Literature Review:
When Quality Assurance Meets Innovation in Higher Education

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1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) face continued, and often contradictory, pressures for change. These include: reacting to the impact of COVID-19; addressing changing student demographics; pursuit of financial sustainability; meeting the evolving needs of employers and economy; increasing salience of 'student voice'; and changes to the complex architecture of a national regulatory authority (the Office for Students) that is still maturing. Within this context, HEIs are responsible for upholding the standards and quality of their learning and teaching provision, and for designing and maintaining a system of governance that provides authority and accountability over action that influences quality and standards. This governance mechanism is referred to as quality assurance (QA), which – along with research excellence – has historically formed the basis of HE's accountability for public funds (Hazelkorn et.al. 2018).

The Office for Students was founded in 2018 with a wide remit that included regulation of new higher education providers in England. These new providers were actively welcomed as a means to increase competition within higher education (HE) and, consequently, quality:

> Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception (BIS 2016 p8).

More competition in HE was seen as key to ensuring HEIs could innovate and grow, and 'choice' included aspects such as size, specialism and location of provider; mode and pace of study; and curriculum emphasis. (More critical scholars have commented that the 'competition fetish' has closed down alternative of educational reform (Naidoo 2018)). Since the inception of the Office for Students, 101 organisations have been added to the OfS Register of HE providers, increasing the provider base by approximately 30%. These new providers operate within the same regulatory regime as established providers and share common expectations as to QA and standards. A question thus arises as to how innovation in both incumbent and new institutions is supported in a regulated, assured environment, and whether these different kinds of providers are taking different or common approaches to assuring quality and standards.

This literature review focuses on identifying frameworks and understandings of QA in UK higher education, and aims to identify QA strategies that best support innovative practice. The contribution of several QA domains that are considered to have the greatest impact on innovation will be explored. These include: institutional learning and teaching strategies; transformation strategies; new programme approval; programme amendment; module/course amendment; accreditation or recognition by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs); validation and review; external examining systems; assessment policies; academic governance processes. This review therefore aims to serve as a concise summary of the current

UK context in which QA is confronted by innovation in HE, in order to inform the targeting and development of mitigation strategies to overcome barriers to innovation.

This paper is structured in two halves. First, we explore definitions and operationalisation of quality, standards, quality assurance and quality enhancement in UK HE, briefly describing differences across the United Kingdom. We then move on to account for different perceptions of QA amongst academics, employers and students. We then move on to innovation in HE, contrasting definitions. The inter-relationship between innovation and QA is explored through the lens of how supported QA processes are of innovative practice and structures, and we consider how technology is impacting innovation and what challenges and opportunities that presents to QA in HE.

2. Quality Assurance in UK Higher Education

2.1. *How do we define and operationalise Quality, Standards, Assurance & Enhancement?*

'Quality' can be considered a philosophical concept undergoing constant evolution (Harvey 2005; Ewell, 2010; Westerheijden *et al.* 2014 in Cardoso *et al.*, 2019: 250). Within HE, the term *quality* is a subjective concept used in relation to a number of processes including: quality assurance, quality management, setting and maintenance of standards, total quality management, quality control, quality audit, quality assessment, and continuous quality improvement (Ellis & Hogard 2019). The Quality Assurance Agency define quality as,

> how well providers support students to consistently achieve positive outcomes in learning, personal development and career advancement, while meeting the reasonable expectations of those students, employers, governance and society in general. (QAA 2023)

Studies of academic understandings of quality have pointed to more reduced concepts of 'fitness-for-purpose' and accountability (Lomas 2007). For English HEIs, the OfS codifies quality in its 'B conditions', describing a high-quality academic experience as one that is up-to-date, challenging, coherent, effectively delivered, and – as appropriate – develops relevant skills. OfS also requires that HE providers assess students effectively, using valid and reliable methods, leading to awards which are credible, both now and over time. Standards in any provider should reflect sector-recognised standards, adequate resources should be made available in the learning environment and students should be able to expect a successful outcome (OfS 2023). OfS have set numerical thresholds for these characteristics, risking a 'Pavlovian' response on the part of HEIs seeking positive performance in a high-stakes environment; these outcomes become – at least in part – the responsibility of the QA function, but are not necessarily conducive to the action on the 'deeper institutional factors' that most impact learning and teaching (Raban 2007). Far from just being a behavioural outcome, as described earlier these external measures and frameworks are affecting the sector's own understanding of what – for example – quality itself is (Su 2022).

In assuring comparable and acceptable standards, HE providers in the UK are able to draw on subject-specific frameworks which are developed and confirmed by academic and practice communities at large. Introduced in 1999 as an outworking of the Dearing Report, the main instrument to regulate academic standards across the UK – to reassure the public that the standards of awards were consistent and being maintained across institutions – has been the National Subject Benchmark Statements, a series of discipline-specific statements

encapsulating the threshold level of knowledge and skills a graduate of that discipline should possess, showing '...what graduates might reasonably be expected to know, do and understand at the end of their studies' (QAA 2023c). Whilst the statements are commonly referenced in new programme development and review processes, they do not in themselves carry formal authority and their realised impact on the upholding of standards is an open question (Bellingham 2008). The subject benchmarks were felt to be particularly relevant to disciplinary areas that do not have external validating or accrediting bodies. For those that do have this innate externality, *c*.150 PSRBs engage in UK higher education for regulatory, representative and/or promotional purposes through a wide range of means but sharing a common aim of setting standards (Day 2018). Standards can then be subject to scrutiny through processes of accreditation, a process which commonly focuses on course and assessment design, rather than direct observation of – or deep discussion about – learning and teaching approaches. In this context, increasing focus on learning outcomes is seen as instrumental in driving a discussion that is closer to pedagogical reasoning than the course descriptions used in the past (ibid.), and in encapsulating expected standards.

The term *quality assurance* is equally complex, historically described as processes that involve planned and systematic activities to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality (HEQC 1994, in Brown 2004). QA is commonly referred to as an overarching term for a system that consists of interconnected mechanisms that promote and change HE (Al-Imarah *et al*., 2021). The concept of 'change' implies a potential to enable innovation, as well as enhancement. QA has been described as those processes that assure provision is accountable, controlled, compliant and improving using approaches of accreditation, audit, assessment and external review. (Harvey, 2005; Harvey and Newton, 2007; Atherton, Lewis and Bolton, 2023). This evokes focal points of: governance and regulation; curriculum design; learning experience; medium of delivery; student support; content of programmes; financial viability; qualification; administrative support; and organisational processes (Harvey 2005).

More contemporary scoping of the term reaches beyond to a richer portfolio of activities that proactively includes teachers and scholars, institutions, entire systems, and the importance of student perceptions, 'the critical actors in the system yet for whom quality assurance processes are often an afterthought' (Hazelkorn *et al*., 2018). These definitions illuminate a shift in QA from a process that is academically driven to one that is driven by a regulatory agency on increasingly specific terms, part of an OECD-wide ethos of 'new public management' that has reached higher education (Broucker & De Wit 2015), is crystallised in quality assurance (King 2018), and which is explicit in OfS' commitment to a competitive HE market, a willingness to birth new, smaller HEIs that will be disruptive, a conceptualisation of students as consumers, and use of input and output controls.

This NPM ethos crystallises a tension between QA that arises from substantial self-regulation and academic freedom, and a more interventionist regulatory approach. Separate to OfS, the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) remains a 'sector-led oversight of HE quality assessment arrangements...shared across the UK' (UKSCQA 2023), who articulate the core principles for QA in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (UKSCQA/QAA 2018). The Quality Code is described as continuing to,

> ...articulate fundamental principles that should apply to higher education quality across the UK, irrespective of changing national contexts. These include principles such as emphasising the role of providers in assuring the quality of the experience they offer to

students, supporting student engagement, and ensuring external referencing is used to ensure the integrity of awards and the quality of provision (QAA, 2023b).

The Quality Code was superseded by the OfS' 'Conditions of Registration' approach in 2022, but further to QAA's April 2023 withdrawal from its role as the UK's Designated Quality Body, the UK HE sector (convened by the QAA) is currently discussing the future scope and structure of the Code, to ensure its continued relevance to staff and students (QAA 2023b).

The relationship between the terms *quality assurance* and *quality enhancement* is one that has been debated for over two decades (Williams, 2016) and can be considered as being dependent on the time, context and stakeholders involved (Harvey 2007). Some interpret the two terms as part of a continuing spectrum, where QA naturally evolves into the more enlightened practice of enhancement, where enhancement is dependent – and should be founded on – the data that QA provides, or where enhancement arises naturally from the process of taking action on core QA processes (Elassy 2015, Williams 2016, Pelik 2023). Enhancement thus reaches beyond quality and QA, and sits within the general idea of improvement, but has connotations that are not so much about bringing activities up to an expected standard, but about '...raising [them] to a higher degree, intensifying or magnifying' (Williams 2016), or about assessing efficacy '...in practice, in delivery, in responding to student needs, in managing quality, in overseeing collaborative partnerships, in setting and maintaining academic standards.' (Pelik 2023). Carroll (2010) describes a 'considerable gap between meeting the standards and creating a masterpiece'.

Others have argued that accountability must be separated from improvement, both in concept and in practice, such that each can fulfil their role without conflict (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). Gosling & D'Andrea (2001) argued that student experience can most effectively be improved through a combination of educational development with QA that they termed 'quality development'. Quality development aims to overcome those authors' perceptions of a mismatch in agendas that arise from different HEI functions that have differing values and differing understandings of how to measure quality (*e.g.*, between learning and teaching centres, and QA departments) by restoring a focus on '...practice and not on documentation' through means such as peer review of teaching, student evaluations, using alternative curriculum design methodologies that do not rely on learning outcomes, and self-evaluations of the learning environment. This positioning (of a stark dichotomy between practice and documentation, where the former is inherently superior) is reflected in Bloch's work, where staff directly involved in teaching roles in HEIs (as opposed to professional services) were identified as having a different perspective on 'every-day quality,' for example in using active teaching strategies, competence development, a continuous evaluation of their own teaching, and managing the expectations of their students and capturing feedback (Bloch *et al.*, 2022). Gosling & D'Andrea's argument exemplifies the different stakeholder communities involved in quality enhancement, and how they can have quite different understandings of what constitutes an effective approach, a phenomenon further summarised by Williams (2016) and expanded upon in this report.

A final conceptualisation of the relationship between QA and enhancement is that they are different but necessarily connected dimensions of the same core process. This can be envisaged as being sequenced (such as when data leads to action) or an integrated whole (Williams 2016).

2.2.   *How does QA differ across the United Kingdom?*

In England, the Office for Students seeks to stimulate enhancement – 'driving improvement above the high-quality baseline' – through the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which aims to incentivise excellence (OfS 2022b). The TEF is a substantial administrative exercise which focusses on an HEI's self-reflection on the themes of student experience and student outcomes; it is this self-assessment (presumably, alongside the Gold, Silver, Bronze or Zero 'badging') that is considered to drive enhancement. However, in an analysis of TEF submissions, HEIs' understandings of quality were noted as being shaped by the TEF itself, which then in turn influenced management and academic practice (Su 2022).

HEIs in the devolved administrations (as is the cases for HEIs in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) are eligible to participate in TEF with the permission of their administration. Scottish HEIs are required by the Scottish Funding Council to meet the requirements of the Quality Enhancement Framework, a process focussed on standards, student experience and engagement. They are subject to an Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR), and are expected to engage with the UK Quality Code as well as national programme of enhancement themes, concentrated on a topic expected to stimulate the sharing of innovation in strategy, policy and practice across the sector (Pelik 2023). (For 2020-2023, the enhancement theme has been resilient learning communities). Welsh providers are required by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales to have had a successful Quality Enhancement Review or Gateway Quality Review (Wales) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency. The Gateway Quality Review evaluates how well student interest is being protected, that standards are being upheld, and to provide assurance that baseline regulatory requirements are being met. HEIs in Northern Ireland are required by the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland (DfE(NI)) requires an outcome of at least 'Meets requirements' for standards and quality in the Annual Provider Review, which is the core mechanism in the Quality Assessment Model that is used to assess a provider. This revised assessment model seeks to promote institutional autonomy, incorporates student as partners, assures standards and value-for-money, sustains the international reputation of UK HE, and provides for intervention when necessary (HEFCE 2016). Thus, the quality, QA and quality enhancement landscape of the UK has become complex and differentiated with devolution and the maturing of the English Regulatory Authority, all founded on the bedrock of assurance and with different emphases being placed on enhancement.

2.3.   *How is quality assured in UK HEIs?*

Having established a central focus on assuring standards and upholding student experience, this section turns to the mechanisms by which HEIs meet these aims. According to Universities UK (2008: 4), QA is conducted through a multi-faceted approach to assuring standards and quality that includes: following regulations for awarding degrees and other qualifications, as well as for withdrawing courses; undertaking rigorous procedures for the design and approval for introducing and validating new degree programmes, as well as monitoring and reviewing courses they currently offer; scrutinising the assessment processes adopted, including using independent and impartial academic advisers (*i.e.* external examiners) as part of this review process; responding to feedback and interaction with students, employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs); exchanging good practice with other universities and

the QAA, as well as participating in collective quality initiatives; and co-operation with the QAA and funding council requirements for regular institutional review, including making a range of information available for students, employers and the general public.

Alongside a conceptualisation of students as consumers who are choosing amongst a competitive market of HEIs (Naidoo & Williams 2015) comes the rapid evolution and adoption of operating mechanisms designed to engage and involve students in all aspects of quality assurance, with the aim of involving them as 'co-creators in their own learning'. UK HEIs have been proactive in including students in various aspects of governance and QA roles as well as involving students in co-design of learning strategies, assessment practices, and curricula (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011 in Naylor *et al.*, 2021). Some have pointed to the power of student engagement as a stimulus for institutional learning, improvement (Gibbs & Wood 2021) and innovation (Naylor *et al.*, 2021), presenting the possibility of a more organically-driven stimulus for organisational self-reflection than that brought about by the TEF.

2.4. How is QA perceived by different constituencies within HEIs?

The changing political context in which HE conducts its work and assures its quality pervades practice and culture. In universities around the developed world, governance and quality professionals operationalise an agenda that is highly politicised but obscured by rules, conditions and metrics (Jayasuriya 2015). The academics who are subject to some of these rules in the design and delivery of their courses often react negatively to what they perceive as constraint and mistrust (as multiple studies in this section will illuminate), and this becomes manifest as cultural challenges between academics and administrators, and subversion of process.

Over the past two decades, a number of studies have demonstrated the differences among stakeholder perceptions of quality, with academic staff described as focused on quality improvement, and governments and external agencies focused on accountability (Williams, 2016). These often conflicting perceptions of the efficacy and motivation of QA processes in HE are not confined to the UK. Over the last two decades, QA processes in HE have become more visible and penetrative wherever massification and marketisation have taken place, and empirical studies have reported the value-laden nature of QA processes, the maturing nature of contemporary QA in HE, and the challenges of ensuring active and genuine engagement amongst all stakeholder groups (*e.g.*, Bhushan 2015, encapsulating work in HEIs across Asia).

The idea of 'quality development' was introduced earlier, and was described as stemming from a desire to rebalance a perception of very low academic staff morale trying to uphold standards in a context of incontestable regulatory intervention, poorly targeted metrics and managerialist approaches combined with declining funding (Gosling & D'Andrea 2001). Such concerns are not uncommon in the literature and are also not confined to the UK. Numerous studies share the perception that QA processes are bureaucratic, that add burdensome tasks to workload, and that quality management professionals have too much managerial power in terms of regulating and disciplining academics (Seyfried and Pohlenz, 2018). Academics have responded with mechanistic conformity and therefore fail to connect the quality of their teaching and research with the work embodied in QA processes (Williams, 2016). Lucas (2014: 216) explored a growing resistance to QA processes on the part of UK academic staff over the previous two decades, commenting that the extent of the QA procedures in the UK is recognised around the world, sometimes with admiration and sometimes with fear

that such practices that will be adopted in other countries over time. One of the core concerns raised by Lucas was a deep scepticism towards the value and methodology associated with many QA practices, as one academic observes:

> We supplied the hypotheses, the evidence, and the witnesses. We chose the students, the graduates and employers, the samples of work, and the internal documentation to be seen by the panel (Harrison & Lockwood 2001 in Lucas 2014).

This perceived lack of integrity was also reported in a UK and Dutch comparative study, where UK academics expressed concerns as to 'data massaging … and lack of integrity and sensitivity' (Teelken & Lomas 2009). Cardoso *et al.* (2019) highlighted similar concerns in Portugal where bureaucratic imposition were being manifested as increased performance monitoring. However, the more formalised procedures and increasing expectations of administrative activity on the part of academics, was not yet considered to have crystallised as tension and mistrust between administrative and academic staff as is the case in the UK where the situation has progressed from demands for time into more unscrupulous strategies: 'There is a feeling that one is being manipulated by … administrators' (Henkel, 2000: 206-207 in Cardoso *et al.*, 2019).

In the literature, the voice of academics is expressed more frequently than those of quality professionals themselves. One of the few studies to explore how effective quality professionals consider QA to be was a questionnaire and statistical analysis conducted in German HEIs which took as its premise the idea that quality managers are change agents working within external constraints and institutional norms (Seyfried & Pohlenz 2018). Findings indicated that quality management that arose in response to external drivers (such as international alignment or accreditation) was seen as less effective, whereas sensior management support and collaboration with other HEIs was perceived as producing a more effective QA system. Although not reaching statistical significance, there are interesting indications in this work that resistance from academics is seen as a hallmark of effective QA. In the face of resistance, quality managers perceive an effective QA system as being one where positive outcomes are achieved (*e.g.* accreditation) rather than one where sanctions are distributed, and quality managers agree that a key part of their role is translation or promotion of QA goals. These two roles are also reflected in an examination of academic resistance to QA systems in Finland (Overberg 2019). Here, in tackling resistance, these professionals deploy two core strategies: articulating the benefits of QA, and through 'linguistic adaption' – specifically, by avoiding terms associated with 'quality'.

Whilst the majority of this section focuses on differing perceptions between academic and professional services staff in HEIs, the unsettled nature of quality, assurance and enhancement reaches beyond staff to broader communities. In their large-scale survey of students, staff, and employers within a UK institution, Dicker *et al.* (2019) found that employers consider quality to be detectable in the personal attributes of graduates and external collaborations with industry. Students considered quality to be challenged by change in the learning environment and high staff turnover, and staff outline how oppressive demands on their time undermine their ability to deliver a high quality learning experience. To reconcile these different understandings, the authors urged HEIs to clearly outline to staff how the skills and attributes valued by employers are delivered in learning and teaching processes.

3. Innovation in a Higher Education Context

3.1. *What does 'innovation' mean in the design and delivery of Higher Education?*

In corporations, government, media, and universities, the eminently transferrable concept of innovation is one that avoids succinct definition despite recognisable impetus for innovation in global higher education that compel innovation: technological advancement and the rise of knowledge-intensive economies; the need to train a creative and innovative workforce; the tension in massification and quality; and declining funding and resources (Tierney & Lanford 2016). These authors go on to propose a baseline definition for academic innovation as '…the conception and application of new or novel ideas in evolving learning environments.' Findlow (2008) defined innovation in HE more modestly, as an '…attempt to meet student and disciplinary needs in ways that seem best but diverge from established practice.'

In a study of 20 academic innovation units in the USA, Barger *et al*. (2021: 95) found that the concept of academic innovation spanned different areas of focus including technology-based enhancement, pedagogic research, multimodal learning, development of academic staff and entrepreneurial activities. Consistent with Tierney & Lawford, these authors also highlighted a lack of consensus as to what innovation actually was in an HE context, how innovations should be evaluated, and how their contribution to the wider HEI environment should be understood. The different perceptions of success amongst different stakeholders – and the fact that an innovation can lead to positive spillover effects even in cases where that the original intended outcomes are not realised – leads to what has been referred to as '*invisible success*' (Whitworth 2012).

Whether change that is organic or externally stimulated can equally be considered 'innovation' is an open question. Blumenstyk & Gardner (2019) considered academic innovation to be largely a product of responding to a changing external environment, whether that response is imposed or arising from reflexivity. Bevitt (2015) considered that students defined innovation (at least, in terms of assessment). Serdyukov (2017) observed a tendency for educators to deploy the word 'innovation' for almost any change to classroom practice. He outlined three levels of academic innovation: adjustment or upgrading of an existing process (which he argued should be considered an improvement rather than an innovation unless a new method or tool is developed); modification of a process that significantly alters process, performance or quality (*e.g.*, accelerated learning); and system transformation (*e.g.*, mobile learning). Serdyukov also reflected on how innovation that starts from educators ('bottom-up') can be as prone to difficulty and failure as that which comes 'top-down'.

Earlier, the concept of trust arose as an important factor in negotiating different perceptions of QA; it rises here again. Just as Henkel reported academics suspecting they were being manipulated by administrators, and as Tierney & Lanford described trust as a 'crucial animating force' that facilitates the collaboration needed for successful innovation with appropriate levels of autonomy, Blumenstyk & Gardner (2019) describe innovation as being 'a currency of its own' that distinguishes HE leaders and can quickly bring about resistance and cynicism if that 'currency' is thought to be self-serving.

3.2.   Does QA Inhibit or Support Innovation in Learning and Teaching?

Mello Silva and Vargas' (2021) global review of QA processes and innovation over a 20-year period concluded that there remains scope to improve understanding of how HEIs can both innovate whilst ensuring that quality standards are met. They highlighted a lack of clarity over the extent to which innovation is supported in contexts with active QA systems, this resulting in conflicting views regarding the potential to innovate. They identified that while there was broader recognition that QA methods can act as useful tools for evaluating the effectiveness and management of HEI activities (Roffe, 1998; Blanco Ramírez, 2014; Cullen *et al.*, 2003; Prisacariu, 2014), they can also lead to a tendency for standardisation, inhibiting improvement and threatening autonomy and creativity (Harvey and Williams, 2010; Dias Sobrinho, 2010; Yorke, 2000; Bendermacher *et al.*, 2017).

Findlow (2008) directly interrogates this perceived tension between 'audit-driven accountability' and 'academic innovation.' They describe academic innovation as a historically private, professional affair that has had increasing strategic relevance for HEIs, thus becoming increasingly centralised and programmed over the last two decades, bringing with it managerial language, standardisation and administrative processes that are at odds with academic culture. The study identifies demands for external accountability, and institutional structure (at programme, module and assessment level) as inhibitors of innovation and describes an 'underlying insecurity about standards' as inhibiting innovation rather than the standards themselves, as well as a fundamental mismatch in administrative and academic understandings of quality.

Accreditation also impacts upon innovation in HEIs (Jackson, 2001; Bellingham, 2008; Kumar, *et al.*, 2020) with Horn and Dunagan (2020) claiming that there is potential for it to have a 'stifling effect … on innovation at existing institutions' (p. 4) before going onto make the important point that it is not necessarily *accreditation* that was at odds with innovation, but (sometimes) *accreditors*. This issue is of particular concern for cases where a proportion of the curriculum is prescribed by a professional or statutory/regulatory body (PSRB) which can result in those undertaking programme design working with multiple reference points and attempting to satisfy multiple (potentially competing) stakeholders. Such tensions may leave less space for innovation and creativity in the design and delivery of programmes (Bellingham, 2008: 270).

Brady and Bates (2016) share a case study of a business faculty in a UK HEI through the lens of the impact of QA processes, asking how QA is balancing its dual mandates of accountability and enhancement. The research, which was based on academic interviews and documents, found that QA was perceived as being so focussed on administration that it led to 'distortion of academic practice' (p. 155). Participants shared a sense of powerlessness in developing the curriculum due to lengthy timescales involved (*e.g.*, a year), this being associated with significant difficulty when teaching a constantly changing subject area such as business. The quality process was viewed as involving hierarchical systems and expectations of compliance with procedures and templates and there were perceptions of there being tight control around QA functions in terms of exercising course innovation (Brady and Bates, 2016). 'The expression [by staff] I am just a cog in this wheel' appears to signal a feeling of diminished agency, in the form of perceived powerlessness or disconnection from the organisation or both' (Brady & Bates, 2016: 166).

For example, in practice, programme level changes such as programme (re)design must be ratified by an institution's formal programme approval and review processes (Hill & Smith,

2023). In the time since Brady & Bates' case study, the time lag in securing course changes is likely to have increased due to the increasingly visible presence of consumer law in UK HE. The Consumer and Markets Authority consider their choice of HE to be a 'one off' decision that demands a significant amount of time and cost. On this basis, prospective applicants must be furnished with accurate and timely information about their course choice at each stage of their interaction with the HEI; this information includes course title, core modules, contact hours and mode and means of delivery, expectations of feedback, overall methods of assessment, and a general indication of the status of staff who will be teaching. Failing to provide such information risks action by consumer law enforcers, by compliance partners, by HE sector bodies or directly by students (CMA 2023). In a sense, such legislature locks HEIs into a course composition and learning and teaching strategy for the period of advertising, selection and study, all of which can constitute a 5-year cycle. It is unsurprising that academic staff who are teaching feel 'straightjacketed' by these, and other, expectations.

In this light, it is ironic that the very legislation used to facilitate a new era of 'disruptive, innovative' providers is the same legislation that solidified the idea of students as consumers who would benefit from choice. Practitioners in this new provider space have also begun to comment that the regime that brought them into existence is still overly burdensome, absorbs time that could be better spent on institution-building, and locks in an inflexible 3 year plan that clashes with the nature and need of entrepreneurial start-up organisation (Grant & Cook 2022). In this case where QA processes lead to small changes such as altering a module title 'feeling too much' and stopping 'inventive people having a go,' it is clear how they are also considered as barriers to the introduction of more innovative changes to the curriculum, something which was discussed during the global pandemic.

Whilst the HE sector has been described as 'inherently eclectic and dynamic' (Ratcliff, 2003 in Hazelkorn *et al.*, 2018: 8), the literature is largely silent on the question of how responsive QA processes are in the face of evolving learning and teaching practice, the drivers that lead to change, and the procedural and cultural changes that may take place. The QAA is encouraging reflection and debate about 'responsiveness' of QA across UK HEIs (QAA, 2020d). Workload and bureaucracy associated with QA is described as a barrier to making dynamic changes by staff working in the Danish sector (Bloch *et al.*, 2022: 1), an issue which has been raised historically within the UK (Newton, 2002, 2007; Vettori, 2023). In some cases, shortcuts around bureaucracy have been reported (Murphy 2014 in Vettori 2023) although this has been criticised as being 'a defensive strategy' and it is argued that there is further need for capturing different perceptions and a more detailed understanding of the experiences of quality processes from different stakeholders (Bloch *et al.*, 2022). Such work would be particularly useful when considering the responsive approaches to QA processes across the sector as a result of the pandemic (QAA 2020c, Snelling 2021) which may present opportunities to capture insights into what measures have or could be retained.

3.3. Is Technological Disruption Driving Change in QA Practices?

When asked to consider technological disruption in HE, many readers minds will turn to the COVID-19 and the rapid transition this brought about. Teaching and learning strategies as well as established approaches to QA were disrupted during the pandemic, which instigated rapid change towards online, hybrid and blended learning and assessment (Staring *et al*, 2022; Stott, 2023). Technology was embedded more firmly into teaching, learning and assessment practices

out of necessity and was classified as 'an emergency pivot to online delivery' (OfS, 2022a). During this testing time, providers adapted QA processes through effective use of steering groups and operational sub-groups, through rapid approval plans for modules, assessments and regulations, through substantial reconsideration of assessment strategies, and through meaningful engagement with students in planning changes (QAA 2020c). In this study, small and specialist providers had worked closely with their validating partners where appropriate, and were '…better positioned than larger [providers] to provide a more personalised student experience' (p. 5), showing 'particular high' student satisfaction mid-pandemic even though this kind of providers have smaller staff teams to resource an extremely high and urgent transition workload. This is suggestive of an agility amongst small, specialist providers – perhaps cultural, or as a function of lower complexity – that is notable.

This demonstration of agility in structures, processes and practices was particularly significant in a sector that historically has been 'notoriously slow' (Snelling 2020) or 'glacial' (Robertson 2020) to change. In general, technology-enhanced learning strategies in UK HEIs are found to support incremental advancements or efficiency improvements rather than disruptive innovation (Flavin & Quintero 2018). The 'emergency pivot' was an accelerated instance of a prevailing trend towards increased use of technology that is itself accelerating the pace of change, in a manner that the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) claims brings '…an onus on leaders to ensure innovation is aligned with pedagogy' (Clay 2020). The extent to which these changes to QA processes can, or should, be maintained will depend on who sees benefits of such approaches and how effectively they can advocate for sustained change. Advocacy group UniversitiesUK has described an unreflective return to a pre-pandemic world as impractical and unwelcome. It specifically calls for adaptations to curriculum design, assessment strategy, QA processes, and portfolio review processes, as well as continued flexibility and dialogue with PSRBs, whilst simultaneously pointing to the need for 'robust quality assurance' in building trust in its post-pandemic provision (Universities UK 2020). Whilst the 'emergency pivot' presented major challenges to academics, administrators, and students, it has been an opportunity to recalibrate risk and be better attuned to 'new possibilities … which will likely change the higher education sector into the future' (Robertson, 2020). More directly linked to QA practice, Jackson (2021) report that academics consulted in that work considered that the pandemic had enabled them to be more agile, and demonstrated that QA processes can be more streamlined.

On the other hand, the emergency pivot brought about rapid changes of mode in assessment and this further crystallised concerns around academic integrity (Gamage *et al.*, 2020). Rather than being new, or specific to the pandemic, challenges to academic integrity from the COVID-19 are a moment (albeit a significant one) in a sustained trend that, for example, was previously concerned with essay mills (*e.g.* QAA 2020f) and is now concerned with generative artificial intelligence (*e.g.* Cotton et.al. 2023). Nevertheless, any undermining of academic integrity is a threat to academic standards, an effect that has been recognised by QAA with guidance offered (*e.g.* QAA 2018, QAA, 2020e).

In the decade preceding the pandemic, many UK universities engaged with Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs), a new mode of lifelong learning – often without enrolment cost – capable of reaching many thousands of users around the globe. Al-Imarah, *et al.*, (2021) considered the introduction of the MOOC to be a suitable site in which to explore the relationship of QA and innovation in learning and teaching. In so doing, they drew upon case studies of five different UK HEIs, none of whom used conventional routes to approve MOOCs.

Established QA processes were reported as too burdensome to be applied to MOOCs and HEIs those made us of 'lighter quality assurance processes' than those adopted for their standard provision. Both Al-Imarah (2023) and Xiao et.al. (2019) observed that an important reason for this adapted QA approach was the very wide range of learners from different backgrounds that is characteristic of a MOOC, and the challenge this presents to the course designer's ability to articulate benchmarks – this largely incapacitated 'offline' QA approaches. MOOCs also directly challenge what the notion of quality means, given that they reside in a domain of open education where dimensions such as transferability, adaptability, and quality of metadata sit alongside course content (Poce et.al. 2019).

HEIs often turn to MOOC platform hosts to solicit guidance on quality, but report that such guidance tends to focus on quality of presentation rather than suitability of content or intellectual coherence. To address this gap, three of the five case study HEIs in Al-Imarah's study had adapted internal QA processes by introducing learner peer review as a more formal part of the approval process. Another had used independent academic review from unrelated subject areas.

Looking forward, a number of colleagues consider big data and learning analytics to be a further, growing pressure to reconsider QA processes. Pohlenz (2022) argues that current forms of QA in HE are a legacy of the industrial age, focussing on cost-effectiveness and productivity ratios. In an age of ICT and data, he argues that quality approaches must be capable of responding to complexity with agile methods. This has led to calls to reconsider paradigms for, and practices of, quality management, and to make it more compatible with the requirements of changing environments, for example a scholarly approach to QA with more structured professional development, reflection, sharing and peer review (Pohlenz, 2022). Through a more cautionary lens, Beerkens (2022) has highlighted the cyclical relationship between the availability of data, its use in governance, and the audience it attracts. Rosa *et al.* (2022: 73) pointed to QA practice that is learning from digitisation but without the fundamental rethink Pohlenz calls for – instead, leveraging the data being produced in practice to generate insights that can drive innovation.

A further step ('Quality 4.0') involves digitising QA processes to undertake procedures such as monitoring, collecting and analysing real-time data, as well as applying learning analytics to datasets to predict problems and maintenance needs, as well as for evaluative practices (Küpper *et al.* 2019 in Bravo *et al.*, 2022; Pohlenz, 2022). The value of data captured from social media and student review sites has also been highlighted (Griffiths *et al.*, 2018). Finally, digital transformation also offers a potential means by which to break down barriers that exist between functions, the silos that lie underneath many of the feelings of mistrust that appear in this report. Digitisation approaches have been claimed to offer the opportunity to consolidate different monitoring and reporting systems into more holistic and student-centric views of the learner journey which in turn breaks down silos (Campus, 2022). Realising cultural changes from IT-led organisational change is an ongoing challenge in HE.

4. Conclusions

In this review, we have explored definitions of quality, standards, quality assurance and quality enhancement. Whilst accepting the subjective nature of concepts that are in practice and evolving rapidly, a picture has emerged of quality as being rooted in learning experiences and outcomes that meet the needs of a range of stakeholders including students themselves,

employers, and society. This has been described by academics as 'fit-for-purpose', whilst the English regulator has set threshold expectations in the form of sector benchmarks, a significant step towards a focus on *outcomes* rather than quality assurance *process*.

Quality assurance is inextricably bound up with an ethos of new public management and the positioning of students as consumers, which has further extended need for governance oversight in the form of compliance with consumer law. Efforts to increase competition amongst higher education providers are described as steps to increase quality and innovation, and this report has noted that this 'consumer' conception has (at least) two adverse effects: that (1), in bringing further complexity to QA environments in HEIs, it makes more difficult the process of innovation that seek to enhance student experience, and (2) the legislative regime that brought new providers into existence is in itself so burdensome that it absorbs disproportionate effort that could be directed towards student experience and outcomes.

There is a wealth of literature reporting that the increase in QA effort and influence in HEIs is received negatively by academic staff with resistance not uncommon. The reasons for this resistance stem from scepticism as to the authentic impact of QA effort, an undue influence into what is academic work and associated academic freedom and what seems to be an obviously approach of discipline that arises from a fundamental lack of trust.

As with quality, innovation in learning and teaching is also subjective. Some argue that only new modes or tools properly warrant the term innovative, whilst others have argued the tendency of some educators to claim any changes as being innovations. Innovations that come from external mandates, bottom-up improvements, and changes in HE leadership all have different factors in being positively received and ultimately being successful. In general, the literature reports a negative effect between externally-driven innovation and authentic success, and between active QA processes and successful innovation – multiple studies share educators experience reduced agency, creativity and empowerment in these contexts.

Technological changes – and particular those brought about by the 2020-21 COVID-19 online pivot are commonly regarded to have stimulated innovation both in practice and in QA practice. The literature indicates that this technological catalyst for change should be considered not as a one-off event, but as a journey that began with the ICT age, had one point of catalysis with the introduction of MOOCs, another with the pandemic online pivot, and is expected to have its next in the rapid expansion of big data and learning analytics. These moments of development in QA processes – more streamlined processes, use collaborative operational steering/sprint groups, rapid approval plans, or more meaningful student engagement – are not routinely captured and leveraged across HEIs, despite calls for this. Undoubtedly this is a rapidly evolving and already complex landscape, but this literature review makes the case that mistrust between academics and administrators is both a root cause and an outcome of contemporary HE QA. In this light, all efforts to reflect, learn, and improve will benefit all those working in UK higher education.

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