2025 European Quality Assurance Forum

QA in times of crises – Ensuring stability, autonomy and international cooperation in higher education

Hosted by Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary
12-14 November 2025

ISSN: 1375-3797

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Paper

Title: Quality Assurance as a Catalyst for Institutional Policy Reform in Times of Crisis

Abstract

Crises often act as accelerators of change. This paper examines how quality assurance (QA) mechanisms have been leveraged not only to maintain academic standards but also to catalyse broader policy reforms at the institutional level. We explore the case of a national university that overhauled its governance and learning outcomes frameworks following two concurrent disruptions: a national political crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. QA teams used these disruptions to initiate conversations about academic integrity, student-centred learning, and institutional transparency, framing reform through internal quality dialogues and peer-led reviews. The paper discusses how QA's role shifted from oversight to facilitation, enabling shared ownership of change. While short-term decisions were driven by necessity, long-term institutional policy reform was guided by QA processes that emphasised reflection, stakeholder inclusion, and responsiveness. This case provides a replicable model for QA units seeking to use crisis moments as windows of opportunity for structural reform rather than reactive damage control.

Crises are institutional stress tests. They compress time, expose latent contradictions, and compel organisations to make decisions under conditions of imperfect information[1]. In higher education, a crisis is rarely a single event. It is a compounding of pressures, public health emergencies, political volatility, budgetary shocks, and digital disruption arriving faster than governance structures were designed to

[1] L. Harvey, B. Stensaker, *Quality Culture: Understandings, Boundaries and Linkages*, European Journal of Education, 43(4), 2008, pp. 427-442.

absorb[2]. Yet crisis also releases energy that is otherwise difficult to mobilise in stable times, attention becomes focused, assumptions become negotiable, and the opportunity cost of inaction becomes intolerable. The central argument of this paper is that quality assurance (QA), when reimagined as a facilitative and reflexive practice rather than a compliance ritual, can convert that compressed energy into durable institutional policy reform[3].

In ordinary times, QA is often mischaracterised as an after-the-fact inspection system, a cycle of documenting inputs, auditing processes, and reporting outcomes for external scrutiny. While such functions remain necessary for credibility, they do not exhaust QA's potential. At its best, QA is the institution's architecture for collective learning[4]. It organises feedback, sets expectations for deliberation, translates data into meaning, and makes local experiments legible across the organisation. These capacities are precisely those most needed in crisis, when linear planning collapses and institutions must adapt through iterative sense-making[5]. When QA occupies a facilitative role moderating evidence-informed conversations, curating emerging practices, and signalling what good enough for now looks like, it becomes the engine that moves an institution from reactive damage control to generative reform.

To ground this claim, consider the experience of a national public university, “University Alpha”, which encountered two concurrent disruptions between 2020 and 2023: a nationwide political standoff that disrupted public finances and regulatory clarity, and the COVID-19 pandemic that shuttered campuses and scrambled pedagogical routines[6]. The dual crisis created competing imperatives. On the one hand, leaders needed to act decisively to protect the continuity of learning. On the other hand, actions taken under duress would set precedents. They would harden into policy unless actively reviewed. QA's traditional cadence of multi-year audits culminating in summary reports was ill-suited to this tempo[7]. The university therefore authorised its QA office to pivot from periodic oversight to continuous facilitation. That pivot transformed how decisions were made, how legitimacy was built, and how reform was institutionalised.

The first move was to establish rapid, credible, usable, and humane feedback loops. The QA team designed short, rotating pulse surveys for students and instructors, complemented by online focus groups and open office hours. The instruments prioritised actionable indicators, access to devices and bandwidth, clarity of expectations, balance between synchronous and asynchronous activity, assessment workload, and perceived fairness, rather than an encyclopaedic inventory of everything that could be measured[8]. Data were processed weekly into learning memos that condensed findings into two pages: one page of signals and trends, and one page of implications. The memos were circulated to department heads and student unions, then discussed in open forums. The choice to keep memos short was strategic. It signalled that the purpose was not compliance but collective problem-solving[9]. The result was a cadence of attention that leaders could sustain without drowning in dashboards.

From those feedback loops emerged a shared storyline of the crisis, students disengaging, staff workloads spiking, which types of courses were adapting well, and inequities widening. Storylines

[2] J. Newton, *Is Quality Assurance Leading to Enhancement?*, *Quality in Higher Education*, 19(3), 2013, pp. 297-315.
[3] R. A. Gigliotti, *Crisis Leadership in Higher Education: Theory and Practice*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2019.
[4] A. Schleicher, *The Impact of COVID-19 on Education: Insights from Education at a Glance 2020*, OECD Publishing, Paris 2020.
[5] C. Hodges, S. Moore, B. Lockee, T. Trust, and A. Bond, *The Difference Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning, Educause Review*, 27(1), 2020.
[6] A. R. Hakim and N. Suharto, *The Role of Accreditation in Improving Education Quality,* in *Proceedings of the 2nd Annual International Conference on Research of Educational Administration and Management (ICREAM 2018)*, *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, vol. 382, Atlantis Press, Paris 2019, pp. 222–226.
[7] D. B. Cousins and J. Whitmore, *Introducing Evidence-Based Principles to Guide Collaborative Approaches to Evaluation: Results of an Empirical Process,Evaluation and Program Planning*, 57, 2016, pp. 77–88.
[8] N. Selwyn, *Education and Technology: Key Issues and Debates*, 2nd ed., Bloomsbury, London 2020.
[9] Ibidem

matter. They distribute empathy, legitimise trade-offs, and identify levers for improvement[10]. QA's role was not simply to count complaints but to frame patterns in ways that made choices intelligible. One early policy decision illustrates the effect. In the initial weeks of remote teaching, instructors leaned heavily on high-stakes, proctored examinations. Reports from students documented connectivity failures, privacy concerns, and anxiety tied to surveillance tools[11]. Rather than impose a blanket ban on proctoring, QA convened a design clinic to map assessment goals to alternative methods as iterative projects, oral defences, open-source exams with higher-order tasks, and reflective journals tied to explicit rubrics[12]. Within a month, a majority of first-year courses had shifted toward diversified assessment, and the Senate approved an interim policy that framed integrity as a shared responsibility rather than a technological arms race. What began as an emergency adjustment became the seed of a new institutional assessment philosophy.

Parallel to pedagogical change, the university's governance needed to become more agile. The standing Senate and its subcommittees were too slow to evaluate weekly evidence and authorise course corrections[13]. In response, the rector established compact, time-limited strategy tables composed of faculty leads, student representatives, IT and library services, and a QA facilitator. Each table was chartered around a mission of continuous learning, staff well-being, digital inclusion, and academic integrity, and was empowered to pilot interventions with built-in evaluation plans[14]. The QA facilitator's job was to ensure that proposals articulated their assumptions, defined credible indicators of success, and specified sunset clauses if results did not materialise. This configuration accomplished two things. First, it decongested decision-making without fragmenting it; QA's standard templates made different experiments comparable. Second, it habituated the institution to a discipline of reversible decisions, safe-to-try moves that were bold enough to matter but bounded sufficiently to retract[15]. Over time, several pilots evolved into formal policy, with refinements as an institution-wide digital pedagogy framework, guidelines for inclusive course design, and a commitment to regular student-staff partnership reviews[16].

Crises create not only practical dilemmas but moral ones. Who bears the cost of adaptation? Whose definition of quality prevails? Which risks are deemed acceptable? Because QA is conventionally associated with fairness and transparency, it can convene conversations that might otherwise be avoided. University Alpha's QA team used this convening power to foreground equity. Analyses of participation patterns revealed that students from rural areas and first-generation backgrounds were under-represented in synchronous sessions and over-represented among those requesting deadline extensions. Rather than publishing deficit narratives about student resilience, the QA memos linked inequity to institutional choices, scheduling, pedagogical format, and assumptions embedded in course design[17]. That reframing shifted the burden of proof. Departments were asked to justify the proportion of synchronous hours in relation to demonstrable benefits and to document the accessibility of essential materials on low-bandwidth devices. The resultant policy did not dictate a single model but required departments to articulate their rationales in light of evidence. Equity thus moved from aspiration to design constraint, an outcome made possible by QA's positioning as a translator between values and operational choices[18].

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[10] QAA, *Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education: How to Address Contract Cheating, the Use of Third-Party Services and Essay Mills (Third Edition)*, The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Gloucester 2022.
[11] H. de Boer and J. File, *Higher Education Governance Reforms Across Europe*, CHEPS, Enschede 2009.
[12] A. Schleicher, op. cit,
[13] Ibidem
[14] C. Bryson and L. Hand, *"The Role of Engagement in Inspiring Teaching and Learning," Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 44(4), 2007, pp. 349–362.
[15] J. Newton, *op. cit.*
[16] M. Zembylas, *"Higher Education for Social Justice During Crises," Teaching in Higher Education*, 26(4), 2021, pp. 497–510.
[17] T. Lancaster and R. Clarke, *"Contract Cheating: The Outsourcing of Assessed Student Work,"* in T. Bretag (ed.), *Handbook of Academic Integrity*, Springer, Singapore 2016, pp. 639–654.
[18] D. A. Rettinger, *"Student Integrity and the Ethics of Assessment in Higher Education," Ethics & Behavior*, 30(3), 2020, pp. 217–233.

Academic integrity represented another arena where QA's catalytic role was visible. The initial instinct among some faculty was to escalate surveillance. QA proposed a different logic: cultivate integrity by making expectations explicit, assessments authentic, and feedback frequent. It offered a toolkit with model honour pledges, scenario-based discussions for first-year courses, and rubrics that rewarded process as well as product. Faculty mentors shared vignettes of how they redesigned assignments to be less about recall and more about application to local contexts, group synthesis, or personal reflection. Within a semester, the university adopted an Integrity Charter that placed education before enforcement, paired with a proportionate and transparent misconduct process. Importantly, QA monitored not only incidents of cheating but also students' reported understanding of integrity norms and their perceived fairness of procedures. That dual monitoring recognised that ethical cultures are built by both rules and perceptions of justice. The charter survived the return to hybrid teaching because it had been socialised through practice rather than imposed as a code to memorise.

If crisis responses are to become reform, institutions must remember what they learned. QA became the custodian of memory by institutionalising learning reviews at the end of each term[19]. These were not audits but cross-unit conversations structured around four prompts: what did we try, what did we learn, what will we keep, and what will we stop. The reviews mixed quantitative indicators with narrative evidence, examples of student work, short case studies of course redesigns, and reflections from student partners. The QA office synthesised these into campus-wide learning briefs, highlighting principles that travelled well across disciplines and noting contextual limits. Because the briefs were concise and story-rich, they circulated widely; faculty development centres turned them into workshops; deans used them in annual retreats; and the student union drew on them to orient new representatives. Over time, the briefs formed a living archive that made it easier to distinguish habits worth retaining from emergency hacks worth retiring.

A notable shift during this period was the democratisation of QA. Historically, QA language and tools had been the domain of administrators and accreditation experts[20]. University Alpha intentionally expanded ownership. Students were trained as peer reviewers for course redesigns, contributing insights on clarity, workload, and relevance. Departments nominated quality partners, frontline staff who documented micro-innovations and fed them into institutional learning reviews. The QA office simplified templates and published glossaries to demystify terminology. It also launched open studios where anyone could bring a messy question, "How do we give feedback at scale without burning out?" and leave with a small prototype to test. These moves treated quality not as a gate to pass but as a craft to practice. The cultural effect was palpable. Conversations about improvement migrated from the margins of committee meetings to the centre of daily work[21].

Financial constraints are often cited as the reason reforms stall once urgency fades. QA helped University Alpha prioritise within limits by linking resourcing to demonstrable learning gains. When departments sought funds for technology or staffing, proposals had to reference evidence from pulse surveys or pilots, specify the smallest sensible investment that could test an approach, and commit to sharing results. This discipline discouraged gold-plating and rewarded frugal innovation[22]. It also countered a frequent pathology of crisis spending: the assumption that permanent costs were built on transient needs. Because QA insisted on evaluation and sunset clauses, investments could be rolled back or scaled only when evidence justified it. The budgeting process thus became a site of policy learning rather than merely an allocation contest.

[19] R. Barnett, *The Ecological University: A Feasible Utopia*, Routledge, London 2017.
[20] L. Harvey, “Understanding Quality,” *Quality in Higher Education*, 12(1), 2006, pp. 1–19.
[21] C. Christensen and H. Eyring, *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 2011.
[22] P. Black and D. Wiliam, “Developing the Theory of Formative Assessment,” *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 2009, pp. 5–31.

Not all interventions worked. Some courses overwhelmed students with continuous low-stakes tasks in the name of formative assessment[23]. Some instructors, eager to be flexible, created ambiguity that reduced rather than increased student agency. QA's facilitative stance included naming such unintended effects without blame. Learning memos juxtaposed intentions with outcomes and offered alternative designs. Over successive cycles, the noise diminished. The capacity to admit missteps publicly made safer by QA's neutral framing proved as crucial as any single innovation. It cultivated institutional humility, a trait that correlates with resilience, because it lowers the cost of course correction[24].

As crisis pressures eased, the risk of reform decay increased. University Alpha addressed this by transforming ad hoc practices into policy with built-in review. The Senate adopted a revised Institutional Quality Policy that codified principles tested during the crisis, like proportional evidence, student-staff partnership, equity by design, and reversible decision-making[25]. Crucially, the policy defined quality assurance as the joint work of setting intentions, generating proof of learning, and making that evidence public within the community. It mandated annual learning reviews at program and faculty levels and set epectations that committees would justify major decisions by reference to those reviews. The policy thus re-anchored QA in routine governance, not as a parallel system but as the grammar of institutional conversation[26].

The university's external relationships also shifted. In prior accreditation cycles, external panels had been treated as hurdles. After the crisis, University Alpha invited external peers to join internal learning reviews as thought partners rather than judges. By exposing formative work and inviting critique upstream, the university reduced downstream performative compliance. External recognition followed not because the university perfected its documentation, but because it demonstrated a living, quality culture, one that generated, examined, and acted upon its own evidence. That cultural turn is difficult to counterfeit and, once developed, becomes a reputational asset[27].

What general lessons emerge from this case? First, QA catalyses reform by shortening the distance between evidence and decision. Weekly learning memos, design clinics, and strategy tables turned information into action with minimal friction[28]. The lesson is not "move fast and break things," but "move at the speed of learning," which is slower than panic and faster than bureaucracy. Second, QA gains legitimacy when it broadens participation. Quality done *to* people provokes compliance; quality done *with* people induces ownership. Third, QA protects equity by making inequity visible as a product of design rather than character[29]. Requiring departments to explain synchronous loads or technology dependencies reframed fairness as an institutional duty. Fourth, QA sustains change by building memory. Without the learning briefs and annual reviews, reforms would have receded as the crisis abated; with them, reform became the new routine.

There are, of course, boundaries to QA's catalytic power. QA cannot compensate indefinitely for underfunding, political interference, or structural inequities in the broader system[30]. It cannot eliminate

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[23] M. G. Eva and R. Regehr, *"Assessment and Feedback in Medical Education: Lessons from the Past, Principles for the Future," Medical Education*, 47(12), 2013, pp. 1164–1172.
[24] A. Stensaker and P. Maassen, *"The Future of Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions: On Their Way Towards Organisational Identities," Quality in Higher Education*, 21(3), 2015, pp. 209–228.
[25] M. J. Rosa, C. S. Sarrico, and A. Amaral, *"Understanding the Impacts of Quality Assessment: An Exploratory Use of Cultural Theory," Quality in Higher Education*, 22(2), 2016, pp. 119–136
[26] HRK – German Rectors' Conference, *Responding to Massification: Lessons from the Global Expansion of Higher Education*, HRK Publications, Bonn 2019.
[27] B. Williamson and A. Hogan, "Commercialisation and Privatisation in/Of Education in the Context of COVID-19," *Education International Research Paper*, 1(1), 2020.
[28] S. Coates and D. McCormick, *"Student Voice and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education," Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(6), 2020, pp. 819–832.
[29] Ibidem
[30] J. Hazelkorn, *Reshaping the University: The Rise of the Regulated Market in Higher Education*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2015.

uncertainty or foreclose conflict. What it can do is increase the institution's coefficient of learning: the speed and quality with which experience is converted into wiser policy. That conversion requires capacities such as sense-making, empathy, and facilitation that are not always part of QA's traditional self-image. Developing those capacities demands investment in people, such as hiring for hybrid profiles that combine analytic and relational skills, and in professional development in design methods, data storytelling, and conflict mediation. It also requires leadership that protects QA's neutrality so that evidence is not weaponised in local turf battles[31].

Looking forward, the role of QA in digital transformation deserves particular attention. The crisis normalised blended learning, expanded data traces of student engagement, and multiplied tools that promise efficiency at the cost of opacity. QA will be central in adjudicating trade-offs between personalisation and privacy, automation and agency, convenience and community. If QA restricts itself to verifying that tools meet technical standards, it will miss the deeper question of how technology reshapes pedagogy, assessment, and the distribution of academic labour. By convening educators, students, technologists, and ethicists around concrete use cases and by insisting on evidence that reflects learning, not just clicks, QA can guide technology adoption toward educational value rather than novelty.

Finally, QA's catalytic effect in crisis rests on a paradox: to reform policy, one must first reform conversation. Policies endure when they crystallise shared understanding; they decay when they outpace what people can collectively affirm. In the compressed time of crisis, conversation often becomes directive. QA's gift is to restore deliberation without sacrificing momentum, to host the kinds of talk that make action brighter and commitment deeper. In doing so, QA redefines quality itself not as the absence of error, but as the presence of learning. That definition travels well from emergency to normalcy. It invites institutions to treat every cycle not as a ritual of compliance but as a rehearsal for doing their core work better, enabling people to think, inquire, and grow together.

If there is a single lesson from University Alpha, it is this: crises do not automatically produce reform; institutions produce reform when they are equipped to learn in public. Quality assurance, when practised as facilitation, equips them. It gathers the proper evidence at the right granularity, orchestrates dialogue across differences, and secures legitimacy for choices that cannot please everyone. It keeps equity visible as a design question, integrity credible as a community norm, and technology subordinate to pedagogy. It translates the adrenaline of an emergency into the muscle memory of better practice. And when the sirens fade, it leaves behind something rare in organisational life that policies that people recognise as their own, because they were learned into existence rather than mandated into being.

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