

# European Quality Assurance Forum

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*Putting the System into Quality Assurance?*  
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**SREU**



**BIRMINGHAM CITY**  
University

# Introduction

- Undefined use of the word 'system' in research on QA;
- Little work directly dealing with the question of whether QA in HE *is* a system; Houston and Maniku (2005);
- Can we apply the notion of 'system' to QA?
- Does it matter?
- What does a comparison of QA research and systems theory tell us?
- What *really* matters here?

# Structure

- System and QA – an unexplored concept?
- System: definition;
- QA: definitions;
- General Systems Theory – what is it and what are the key concepts?
- Implications for QA?

# Methodology

- Focus on research on QA since 1980s;
- Particular focus on work published in *Quality in Higher Education*, 1995-present;
- QHE – 1995-present. All aspects of quality in HE and our understanding of it;
- Main forum for research on quality assurance in HE;
- More general overview.

# Definitions: System and Quality assurance

- How is 'System' defined?
- How is 'quality assurance (in HE)' defined?
- Use of term 'system' – confused? Inconsistent?
- 'Process' and 'Scheme' – issues of clarity and inconsistency?

# Definitions: System

- 1 – ‘A set of things working together as parts of a mechanism or an interconnecting network; a complex whole.’
- 2 - ‘A set of principles or procedures according to which something is done; an organized scheme or method.’
- 3 - ‘The prevailing political or social order, especially when regarded as oppressive and intransigent.’
- 4 – A cover all, common sense use of a word to mean the ‘processes’ and ‘procedures’ that make up quality assurance.

# Definitions: Quality assurance – in HE

*'the collections of policies, procedures, systems and practices internal or external to the organisation designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality.'*

(Harvey, 2004-18)

# Quality assurance – a catch-all phrase

*‘Quality assurance has become a catch-all phrase’ .... ‘a tag which is used to cover everything from information for students to state control of universities; from the allocation of money to the improvement of pedagogical practice; from the creation of rankings to internal departmental self analysis and student feedback.’ ([P.] Williams, 2011)*

# Quality assurance – different understandings?

*'[A]ctors in the field may have rather different ideas of what they are talking about but these differences never come to light. On the downside, this kind of superficial consensus (for example, on the 'importance of quality assurance' or the 'need for improvement') is not able to create a common goal.'* (Vetori, 2018)

# General Systems Theory – Origins

- Origins in science and philosophy;
- Hegel – whole is more than the sum of its parts;
- Boulding, von Bertalanffy, Litterer, Skyttner;
- Application of holistic thinking to natural phenomena (Smuts, 1926);
- Application of GST to social sciences (van Gigch, 1974);
- Identified characteristics of a system, rooted in holism (Skyttner, 1996):

# General Systems Theory – characteristics

- All parts of a system are interrelated and interdependent;
- Transformation – transforming inputs into outputs;
- Regulation – attacking deviancy; importance of feedback;
- Evaluation – quantification and measurement;
- Goal seeking – all systems have goals and seek a state of equilibrium;
- Hierarchy – nesting of systems;
- Differentiation – specialist units for specialised functions;
- Equifinality and multifinality – reaching the same goals by different means.

# QA as a national/international 'system'?

- QA processes are national and viewed as such
- Pfeffer & Stichweh (2015) – need to move on from a focus on national 'systems' of HE
- Is there an international 'system'? A growing set of processes? How does this affect QA? Houston and Maniku (2005).
- QA Networks and frameworks
- But TNE – national QA agencies trying to assure international programmes

# QA: Interrelatedness and interdependence

‘Unrelated and independent elements can never constitute a system’

- Do QA processes relate to each other?
- Triangulation of data?
- Collecting data for what purpose?
- External QA and Internal QA processes?

# QA: Holism

- 'Holistic properties should be possible to define within a system'
- Is QA holistic? Closed or open system?
  - Is QA more than a set of vaguely related processes?
  - Can QA be applied to anything other than L & T?
  - Can QA be expanded to include broader areas of HE? Putting the (HE) system into QA?
  - Precedents? Eg. Total Student Experience – moving beyond the classroom experience?
  - Impact of whole institution on student? Eg. working on campus programmes

# A narrow view?

'unlike accreditation or subject assessments, however, academic audits make no attempt to comprehensively review an institution's or program's resources and activities nor to directly assess the quality of teaching or learning.'  
(Dill, 2000, p. 188)

# QA: Goal seeking

‘systemic interaction must result in some goal or final state to be reached or some point of equilibrium to be approached’

- Does QA have goals? What are they?
- Is there a state of ‘equilibrium’ that is aimed at by QA?
- Collini (2012) – nonsense of continuous quality improvement in HE
- Has QA improved L&T?
- Has QA encouraged HE to have clearer goals?

# QA: Inputs and outputs

- Where do the inputs of QA come from?
- What are the inputs? What are the outputs?
- Tendency to think in industrial terms? QA – origins as industrial notion applied to HE
- Who is the 'customer'? Student as 'consumer'? What is the 'product'?

# QA: Entropy

‘amount of randomness and disorder that is present in any system. All non living systems tend towards disorder. Maximum entropy attained when all motion ceases...’

- Differences between QA ‘systems’? Eg. SA and Nigerian comparison (Okafor, 2014)

# QA: Differentiation

‘in complex systems, specialised units perform specialised functions’

- Is there differentiation in QA?
- Is internal QA a specialised function of specialised units within HEIs?

# QA: Hierarchy

‘systems are generally complex and are made up of smaller subsystems – nesting of systems implied by hierarchy’

- Is QA part of a hierarchy?
- Is QA a separate system or a subsystem of HE?
- External QA – external to ensure independence
- Internal QA – rooted in HEs

# QA and regulation

‘interrelated objects constituting the system must be regulated so that its goals can be realised. Deviations will be detected and corrected; feedback is necessary for effective control. ‘

- Regulation – core characteristic of a system;
- Regulation is what QA does?
- QA – the regulation of HE system? Or is there regulation of QA as a system?
- Prominent role of feedback – from students, from QAA; from other ‘stakeholders’
- Feedback as control – NSS and others

# QA: Transformation

'all systems, if they are to attain their goal, must transform inputs in to outputs'

- Is QA a transformative process or simply about monitoring?
- Transforming what? Processes or people?
- QA – the first step to QE? Or simply about monitoring?
- Problem of measurement – what you can count rather than what counts.
- Academics not always happy with the notion of QA – 'quality assurance' used as a negative term; 'quality improvement' more positive (Cardoso et al, 2018).

# QA: Equifinality and multifinality

‘open systems have equally valid alternative ways of achieving the same objectives (divergence) or obtain different and mutually exclusive objectives (convergence).’

- QA – different ways of achieving quality?
- HEIS can take different approaches to achieving QA Goals.

# Concluding remarks

- Can QA be classed as a 'system'?
- Is QA a sub-system of HE?
- Often, the problem is simply that QA is not actually a system;
- It matters;
- Systems thinking can be helpful in identifying underlying issues in QA;
- Expanding remit of HE?
- Philosophical 'problem' of QA in HE;
- There is danger in applying systems thinking to QA – justifying control over transformative potential of QA.

# Thank You!

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