?

Is your view:

- Industry feedback on academic programmes is important for AQA.
- Industry feedback on academic programmes is not important for AQA.

B8A.

The higher the level of representation of a staff group on Academic Council the lower the level of support from that staff group for Academic Council monitoring of academic programmes.

Is this because of:

- 1. A better understanding among Academic Council members of the function of Academic Council.

B8B.

Only 73.5% of Academic Staff agree that Academic Council monitoring of academic programmes is important for academic quality assurance.

Is this because:

- 1. Academic Staff do not see academic council monitoring of programmes as meeting the requirements of academic quality assurance?
- 2. There is an insecurity among Academic Staff with regard to the monitoring of academic programmes?
- 3. There is a protectiveness among Academic Staff with regard to the monitoring of academic programmes?
- 4. Another reason

(please specify)
B8C.

One might have expected that the two staff groups represented on Academic Council, academics and management, would be the most supportive of academic council monitoring of academic programmes.

Do you agree?

○ Yes
○ No

B9A.

Academic Staff are the least supportive of the view that Academic Council monitoring of assessment is important for academic quality assurance.

Do you think Academic Council monitoring of assessment is important for AQA?

○ Yes
○ No

B10A.

There is 91% agreement that Management commitment is a key element in establishing a viable quality assurance culture.

Do you think this is due to a:

○ 1. High level of agreement within the organisation on the importance of management commitment in establishing a viable quality assurance culture.
○ 2. Top-down management culture of quality assurance within the organisation.
○ 3. Referral of responsibility to management for the academic quality culture.
○ 4. Another Reason

(please specify)
C1A. The main strengths of the academic quality assurance in operation in higher education in Institutes of Technology were identified in the following order:

1. Academic Staff: quality, commitment, motivation, professionalism, integrity and self-reflective were returned as attributes of the Academic Staff. This response also reflects on staff in general, but academic staff is repeatedly mentioned specifically.

2. Quality Standards in operation were also considered as a particular strength, with repeated positive references to policies, procedures and documentation.

3. External Examiners and External Reviews were noted as a strength of the AQA system.

4. Student feedback and student involvement in the AQA system were considered important.

Do you agree that these are four main strengths of academic quality assurance system in operation in Institutes of Technology?

☐ Yes
☐ No

C1B.

Academic staff in Institutes of Technology see themselves primarily as teachers or lecturers rather than as researchers.

Do you agree?

☐ Yes
☐ No

C1C.

Academic staff see their primary relationships being with academic colleagues and their students.

Do you agree?

☐ Yes
☐ No
C2A. The main weaknesses of the academic quality assurance in operation in higher education in Institutes of Technology were identified in the following order:

1. Academic Staff: disinterested; resistant to change; underperforming; too busy to be reflective; not monitored and not supported to do research, are some of the comments that support the view that academic staff represent weakness in the AQA system.

2. Students: the student experience; student unwillingness; lack of awareness among students; plagiarism and unequal treatment of students, are given as examples of where students represent a weakness in the AQA system.

3. Quality System: AQA system is too removed from teaching; emphasis on efficiency conflicting with a quality focus; lack of communication and training for staff, are presented as the reason why the focus on quality itself is weak within the AQA system.

4. Management: overbearing management structure; managerialism; micro management; management lack of commitment and self-obsession; disregard for lecturers; short-term focus; loose management practices; management by pass rates; ineffective departmental management; focus on “doing things right over doing the right thing”, are all stated as contributing to a management weakness in the AQA system.

5. Teaching: teaching quality not the highest priority; disconnect of AQA with teaching practice; no assessment and little internal oversight of teaching quality; a focus on quantity versus quality are identified by survey participants as the reasons why teaching is a weakness in the AQA system.

Do you agree that these are five main weaknesses of academic quality assurance systems in operation in Institutes of Technology?

☐ Yes

☐ No

C2B.

Academic Staff are seen both the primary strength and the primary weakness of academic quality assurance.

Is this because the quality of teaching varies widely?

☐ Yes

☐ No
C2C. Administration staff identified a number of specific weaknesses of the academic quality assurance as follows:

1. No procedure in place if a lecturer consistently does not meet required standards.

2. Academic quality assurance appears to be a complicated process.

3. Difficulty getting people on board.

4. Staff under pressure to deliver leaving too little time for reflection.

5. Communication between academic staff and administration not always as it should or could be.

Do you agree that these are weaknesses experienced by Administration Staff in carrying out their role?

- Yes
- No

C2D. Management staff identified a number of specific weaknesses of the academic quality assurance as follows:

1. Management involvement.

2. Staff distance from quality assurance processes.

3. Lack of evaluation of teaching.

4. Excessive reliance on bureaucratic approach.

5. Too much emphasis on process not content.

Do you agree that these are weaknesses experienced by Management Staff in carrying out their role?

- Yes
- No
C2E. Student Services staff identified a number of specific weaknesses of the academic quality assurance as follows:

1. Lack of student participation in quality enhancement.

2. Lack of implemented accountability.

3. Lack of input by student support staff.

4. Lack of awareness of QA.

Do you agree that these are weaknesses experienced by student services in carrying out their role?

☐ Yes
☐ No

C3A. When asked about the potential for improvement in academic quality assurance the different staff groups placed their emphasis differently (Questions C3A to C3E look closely at the differing emphases.):

• Academic staff were more self-reflective and reflective on the organization and drew attention to the resourcing needs to improve academic quality.

Do you agree with focus on resourcing of academic quality improvement?

☐ Yes
☐ No

C3B.

• Administration staff focused on “speedier reaction times to changes in outside influences” and emphasis on external benchmarks.

Do you agree with focus on external factors for academic quality improvement?

☐ Yes
☐ No

X
C3C.

- Management Staff views align closely with Academic Staff views. Management Staff are stronger in their call for more student evaluation and feedback.

Do you agree with a focus on more student evaluation and feedback for academic quality improvement?

- Yes
- No

C3D.

Management feedback also calls for staff to be acknowledged for contributing to quality improvement or enhancement.

Do you agree with a focus on acknowledging contribution for academic quality improvement?

- Yes
- No

C3E.

Student Support staff suggested a need for stronger links with employers.

Do you agree with a focus on links with employers for academic quality improvement?

- Yes
- No

C4A. 60% of academic staff were of the view that the primary result of Academic Quality Assurance is to Improve Academic Quality.

Do you agree?

- Yes
- No

C4B. Administration staff are divided evenly on whether the primary result of AQA is to Improve Academic Quality (50%) or Improve Student Experience (50%).

Do you think the primary result of AQA is:

- 1. To Improve Academic Quality
- 2. To Improve Student Experience
C4C. The Management staff group were the least convinced that AQA results in Improved Academic Quality. The majority of Management are of the view that the primary result of AQA is to Improve Student Experience.

Do you agree?
- Yes
- No

C4D. Student Support staff differed from other staff groups in their view that the primary result of AQA is improvement in the Academic Quality System itself.

Do you agree?
- Yes
- No

C5A. All staff groups agree that the primary result of academic quality assurance on staff is to Improve Academic Staff Performance.

Do you agree?
- Yes
- No

C5B. Management staff are the least positive about the effect of AQA on staff, with 14% expressing the view that the primary result of AQA on staff is to Dis-improve Academic Staff Performance and 14% expressing the view that the primary result is to Decrease Academic Staff Commitment.

Do you agree with this management view?
- Yes
- No

C5C. A Management staff member expressed the view that the primary result of academic quality assurance on staff is “a leading cause of a loss of motivation from staff members”.

Do you agree with this view?
- Yes
- No
C5D. An Administration staff member expressed the view that the primary result of academic quality assurance on staff is, “It makes staff question whether management trust that staff carry out their job with personal commitment and integrity”.

Do you agree with that view?

☐ Yes
☐ No

C5E. An Academic staff member expressed the view that the primary result of academic quality assurance on staff is, “Outsourcing QA away from course boards and individual lecturers”.

Do you agree with that view?

☐ Yes
☐ No

C5F. An Academic staff member expressed the view that the primary result of academic quality assurance on staff is, “Managerialism – manuals and tick boxing culture have redirected energy away from the classroom”.

Do you agree with that view?

☐ Yes
☐ No
Quality Assurance in Higher Education Earlier Survey Follow-Up Questions

Section D – Academic Quality Assurance Management

D1A.

• 49% of Academic staff view Higher Education as primarily the Pursuit of Knowledge and 40% view it as a Public Service.

• 37% of Administration staff view Higher Education as primarily the Pursuit of Knowledge and 53% view it as Public Service.

• 69% of Student Support staff view Higher Education as primarily the Pursuit of Knowledge and 46% view it as a Public Service (some overlap here).

• 62% of Management Staff view Higher Education as primarily the Pursuit of Knowledge and 31% view it as a Public Service.

In your view is Higher Education primarily:

☐ 1. The Pursuit of Knowledge
☐ 2. A Public Service

D1B. More than any other staff group Administration staff (23%) view Higher Education as primarily a Business.

Do you agree?

☐ Yes
☐ No

D1C.

• 62% of Management staff view Higher Education as primarily the Pursuit of Knowledge.

• Management return the lowest response of all groups to Higher Education as primarily Training for Employment (25%), compared to 54% from Student Support staff, 40% from Administration staff and 31% from Academic staff.

In your view is Higher Education primarily:

☐ 1. The Pursuit of Knowledge
☐ 2. Training for Employment
D1D. There appears to be a difference between the Management and Academic Staff views on the primary purpose of Higher Education on the one hand and Student Support and Administration staff views on the other.

70% of Management Staff and 70% of Academic Staff chose a single definition of Higher Education from the four definitions provided. Only 16% of Student Support Staff and 47% of Administration Staff chose a single definition of Higher Education.

Is this due to a difference in understanding/perception of Higher Education between staff groups?

- Yes
- No

D2A.

- 68% of Academic staff believe that Academic Quality is best achieved within institutions with a flat management structure.

- The majority of Administration, Management and Student Services staff take the contrary view that a hierarchical management structure is best to achieve Academic Quality.

In your view is Academic Quality best achieved with:

- 1. A flat management structure
- 2. A hierarchical management structure

D2B. An Academic staff member commented that the “Greatest asset is the diversity of staff and their professional knowledge. Failure to tap into this is a consequence of a hierarchical management structure”.

Do you agree?

- Yes
- No

D2C. An Academic Staff member commented that “Academic Quality is best achieved where the academic standards are legitimate and All Staff within the institution buy into the virtues of the system.”

Do you agree?

- Yes
- No
D3A.

• Over 90% of Academic staff believe Academic Quality is best achieved within institutions with a Collegiate Focus.

• Only Administration staff differs significantly from this view, with 32% of Administration staff favoring a Managerial Focus over a Collegiate Focus.

In your view is Academic Quality best achieved within institutions with:

☐ 1. A Collegiate Focus
☐ 2. A Managerial Focus

D4A. All staff groups (71% average) agree that Academic Quality is best managed through the use of a mix of management and academic measurements.

Do you agree?

☐ Yes
☐ No

D4B. Academic Staff and Management Staff are 24%-25% supportive of Academic Quality being best managed through Students Results Performance Measurement, while Administration Staff and Student Support Staff are 32%-46% supportive.

Do you think Academic Quality is best managed through Performance Measurement based on Student Results?

☐ Yes
☐ No

D5A. Two thirds of all staff groups agree that Academic Quality is primarily driven by Staff Ownership of Academic Quality.

Do you agree?

☐ Yes
☐ No

D5B. Academic Staff and Management Staff place less emphasis on Management Commitment as a driver of Academic Quality (20%-31%) than Administration Staff and Student Support Staff (43%-46%).

Do you agree that Management Commitment is a driver of Academic Quality?

☐ Yes
☐ No
D5C. Academic Staff and Management Staff place less emphasis on Activities of Frontline Staff as a primary driver of Academic Quality (25%) than Administration Staff and Student Support Staff (36%-38%).

Do you think the Activities of Frontline Staff are a primary driver of Academic Quality?

☐ Yes
☐ No

D5D. Academic Staff and Administration Staff place less emphasis on External Scrutiny and Accountability as a driver of Academic Quality (25%) than Student Support Staff and Management Staff (38%-44%).

Do you think the External Scrutiny and Accountability are a primary driver of Academic Quality?

☐ Yes
☐ No
Section E – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in your Institution

E1A. 40% of Academic Staff agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in their institution is on Quality Enhancement. This is a lower level of agreement than Student Support Staff (83%), Management (73%) or Administration Staff (50%).

Do you agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in your institution is on Quality Enhancement?

☐ Yes
☐ No

E2A. 24% of Administration Staff agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Quality Monitoring. This is a lower level of agreement than Student Support Staff (54%), Management (53%) or Academic Staff (40%).

Do you agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in your institution is on Quality Monitoring?

☐ Yes
☐ No

E3A. 30% of Academic Staff agreed that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Assessment of Quality. 25% of Academic Staff disagreed and 45% “Neither agreed nor disagreed”.

Do you agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in your institution is on Assessment of Quality?

☐ Yes
☐ No

E4A. The three questions above describe the focus of academic quality assurance as Quality Enhancement, Quality Monitoring or Assessment of Quality. The Academic Staff group is most torn between agreement and disagreement in response to each question. This might reflect a view that the focus of AQA is a combination of all three.

Do you agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in your institution is a combination of Quality Enhancement, Quality Monitoring and Assessment of Quality?

☐ Yes
☐ No
E4B. 40% of Academic Staff and 13% of Management Staff agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Impression Management. 16% of Academic Staff and 47% of Management Staff disagree with the statement.

Do you agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in your institution is on Impression Management?

○ Yes
○ No

E5A. As a consistency check within a previous questionnaire, two questions (E1 and E5) asked if the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Quality as Enhancement in Question E1 and on Quality as Improvement in Question E5.

This is essentially the same question. The level of agreement among Administration staff increased from 50% for Quality as Enhancement to 58% for Quality as Improvement. (The additional 8% agreement in Question E5 came equally from people who changed from a neutral response and who changed from a disagree response to the original Question E1).

Do you view this change from 50% to 58% agreement as demonstrating consistency or inconsistency in Administration staff views?

○ 1. Consistency
○ 2. Inconsistency

E5B. The consistency check questions produced a shift in the level of agreement among the Management Staff from 73% agreement down to 46% agreement, with a corresponding shift to the percentage choosing neutral option and no change to the level the disagreement option. This demonstrates a 27% shift in Management views from “I don’t know” to “I agree” on what was essentially the same question.

In your view, is this change due to:

○ 1. Closer consideration of the answer to the repeat of the question.
○ 2. Fatigue towards the end of the survey.
○ 3. Placing more meaning on “Improvement” over “Enhancement”.
○ 4. Another reason

(Please specify)

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E6A. Management staff disagree (40%) that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Quality as Discipline and Technology. This would indicate a view among Management that industrial models of QA are not the focus in higher education.

Do you agree that industrial models of QA are not the focus in higher education?

☐ Yes
☐ No

E7A. 42% of Academic Staff disagree with the representation of the focus of academic quality assurance in their institution as Meeting Staff Expectations of a quality work environment.

Do you think the focus of academic quality assurance in your institution is on Meeting Staff Expectations of a quality work environment?

☐ Yes
☐ No

E8A. 10% of Academic Staff, 8% of Administration Staff, 7% of Management Staff and 0% of Student Support staff responded that the focus of academic quality assurance in their institution is on Breaking Staff Expectations of Management's Responsibilities.

Do you agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in your institution is on Breaking Staff Expectations of Management's Responsibilities?

☐ Yes
☐ No

E9A.

• The perception of 41% of Academic Staff is that the focus of academic quality assurance is on Adopting External Quality Policies, with 35% perceiving the focus to be on Adapting External Quality Policies.

• The perception of 28% of Management Staff is that the focus of academic quality assurance is on Adopting External Quality Policies, with 50% perceiving the focus to be on Adapting External Quality Policies.

Do you think the focus of academic quality assurance is on:

☐ 1. Adopting External Quality Policies
☐ 2. Adapting External Quality Policies
E11A.

• 50% of Academic Staff perceive the focus of academic quality assurance is on Form rather than Substance.

• 53% of Management Staff perceive the focus of academic quality assurance is on Substance rather than Form.

Is the focus of academic quality assurance on having a system of accountability (Form) or a system of improving the quality of operations (Substance)?

○ 1. System of Accountability (Form)
○ 2. System of Improving the Quality of Operations (Substance)

E11B. Not withstanding the issues identified in this research do you believe Staff have a generally positive view of academic quality assurance?

○ Yes
○ No
Section F – Conclusions

F1A. From the findings above can we conclude that there are different staff groupings within LIT with different group perceptions of Academic Quality Assurance?

☐ Yes
☐ No

F1B. Is it reasonable from the evidence above to conclude that differences in views and perceptions are role related?

☐ Yes
☐ No

F1C. From the data above is it reasonable to conclude that the culture of the organization is in fact composed of subcultures that are role related?

☐ Yes
☐ No

F1D. In light of the findings above, have you any views on how the organization should respond?


Quality Assurance in Higher Education Earlier Survey Follow-Up Questions

Thank you for completing this interview questionnaire and for sharing your views. Much appreciated.
Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Interview Questions

Perceptions of Academic Quality Assurance Systems in Institutes of Technology

All information provided will be kept CONFIDENTIAL and used only for research: no respondent will be identified.

Interview Code
Views on Academic Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Aim of this Interview

The primary aim of this interview is to further explore the staff views of Academic Quality in Higher Education proffered in the earlier surveys, to gain a better understanding of those views.

There was a high level of consensus among the different staff groups in the earlier surveys. In these interviews we further explore this consensus and the integrative approach across all staff groups to quality assurance.

A better understanding of institute and staff views on quality assurance may help to inform the development of integrated approaches to quality assurance that is more attuned to contextual, cultural, organisational and sectoral QA requirements.

The information gathered will be collated and analysed by Terry Twomey as part of a doctoral research project.
Section A – What is Academic Quality Assurance

A1A. This review of Quality Assurance in the Institute surveyed academics, management, administration and student services staff. Those who responded were:

1. Academic 72%
2. Administration 11%
3. Student Services 9%
4. Management 8%

Do you think this collaborative approach to QA is valuable and valid?

A1B. The research identified these groups as identifiable staff groups with different group cultures within the organisation. Would you agree?

A2A. 78% of all staff said primary responsibility for academic quality assurance in a Higher Education institution rests with Academic Staff, 19% of all staff attributing primary responsibility to Management,

What is your view on this response?

A2B. Two-thirds of all staff saw differences in views about responsibility for AQA as related to the Organisational culture and one-third saw differences in views about responsibility for AQA as related to the Staff Group Identities.

Would you agree with this explanation for differences in views on responsibility for AQA?

A2C. 72% of all staff expressed the view that referencing Management or External Body responsibility for AQA indicated a weakness in collegiate academic culture in the organisation.

What do you think?

A3A. Management and Administration Staff hold Academic Quality as the primary measurement of a Higher Education institution. Academic Staff and Student Support Staff place less emphasis on Academic Quality as a primary measurement.

What’s your view on this finding?

A4A. 57% of Staff viewed the Academic Quality Assurance system as “A collegiate system of excellence.” 38% of Staff viewed the AQA system as “Operational policies & procedures.”
What do you think of this finding?

**A5A.** 78% of Staff agreed that the Academic Quality Assurance system has helped to improve academic quality.

Do you agree with this finding?

**A5B.** Should it be a matter of concern that 28% of Academic Staff disagree that the Academic Quality Assurance system has helped to improve academic quality?

**A6A.** 66% of all staff agree that the Academic Quality Assurance system has helped to improve the student experience.

Do you agree?

**A6B.** Staff in the organisation across all staff groups show a high level of consensus of what Academic Quality Assurance is about.

How do we explain the perception that these differing Staff groups hold differing views, leading at times to strong tensions between groups?

**A6C.** Would the collaborative approach to AQA proposed here help to reduce these perceptions of difference and tensions between staff groups?
Section B – What are the Best Processes of Academic Quality Assurance

B1A. 72% of all staff identify “Policies and Procedures” as the best process of academic quality assurance in Higher Education.

Do you agree?

B1B. 58% of Academic Staff and 67% of Management are supportive of “collegiate professional judgement” as the best process of Academic Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

What do you think?

B2A. 97% of all staff agree that Critical self-reflection on their teaching by Academic Staff is important for Academic Quality Assurance.

What's your view on this finding?

B3A. 70% of all staff, including 61% of Academic Staff, agree that Management monitoring of quantitative outputs is important for Academic Quality Assurance.

Do you agree with this finding?

B4A. There was 100% agreement among all staff that External Examiner monitoring of assessment is important for Academic Quality Assurance.

Would you have expected this universal agreement from all staff groups?

B5A. 97% of all staff agree that Student feedback on their programme is important for Academic Quality Assurance.

Would you have expected this high level of agreement from all staff groups?

B6A. 94% of all staff agree that Student feedback on assessment is important for Academic Quality Assurance.

Would you have expected this high level of agreement from all staff groups?
B7A. When informed that Management are less supportive than the other Staff groups of the statement that “Industry feedback on academic programmes is important for Academic Quality Assurance”, overall staff agreement dropped from 91% to 86%. However, the Administration Staff group view went in the opposite direction from 95% to 100% agreement.

Why do you think this happened?

Is it possible that views are being socially constructed in the context of other views?

B8A. The higher the level of representation of a staff group on Academic Council the lower the level of support from that staff group for Academic Council monitoring of academic programmes and assessment. 72% of all staff explained this finding as “A better understanding among Academic Council members of the function of Academic Council.”

Do you agree?

B9A. One might conclude that the membership of Academic Council (Academic and Management groups) are themselves conflicted in their support of Academic Council authority to monitor academic programmes and assessment.

Do you think this is the case? If so, why?

B10A. There is 91% agreement by all staff that Management Commitment is a key element in establishing a viable Quality Assurance culture.

Would you have expected this high level of agreement from all staff groups?
Section C – Assessment of the Academic Quality Assurance System

C1A. 94% of all staff agreed that the main strengths of the Academic Quality Assurance in operation in Higher Education in Institutes of Technology in the following order are:

1. **Academic Staff**: quality, commitment, motivation, professionalism, Integrity and self-reflective were returned as attributes of the Academic Staff. This response also reflects on staff in general, but academic staff is repeatedly mentioned specifically.

2. **Quality Standards** in operation were also considered as a particular strength, with repeated positive references to policies, procedures and documentation.

3. **External Examiners and External Reviews** were noted as a strength of the AQA system.

4. **Student feedback** and student involvement in the AQA system were considered important.

   Why do you think the survey returned these as the main strengths of the Academic Quality Assurance system?

C1B. There was 88% agreement from all staff, including 87% agreement from Academic Staff that Academic Staff in Institutes of Technology see themselves primarily as teachers or lecturers rather than as researchers.

   Would you have expected this finding?

C1C. 98% of all staff agreed that Academic staff see their primary relationships being with academic colleagues and their students.

   Is that finding what you would expect?

C2A. 87% of Management and 70% of Academic Staff agreed that the main weaknesses of the Academic Quality Assurance in operation in Higher Education in Institutes of Technology in the following order were:

1. **Academic Staff**: disinterested; resistant to change; underperforming; too busy to be reflective; not monitored and not supported to do research, are some of the comments that support the view that academic staff represent weakness in the AQA system.
2. **Students**: the student experience; student unwillingness; lack of awareness among students; plagiarism and unequal treatment of students, are given as examples of where students represent a weakness in the AQA system.

3. **Quality System**: AQA system is too removed from teaching; emphasis on efficiency conflicting with a quality focus; lack of communication and training for staff, are presented as the reason why the focus on quality itself is weak within the AQA system.

4. **Management**: overbearing management structure; managerialism; micro management; management lack of commitment and self-obsession; disregard for lecturers; short-term focus; loose management practices; management by pass rates; ineffective departmental management; focus on “doing things right over doing the right thing”, are all stated as contributing to a management weakness in the AQA system.

5. **Teaching**: teaching quality not the highest priority; disconnect of AQA with teaching practice; no assessment and little internal oversight of teaching quality; a focus on quantity versus quality are identified by survey participants as the reasons why teaching is a weakness in the AQA system.

Do you agree that these are five main weaknesses of academic quality assurance systems in operation in Institutes of Technology?

**C2B.** Academic Staff are seen as both the primary strength and the primary weakness of Academic Quality Assurance. 81% of all staff and 76% of Academic Staff attributed this to the quality of teaching varying widely.

Would you have expected this finding?

**C2C.** 84% of all staff, including 77% of Academic Staff, confirmed their awareness of specific weaknesses of Academic Quality Assurance as perceived by Administration Staff as follows:

- No procedure in place if a lecturer consistently does not meet required standards.
- Academic quality assurance appears to be a complicated process.
- Difficulty getting people on board.
- Staff under pressure to deliver, leaving too little time for reflection.
- Communication between academic staff and administration not always as it should or could be.

Do you agree that these are weaknesses experienced by Administration Staff in carrying out their role?
C2E. 82% of all staff confirmed their awareness of four specific weaknesses of the Academic Quality Assurance system for Student Support Staff as follows:

- Lack of student participation in quality enhancement.
- Lack of implemented accountability.
- Lack of input by student support staff.
- Lack of awareness of QA.

Are you surprised by this finding?

C3A. When asked about the potential for improvement in academic quality assurance, staff agreement was evident as follows:

- 90% of all staff agreed with the Academic Staff view that resourcing is needed to improve academic quality.
- 62% of all staff agreed with the Administration Staff view that “speedier reaction times to changes in outside influences” and emphasis on external benchmarks would improve QA.
- 82% of all staff agreed with the Management staff on the need for more student evaluation and feedback.
- 78% of all staff agreed the Student Support staff view that stronger links with employers would strengthen AQA.

Are you surprised by these findings?

C4A. 84% of all staff were of the view that the primary result of Academic Quality Assurance is to Improve Academic Quality, rather than the student experience or the AQA system itself.

Do you wish to comment on this?

C5A. 79% of all staff agree that the primary result of academic quality assurance on staff is to Improve Academic Staff Performance.

Do you agree?

C5F. 46% of all staff agreed that the primary result of academic quality assurance on staff is “Managerialism – manuals and box-ticking culture have redirected energy away from the classroom.”

Are you surprised by this finding?
Section D – Academic Quality Assurance Management

D1A. 84% of all staff view Higher Education as primarily the Pursuit of Knowledge, as opposed to viewing it as a Public Service.

Are you surprised by this finding?

D1B. 80% of all staff disagree with the view that Higher Education as primarily a Business.

Are you surprised by this finding?

D1C. 64% of all staff disagree with the view of Higher Education as primarily Training for Employment.

Would you have expected this finding?

D1E. 97% of all staff explain differences in views of the purpose of Higher Education between different role identity staff groups as due to differences in understanding or perceptions of Higher Education by different groups.

Is this a view you would have expected nearly all staff to hold?

D2A. 68% of Academic staff believe that Academic Quality is best achieved within institutions with a flat management structure. Administration and Student Services staff take the contrary view that a hierarchical management structure is best to achieve Academic Quality.

Why do you think this is the case?

D2B. 66% of all staff agreed that the “Greatest asset is the diversity of staff and their professional knowledge. Failure to tap into this is a consequence of a hierarchical management structure.”

What do you think of this finding?

D2C. 89% of all staff agreed that “Academic Quality is best achieved where the academic standards are legitimate and all within the institution buy into the virtues of the system.”

Does this finding indicate value in a collaborative approach to AQA?

D3A. 99% of all staff believe Academic Quality is best achieved within institutions with a Collegiate Focus, rather than a managerial focus.
What does this finding tell us?

**D4A.** 99% of all staff agree that Academic Quality is best managed through the use of a mix of management and academic measurements.

What do you think?

**D4B.** 78% of all staff do not agree that Students Results is a good Performance Measurement.

Are you surprised by this finding?

**D5A.** 91% of all staff agree that Academic Quality is primarily driven by Staff Ownership of Academic Quality.

Do you agree?

**D5B.** 75% of all staff agree that Management Commitment is a driver of Academic Quality.

What is your view of this finding?

**D5C.** 65% of all staff agree that Activities of Front-line Staff are a primary driver of Academic Quality. Only the Management staff group disagreed with this finding.

What is your view on this finding?

**D5D.** 66% of all staff agree that External Scrutiny and Accountability is a driver of Academic Quality.

What is your view on this finding?
Section E – Focus of Academic Quality Assurance in Your Institution

**E1A.** 61% of all staff agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in their institution is on Quality Enhancement.

Why do you think this is the case?

**E2A.** 54% of all staff agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Quality Monitoring.

Why do you think this is the case?

**E3A.** Only 4% of all staff, including 33% of Management, agreed that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Assessment of Quality.

Why do you think this is the finding?

**E4A.** 78% of all staff agree that the focus of academic quality assurance is a combination of Quality Enhancement, Quality Monitoring or Assessment of Quality.

Do you agree that the focus of academic quality assurance in your institution is a combination of Quality Enhancement, Quality Monitoring and Assessment of Quality?

**E4B.** 61% of all staff disagree that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Impression Management. 58% of Academic Staff and 50% of Management Staff disagree with the statement.

Are the Academic Staff and Management Staff views here a concern?

**E6A.** 77% of all staff disagree that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Quality as Discipline and Technology, the traditional industrial models of QA.

Would you agree that the traditional industrial models of QA do not fit well to higher education?

**E7A.** 73% of all staff disagree with the statement that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Meeting Staff Expectations of a quality work environment.

Is this finding what you would have expected?
**E8A.** 82% of all staff disagree that the focus of academic quality assurance in my institution is on Breaking Staff Expectations of Management’s Responsibilities. 47% of staff skipped this challenging question and only 12 staff agreed with the statement.

What can be learned from this?

**E9A.** 78% of all staff agree that the focus of academic quality assurance is on Adapting External Quality Policies, rather than on Adopting External Quality Policies.

Do you think this view among staff is accurate?

**E11A.** 54% of all staff perceive the focus of academic quality assurance is on Substance rather than Form. 46% of staff perceive the focus of academic quality assurance is on Form rather than Substance.

Why do you think this is a point where views differ?

**E11B.** 54% of all staff perceive the focus of academic quality assurance is on Accountability, rather than on Improving the Quality of Operations.

Why do you think a majority of staff hold this view?

**E11C.** 73% of all staff confirmed that staff have a generally positive view of academic quality assurance.

Would you have expected this finding?
Section F – Staff Conclusions

F1A. 99% of all staff concluded from the research findings that there are different staff groupings within LIT with different group perceptions of Academic Quality Assurance.

Do you agree?

F1B. 90% of all staff concluded from the research finding that it is reasonable from the evidence to conclude that differences in views and perceptions are role related.

Do you agree?

F1C. 96% of all staff concluded from the research findings that it is reasonable to conclude that the culture of the organisation is in fact composed of subcultures that are role related.

Do you agree?

Thank you for completing this interview and for sharing your views. Much appreciated.