

## Definitions of Quality in Higher Education: A Synthesis of the Literature

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to provide a synthesis of the literature on defining quality in the context of higher education. During a search for relevant literature, the authors intentionally cast a wide net, beginning with a broad search in Google Scholar and followed by a narrower search in educational databases, including Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and SAGE Premier. The authors identified both peer-reviewed journal articles and publications from professional organizations, such as the International Organization for Standardization. The paper begins with a discussion of the existing challenges and strategies for defining quality. Next, the authors provide a conceptual model of quality based on their review of the literature. Then, they examine some considerations for defining quality assurance and provide recommendations to help bring greater clarity and alignment to existing quality assurance practices. Their findings reveal important gaps in the literature. First, more research is needed to determine the feasibility of developing a universal definition of quality that would apply to different types of institutions in diverse geographic locations. Second, more research is needed to better understand the influence of culture on the use and meaning of quality terminology. Specifically, research is needed to determine whether the terms, quality and quality assurance, are applicable across cultures and, if so, whether there are distinct regional and national meanings of these terms. Finally, the relationship between quality assurance and accreditation in the literature is unclear.

**Keywords:** Higher education quality; quality assurance; quality definition; quality conceptual model; quality indicators

### Introduction

In 1985, Ball asked, “What the hell is quality?” Thirty years later, those in higher education are still trying to answer this question. Undoubtedly, defining quality continues to be difficult, with some asserting that quality can neither be defined nor quantified and others asserting that quality is subjective and dependent upon individual perspectives (American Society for Quality, n.d.; Bobby, 2014; Martin & Stella, 2007; Mishra, 2007; Westerheijden, Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007). Despite the lack of consensus, it is important to have an awareness of the existing definitions in the literature, specifically when tasked with developing one’s own set of definitions.

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The aim of this paper is to provide a synthesis of the literature on defining quality in the context of higher education. In the search for relevant literature, the authors intentionally cast a wide net, beginning with a broad search in Google Scholar followed by a narrower search in educational databases, including Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and SAGE Premier. The authors identified both peer-reviewed journal articles and publications from professional organizations, such as the International Organization for Standardization. The article begins with a discussion of the existing challenges and strategies for defining quality. Next, the authors provide a conceptual model of quality based on their review of the literature. Finally, they examine some considerations for defining quality assurance.

### **Challenges to Defining Quality**

There are many significant challenges to defining quality. First, quality is an elusive term for which there is a wide variety of interpretations depending upon the views of different stakeholders (Bobby, 2014; Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Cullen, Joyce, Hassall, & Broadbent, 2003; Harvey & Green, 1993; Kemenade, Pupius, & Hardjono, 2008; Martin & Stella, 2007; Newton, 2010; Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, & Pârlea, 2007). There are four groups of stakeholders that must be considered when defining quality: providers (e.g., funding bodies and the community, taxpayers); users of products (e.g., students); users of outputs (e.g., employers); and employees of the sector (e.g., academics and administrators; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). Each group has a different perspective on quality. For example, students associate quality with the institution they attend, the program in which they enroll, and the course they complete. Conversely, employers are concerned with quality in terms of the final product, which can be demonstrated through a qualified employee pool (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Therefore, in order to define quality and attempt to establish a culture of quality in higher education, all stakeholders should be involved in the discussion to ensure that different perspectives and needs are incorporated (Bobby, 2014; Cullen et al., 2003).

A second challenge is that quality is a multidimensional concept (Green, 1994; Vlăsceanu et al., 2007; Westerheijden, et al., 2007). Therefore, reducing the concept to a one-sentence definition is problematic. In some cases, such definitions are one-dimensional, lack meaning and specificity, or are too general to be operationalized (Eagle & Brennan, 2007). For example, the following definition of quality is written so broadly that it is difficult to decipher its meaning or how it could be consistently applied in higher education: “the embodiment of the essential nature of a person, collective, object, action, process or organization” (Harvey, 2014, “Quality”). A third challenge is that quality is not a static but rather a dynamic, ever-changing pursuit of excellence that must be considered in the context of the larger educational, economic, political, and social landscape (Bobby, 2014; Ewell, 2010; Harvey, 2005; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Opre & Opre, 2006; Singh, 2010). For example, dwindling public trust in higher education has prompted institutions to refocus efforts on producing concrete evidence of student learning to funding bodies and customers rather than focusing on achieving prestige (Amaral & Rosa, 2010; Ewell, 2010). Given the challenges of defining quality, there are a number of disparate definitions in the literature. In the next section, themes across definitions and strategies used to define quality are examined.

### **Definitions of Quality**

After reviewing the literature, the authors noted two strategies for defining quality. The first is to construct a broad definition that targets one central goal or outcome, such as fulfilling a stated mission or vision (Bogue, 1998; Harvey & Green, 1993). There are 13 broadly constructed

definitions of quality in the literature reviewed. Some definitions are primarily standards-driven, focusing on meeting a pre-defined set of standards, specifications, and requirements, or focusing on exceeding the highest standards in pursuit of excellence and exclusivity (Cheng & Tam, 1997; Garvin, 1987; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Martin & Stella, 2007; Peterson, 1999; Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). Conversely, other definitions are primarily stakeholder-driven, focusing on accountability to the public or providing a transformative learning experience to benefit students and employers (Bogue, 1998; Harvey, 2005; Haworth & Conrad, 1997; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2012; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002, 2004, 2007).

When the authors examined the definitions in totality, several themes emerged. For example, as shown in Table 1, the literature revealed four broad conceptualizations of quality: quality as purposeful, exceptional, transformative, and accountable. The conceptualizations are consistent with those originally developed in the 1990s (Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996) despite a number of newer publications on quality in recent years, which suggests that the meaning of quality in higher education has remained relatively stable for the past 20 years. It is worth noting, however, that there is a trend in many of the newer publications towards stakeholder-driven definitions of quality (Bobby, 2014; Harvey, 2005; Nicholson, 2011; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2012; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007). This trend is consistent with educational changes in the United Kingdom and United States over the past 20 years in which, to bolster public trust, institutions were compelled to demonstrate quality through evidence of student learning as opposed to relying on accrediting bodies to confirm quality based on adherence to pre-defined standards (Amaral & Rosa, 2010; Ewell, 2010; Harvey, 2005).

Table 1. Classifications of Quality

Classifications	Definitions
Purposeful	Institutional products and services conform to a stated mission/vision or a set of specifications, requirements, or standards, including those defined by accrediting and/or regulatory bodies (Cheng & Tam, 1997; Commonwealth of Learning, 2009; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Peterson, 1999)
Exceptional	Institutional products and services achieve distinction and exclusivity through the fulfillment of high standards (Bogue, 1998; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Peterson, 1999)
Transformative	Institutional products and services effect positive change in student learning (affective, cognitive, and psychomotor domains) and personal and professional potential (Biggs, 2001; Bobby, 2014; Bogue, 1998; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Haworth & Conrad, 1997; Pond, 2002; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2012; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007)
Accountable	Institutions are accountable to stakeholders for the optimal use of resources and the delivery of accurate educational products and services with zero defects (American Society for Quality, n.d.; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Green, 1994; Harvey, 2005; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Nicholson, 2011)

The second strategy for defining quality is to identify specific indicators that reflect desired inputs (e.g., responsive faculty and staff) and outputs (e.g., employment of graduates) (Barker, 2002; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi, & Leitner, 2004; Oldfield & Baron, 2000; Scott, 2008; Tam, 2010; Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). Many of the publications and quality assurance

models from the past decade reflect this strategy. For example, the Quality Matters Rubric does not include a broad definition of quality, but does include specific standards that articulate indicators of quality (e.g., “A variety of instructional materials is used in the course”; Quality Matters, 2014). There are over 50 specific quality indicators in the literature we reviewed. After reviewing all of the indicators, we identified four distinct categories: administrative, student support, instructional, and student performance indicators (Table 2). The first three categories primarily address the desired inputs, such as educational resources available to students. The last category, student performance, focuses more on outputs, such as gains in learning, which reflects the trends in assessing student outcomes to assure quality (Tam, 2014).

Table 2. *Categories of Quality Indicators*

Categories	Definitions
Administrative Indicators	A set of quality indicators that pertain to the administrative functions of an institution, including developing a relevant mission and vision, establishing institutional legitimacy, achieving internal/external standards and goals, and procuring resources for optimal institutional functioning (Cheng & Tam, 1997; Commonwealth of Learning, 2009; Hill, Lomas, & MacGregor, 2003; Iacovidou, Gibbs, & Zopiatis, 2009; Mishra, 2007; Online Learning Consortium, 2014; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996; Zineldin, Akdag, & Vasicheva, 2011)
Student Support Indicators	A set of quality indicators that pertain to the availability and responsiveness of student support services (e.g., the degree to which student complaints are adequately addressed; Garvin, 1987; Hill et al., 2003; Iacovidou et al., 2009; International Organization for Standardization, n.d.; Lagrosen et al., 2004; Mishra, 2007; National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2015; Oldfield & Baron, 2000; Online Learning Consortium, 2014; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996; Quality Matters, 2014; Wong, 2012; Zineldin et al., 2011)
Instructional Indicators	A set of quality indicators that pertain to the relevancy of educational content and the competence of instructors (e.g., programs and courses that prepare students for employment; Biggs, 2001; Commonwealth of Learning, 2009; Harvey & Green, 1993; Hill et al., 2003; Iacovidou et al., 2009; Online Learning Consortium, 2014; Quality Matters, 2014; Tam, 2014; Wong, 2012)
Student Performance Indicators	A set of quality indicators that pertain to student engagement with curriculum, faculty, and staff, and increases in knowledge, skills, and abilities that lead to gainful employment (e.g., increased critical thinking skills; Bogue, 1998; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Haworth & Conrad, 1997; Iacovidou et al., 2009; Scott, 2008)

### Conceptual Model of Quality

Adequately defining quality requires both a broad strategy to target central goals and outcomes and a specific strategy to identify quality indicators that can be used to assess whether the identified goals and outcomes have been achieved. It also requires careful consideration of various stakeholder perspectives. Based on the review of the literature, the authors developed a conceptual model of quality that illustrates the interrelationships between these strategies. As shown in Figure 1, the core of the model reflects the importance of eliciting stakeholder perspectives, which should drive the definition of quality and the indicators used to measure quality (Bobby, 2014; Cullen et al., 2003). The next portion of the model contains four broad conceptualizations of quality discussed earlier in this paper (quality as purposeful, transformative,

exceptional, and accountable). The outer portion of the model contains examples of quality indicators that could be used to assess each of the broad conceptualizations. In summary, the model depicts the importance of a multifaceted approach to defining quality, which requires eliciting stakeholder perspectives to develop a broad conceptualization of quality and to accurately select specific indicators to measure that conceptualization of quality.



Figure 1. Conceptual model of quality depicting broad and specific strategies for defining quality.

### Implications for Quality Assurance

Defining quality is an important prerequisite for defining quality assurance. After all, one must know what quality is before determining how to assure it. While defining quality assurance poses some significant challenges due to the wide range of existing definitions, there are some common structural elements across definitions (Figure 2). First, many existing definitions emphasize that quality assurance is a set of processes, policies, or actions performed externally by quality assurance agencies and accrediting bodies or internally within the institution (Borahan & Ziarati, 2002; Commonwealth of Learning, 2009; Opre & Opre, 2006; Peterson, 1999; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2012; Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). Second, many existing definitions of quality assurance include aspects of quality that pertain to accountability and/or continuous improvement. Traditional definitions of quality assurance have focused on accountability; however, there are increasing demands for a greater emphasis on continuous improvement as well (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Nicholson, 2011; Singh, 2010; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2004). Finally, some definitions of quality assurance are broadly constructed (e.g., "policies and processes directed to ensuring the maintenance and enhancing of quality"; Opre & Opre, 2006, p. 422) while others identify specific aspects of quality that will be assured (e.g.,

“policies and mechanisms implemented in an institution or programme to ensure that it is fulfilling its own purposes and meeting the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular”; Martin & Stella, 2007, p. 34). Developing more specific and multidimensional definitions of quality assurance may be beneficial for achieving greater transparency and alignment to definitions of quality developed collaboratively with stakeholders.

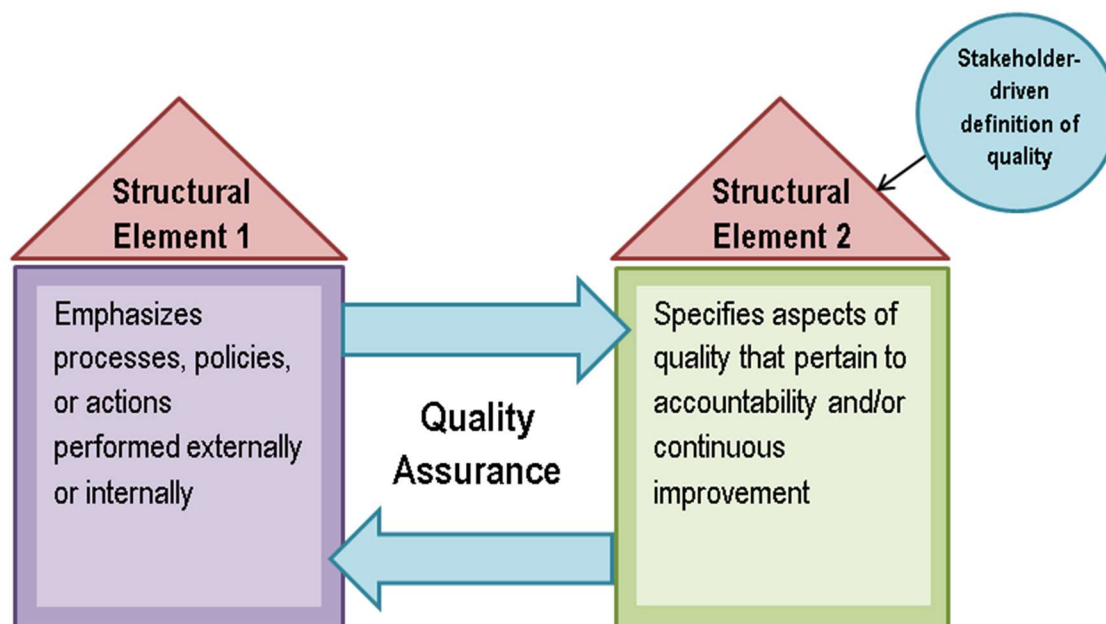


Figure 2. Common structural elements of existing quality assurance definitions.

Another consideration related to defining quality assurance is regional context. In some regions, the terms quality assurance and accreditation are used synonymously while in other regions the terms are distinct (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005). For example, Vlăsceanu et al. (2007) defined quality assurance as “an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system” (p. 48) and accreditation as “the process by which a (non-) governmental or private body evaluates the quality of a higher education institution ... in order to formally recognize it as having met certain predetermined minimal criteria or standards” (p. 37). There are striking similarities between these definitions. Conversely, the American Council on Education (2015) saw accreditation as a basis for quality in higher education institutions, but suggests that meeting accreditation standards may be insufficient for demonstrating overall institutional and programmatic quality. Therefore, a definition of quality assurance must be developed with regional context in mind.

## Conclusion

Defining quality and quality assurance in the context of higher education continues to pose significant challenges. A review of the literature confirms that there is still no consensus on a definition of quality; however, there are themes in how quality is conceptualized and assessed in higher education, as shown in Figure 1. Specifically, the literature suggests that there are four broad conceptualizations of quality (quality as purposeful, transformative, exceptional, and accountable) and a set of quality indicators used to assess each of the broad conceptualizations. The literature also suggests that there are structural themes in existing definitions of quality

assurance, wherein the first element of definitions focus on processes, policies, or actions and the second element of definitions specify aspects of quality that pertain to accountability and/or continuous improvement.

This article has several implications for institutions and quality assurance practitioners. As discussed in the beginning of this article, some have argued that quality is indefinable; however, given the increasing public and governmental interest in quality in higher education, this argument may no longer be acceptable. Institutions must be able to provide evidence to support claims of quality, which often includes systematic assessment of quality. One must be able to define quality in order to assess it. As shown in Table 3, the authors have recommendations for defining quality and quality assurance depending on the existing state of quality initiatives at an institution. The aim of the recommendations for definition quality and quality assurance is to meet institutions and quality assurance practitioners where they are in an effort to help them bring greater clarity and alignment to existing quality assurance practices. In addition, the recommendations must be considered in the context of institutional mission and existing cultural, regulatory, and political environments.

Table 3. *Recommendations for Defining Quality*

<b>Existing State of Quality Assurance Initiatives</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
Institution does not have a definition of quality or a set of indicators to assess quality	Use one or more of the broad conceptualizations of quality in the conceptual model (Figure 1) to define quality at your institution. Then identify a set of observable quality indicators that accurately assess quality as described in the definition.
Institution has a definition of quality, but no indicators to assess quality	Review the existing definition of quality against the conceptual model (Figure 1). Determine if there are any gaps in the existing definition and, if necessary, revise the definition. Then, using a deductive approach, identify a set of observable quality indicators that accurately assess quality as described in the existing definition.
Institution has indicators to assess quality, but no definition of quality	Use an inductive approach to develop a definition of quality that aligns with existing indicators of quality. Review the existing definition of quality and the identified quality indicators against the conceptual model (Figure 1) to determine if there are any gaps and, if necessary, make revisions to the definition and/or indicators.

The article also has several implications for future research on quality in higher education. First, more research is needed to determine the feasibility of developing a universal definition of quality that would apply to different types of institutions in diverse geographic locations. Also worth considering are the disadvantages of creating one definition of quality, given the potential reliance on broad language that may be too vague to convey any significant meaning. Second, more research is needed to better understand the influence of culture on the use and meaning of quality terminology. Specifically, research is needed to determine whether the terms, quality and quality assurance, are applicable across cultures and, if so, whether there are distinct regional and national meanings of these terms. Finally, the relationship between quality assurance and accreditation is unclear. In some instances, the terms quality assurance and accreditation are used interchangeably, while in others these terms are considered distinct and separate (Danø & Bjørn, 2007; Lamarra, 2009; Mishra, 2007; Wells, 2014). Therefore, additional research is needed to determine how these terms are related and whether they are universally distinct.

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