

Rhetoric and reality: The Irish experience of Quality Assurance

CAMILLA FITZSIMONS

Abstract

This paper shares the Irish adult educator's experiences of Quality Assurance (QA). Educators are found to be largely supportive of QA but contradictions emerge. These include philosophical tensions, inconsistent moderation and incongruence between the stated values of QA and a more powerful government-led employability discourse.

Keywords: Quality, quality assurance (QA), accreditation, government policy, evaluation, retrospective and prospective QA, managerialism, neoliberalism.

Introduction

Unless I am mistaken, most adult educators are spending more and more time talking about quality. This hasn't happened in isolation as, since the 1990s, there has been momentous political interest in quality in education. Many countries have created state agencies, each of which are legally responsible for guaranteeing quality or, to use dominant terminology, for 'Quality Assurance' (QA). Across Europe, the Irish regulatory authority, *Quality and Qualifications Ireland* (QQI), link with the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*, and the *European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training* (EQAVET) network. These relationships form part of wider policy convergence through the *Bologna* (1999) and the lesser known *Copenhagen* (2002) Declarations. Both agreements commit participants to transferable, comparable and measurable programmes throughout and to QA cooperation (European Higher Education Area, 1999; European Commission, 2002). To comply with these agreements, many nations have implemented national QA policies, each of which conform to European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) that were first published in 2005 (EGS, 2015). State involvement in quality in education has become so taken-for-granted, it is often rarely questioned.

Most adult educators also care about quality. One could argue adult education's rootedness in a critique of traditional education (Dewey, 1997; Freire 1972) and its emphasis on practitioner self-reflection (Brookfield, 1987; McCormack; 2015) ensure the pursuit of quality forms a cornerstone of practice. Over the years, a number of practitioner-conceived guidance tools have emerged such as the National Adult Learning Agency (NALA) *Guidelines for Adult Literacy Work*, first published in 1985 and the *Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework* published by AONTAS in 2005. These guidelines support democratically-oriented principles of practice and help document a longstanding tradition of collaborative evaluation between educators and participants/learners. It isn't only adult educators who care about quality. Self-conceived peer-evaluations in universities have an equally long history as academics sought fresh perspectives to enhance their teaching practice (Harvey, 2004). Although less documented, developments in Irish Further Education (FE) usually follow British practice (Geaney, 2008) where practitioner guides have long advocated collaborative evaluation to enhance quality (for example in Walkin, 1990).

Given this longstanding interest in quality, one would be forgiven for assuming educators would welcome the recent, top-down, flood of legislative and policy developments. International literature suggests this isn't the case revealing at best indifference, at worst hostility, towards top-down imposed QA frameworks (Newton; 2000; Anderson, 2006; Cartwright, 2007; Coffield and Edward, 2009; Seema *et al.*, 2016).

This contribution addresses a gap in Irish literature by uncovering both benefits and frustrations gathered via an anonymised on-line survey about QA which was completed by 136 adult educators in early 2017. As well as reporting on survey findings, this paper reviews some literature, policy and legislation. Working as a critical researcher (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005), the hypothesis I bring is that, instead of being politically neutral, QA cannot be separated from a wider neoliberalisation of society. This is where the market is considered sacrosanct, where privatisation is revered and where citizens are transformed into consumers (Birch and Mykhnenko, 2010). This socio-political model has profoundly affected adult and community education as, for the neoliberal state, activities beyond employability are at best seen as an indulgence, at worst seen as pointless.

The elusive nature of quality

So what does quality actually mean? Everyday use of the word mostly indicates the superiority of one item/occurrence over another. Take for example the quality of a coat. This is likely to be decided on by comparing the fabric or the fineness of the stitching. Difficulties arise when we realise that quality often means different things to different people depending on each person's values, subjective judgment and cultural context. Let's think about that coat again. Where one person may prefer wool, another's idea of quality could be animal fur, an abhorrence to many. When discussing quality in education, such relativity is equally present. Commonly used terms such as 'standards', 'best practice' or whether something is 'fit for purpose' are open to scrutiny. What criteria are used to set standards? Who decides which practice is best? Whose purpose should education be fit for? Given these debates, it isn't surprising that attempts to define quality in education are largely ineffective (Green, 1994; Stubbs, 1994; Newton, 2000; Coffield and Edward, 2009; Anderson, 2006; Cartwright, 2007; Doherty, 2008; Elassey, 2015).

Despite this ambiguity, an "enhanced model" of QA has emerged which focuses on improvement, especially in student-learning, effective evaluation and clear lines of management and accountability (Boyle and Boden, 1997). In everyday practice, QA generally describes two processes: ongoing programme reviews, mostly of course-work, which culminates in internal and external approval; and lengthier less frequent, in-depth reviews that examine all aspects of an education provider, again with an internal and external dimension. Biggs (2001) differentiates two approaches to QA the first of which is a bottom-up *prospective* model that is forward-looking, holistic, qualitative, educational and centred on reflective self-assessment. He contrasts this with a more dominant *retrospective* approach that is backward-looking, quantitative, concerned with measuring quality against externally imposed standards and frequently includes a value for money perspective.

The growth of QA

Up to the 1980s and 1990s, education was mostly conceived as a collective responsibility and as a citizen's right so people could realise their social, intellectual and occupational potential. European policies on lifelong learning altered this perspective through a powerful, utilitarian discourse that reinterpreted its principle function as to support economic growth (Grummell, 2014; Hurley, 2014). Governments no longer created employment but created *employability* (Browne *et al.*, 2003) where each person became accountable

for their own up-skilling as demanded by a global labour-market. A process of *new public managerialism* facilitated neoliberalism's macro-economic vision through substantial policy reform (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Fitzsimons, 2017). This managerialism infused an ideology of commerce and measurability into the public realm where services once funded on the basis of need, were resourced on their capacity to offer value for money and to satisfy market demands. One consequence was an influx of industry models of QA; representations where standardisation, uniformity and measurability against internationally agreed benchmarks were already well established (Cartwright, 2007; Doherty, 2008; Elassey, 2015).

Ireland's QA managerialist trajectory

The first significant Irish QA policy intervention was within *Education for a Changing World* (Government of Ireland, 1992). Its foreword argued for radical reforms to bring Ireland in line with European employability paradigms. Although much focus within *Education for a Changing World* (1992) was on access, it also advocated for an enterprise culture, an ethos of work-readiness and a standardised, modular approach to education with considerable emphasis on QA. *Education for a Changing World* acknowledged the immeasurable nature of quality and supported holistic review but contradictorily encouraged measurable outputs, a value for money paradigm, performance indicators and external monitoring (Government of Ireland, 1992, p. 190-191).

Around the same time, key adult education policies namely the green paper *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* (Government of Ireland, 1998, p. 117) and the white paper *Learning for Life, White Paper on Adult Education* (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 163) supported the introduction of QA. Both endorsed external monitoring believing in the benefits of external perspectives. Whilst much weight is placed on these two policy documents, they are only as powerful as accompanying legislative change and in the same year as the release of the green paper, *The Education Act, 1998* provided the first statutory framework for Irish education since the Vocational Education Committee (VEC) Act in 1930 initiating a legal focus on QA at all levels (Government of Ireland, 1998). One year later the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act* (Government of Ireland, 1999), created a qualifications' authority which launched the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), a framework that lists 'quality' as a foundational value (NFQ, 2003, p. 6). The Irish NFQ standardised outputs, and binately divided achievements across Further Education (levels 1 – 6) and Higher Education (levels 7 – 10).

Ireland's tiered framework of qualifications formed part of an international trend in qualifications' frameworks and their omnipresence is important in terms of QA. For the first time, quality could be numerically measured through fixed learning outcomes across the domains of 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'competencies'. Qualifications' frameworks have become ubiquitous in education. This is despite little evidence to support their usefulness (Allias, 2014) and much criticism of their reductionist approach to intricate and elusive concepts (Harvey, 2004; Hussey and Smith, 2008, Fitzsimons and Dorman, 2013; Fitzsimons, 2017, pp. 171-173).

In 2012, the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act* was passed into law. This established QQI and solidified government responsibility to ensure each provider creates QA policies (section 28[1]). QQI's core statutory guidelines (2016) promote a holistic approach to QA and recognise multiple educational contexts. However, it also supports measurability and accountability, especially through its guidelines for documenting QA (section 2) and through learner assessment by measuring achievements (section 6).

The contradictory nature of QA

This hybrid approach to QA has created a rhetoric of support but a reality that is rife with contradictions. Although many descriptions of QA support multidimensional approaches to appraisals, organisational reviews, governance, values, teaching practice and learner outcomes (Harvey and Green, 1993; Green, 1994; Doherty, 2008, p. 260), state-imposed policies such as the ESG (2015) and QQI (2016) are equally peppered with the language of accountability and measurability with quality benchmarks largely unsympathetic to contextual and ideological differences. Consider for example the difference between quality determinations within politically-oriented, often non-accredited, community education that seeks egalitarian change (Crowther *et al.*, 1999; Connolly, 2003), and with skills-based, behaviourist-oriented, programmes that support low-paid, work-readiness. Philosophical dichotomisations such as these raise questions about the nature of knowledge; itself an elusive and slippery concept. When learning is limited to dominant ideas about knowledge this frequently excludes women's histories and epistemologies (De Beauvoir; 1949/2009; hooks, 1994), is deeply west-centric (Alvers and Farqui, 2011) and privileges a middle-class experience (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). It also ignores the role of traditional education in perpetuating rather than alleviating inequality (Lynch and Baker, 2005).

Proponents of QA frequently argue there is space for all philosophical approaches signposting policy-support for provider choice around ethos and practices. However, it is impossible to guarantee this autonomy when it is contextualised amidst a policy-led employability paradigm that interprets education as little more than a stimulant to economic growth; a perspective reflected in Ireland's current *Further Education and Training Strategy* (SOLAS, 2014) and its *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

Some may also argue that ongoing consultation ensured educators themselves were central to the design of QA policies. Such shared decision-making is not unique to Ireland but is an integral feature of neoliberal policy-development that promises to transform citizenship into an active over passive pursuit (Swyngedouw, 2005). Again this process is contradictory as, rather than deepen democracy, consultation has created an illusion of shared decision-making with power largely retained by the state. When educators seek to contribute, they frequently meet a fortified neoliberal outlook that is difficult to penetrate. Consultation is also hampered by considerable mistrust in Janus-faced governments who simultaneously undermine practice through harsh funding cuts that, in Ireland, have eroded a once vibrant Community Sector (Harvey, 2012; Bissett, 2015).

The sheer volume of policies to consult with also creates a culture of consultation fatigue. For many working within public Education and Training Boards (ETBs), the precarious nature of their employment further complicates their capacity to truly engage. As precarity undermines occupational identity (O'Neill, 2015), actions outside of the classroom are overshadowed by job insecurity and are often unpaid.

Given these shaky foundations it isn't surprising that the supportive potential of external examination can get lost amidst an international culture of bureaucratisation, monitoring and surveillance where significant cultural power is awarded to external aspects of QA. Research reveals a negative power-dynamic where relationships between external examiners and providers can be distanced and with a common misunderstanding of contexts (Biggs, 2001, p. 230) and where student-educator relationships can be under-appreciated (Cartwright, 2007, p. 297). Coffield and Edwards (2009) argue persistent continuous improvement paradigms contribute to demands for unobtainable objectives which instil a fear of external monitoring, whilst, in another study

external monitoring is described as a stressful time during which educators feel controlled (Seema *et al.*, 2016, p. 121).

Rhetoric and reality – the Irish experience

This research gathers experiences from n136 educators who participated in an on-line, mixed-methods, anonymous survey-questionnaire which was designed and distributed using the Bristol Online Survey (BOS) software package. The survey-link was circulated via gatekeepers to the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN), the Further Education Network (FEN) and chosen Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The survey-link was also sent to providers listed by QQI. The survey contained three quantitative questions: 1) asking if educators were working within FE or HE Quality Assurance, 2) identifying which model best describes their experiences, and 3) measuring the perceived impact on teaching. Each question also invited qualitative comments. Additionally, there were two open-ended questions: 1) seeking stories from the field, and 2) inviting educators to leave further comments. Data was organised through open-coding allowing dominant themes to emerge and ensuring each finding is named. Given the volume of responses, this paper is limited in that each individual contribution cannot be included. A second limitation is that those who contribute are likely to be those with the strongest feelings, both positive and negative, about QA.

Dominant QA models

Ninety percent of survey respondents work within QQI levels 1 – 6. Eight percent use HE models of QA and 2% cite “other”. This confirms a shift from historically close relationships with university accreditation to newer associations with the overseers of FE accreditation, a shift that occurred because of the accessibility, rather than suitability, of these awards (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 175).

When asked to decide if their experiences of QA are ‘prospective’ or ‘retrospective’ (Biggs, 2001), two-thirds of respondents identify with a managerialist, retrospective model of QA.

Table 1 –Retrospective versus prospective QA

<i>Please indicate which of these models most accurately describes the model of QA you experience in your work</i>	
“Retrospective – this is a top-down model of QA where external examination/ authentication reviews previously completed work to make sure it meets externally imposed standards. Often this approach is quantitative and closed.”	64%
“Prospective - this is a bottom up model of QA where standards are set internally and with a focus on the present and the future. External examination/ authentication is qualitative and sets out to determine if self-evaluation methods are fit for purpose.”	36%

Twenty-seven educators commented further with the strongest sentiment being a desire for prospective over retrospective models. Typical comments are, “I feel that we should be working towards a prospective model”, and “I long for a prospective model!” Another relays, “we are hopeful that the FET system is moving towards a prospective model of QA within the next year to 18 months”.

Multiple contributors claim a retrospective model is imposed by external forces with some adhering to an alternative, prospective approach within their organisation as captured below.

We follow QQI requirements which are best described in the retrospective model. However, in actual practice we carry out the prospective model and the retrospective model is then applied by QQI.

One voice suggests a prospective model is used but without dissemination throughout the organisation. Finally, a minority support retrospective approaches believing they are most suitable for some programmes.

Impact on teaching practice

A central principle within QA is the desire to improve teaching standards (QQI, 2016). Respondents were thus asked to react to the statement “*my experience is that quality assurance has enhanced the quality of my teaching practice*”. A majority of 65% (n87) answer “yes”, 27% (n36) answer “no” and 8% (n11) answer “don’t know”. Forty-seven (36%) comment further. From the yes camp, the principal reasons are 1) QA’s perceived role in preventing complacency and 2) the benefits of feedback from moderators. However, the majority of comments are from the 35% of contributors (n47) who answer “no” or “don’t know”. One respondent states “quite the opposite” continuing “the amount of time and energy that has

to be spent on QA considerably constrains the amount of time I have to spend planning my teaching”. This is echoed elsewhere,

I have less time to focus on pedagogical research and lesson preparation as I am filling in repeated forms. QA has become an exercise in paperwork as opposed to an instructive quality resource.

Some voices offer a more paradoxical perspective,

An outright ‘no’ is probably not quite right as QA processes have caused me, in the past, to get quite critical about forms of evaluation – so, by accident, QA has helped me become a more critically reflective educator of assumptions behind managerialist approaches to QA. If you follow.

And,

I wouldn’t say it has enhanced it but I also wouldn’t say it has reduced it either. It does impose restrictions but it also provides a standard to reach/ adhere to. It stops complacency creeping in.

Frequently, the NFQs learning outcomes approach is singled out for causing tensions between the needs of individuals and the pressures to teach to a restrictive curriculum.

Stories of QA in practice

Sixty-three educators (46%) answered the question “If there is a particularly negative story or experience, or a particularly positive story or experience you have had with QA can you share it here?” Many respondents share how contradictory experiences with both ‘Internal Verifiers’ (those internal to an education provider with responsibility for QA) and ‘External Authenticators’ (those approved by QQI and invited into an organisation to act as an external reviewer) can undermine confidence and create mistrust. One comment that captures overriding sentiment is,

QA is beneficial if it is adopted by all with the same spirit, however EAs can differ in point of view and can sometimes feel that their view or method of achieving the LOs is the only way, this, I hope, will change with the introduction of new training for EAs and the greater cooperation between ETBs.

Differences can be profound and can contribute to both emotional and laborious dimensions of QA both of which are underpinned by hierarchical power-relationships. To give some examples,

I had a particularly negative experience with an EA where the person did not recognise the value of the different methodologies I used in the assessment, such as role play. The EA also questioned how I dispersed the marks. As a result, the student portfolios were not submitted for certification. I had to retrospectively change the marking to fit with what the EA wanted and resubmit. Another EA evaluated my work and found nothing wrong with the original process used. This caused an enormous amount of stress and worry. The inconsistency between EAs is alarming!

From a separate interaction with an IV,

The centre decided that the 25+ portfolios I had submitted did not have enough detail regarding the marking scheme in the assignment brief...I disagreed strongly but was overruled and subsequently spent a week of full time unpaid work writing ridiculously over-detailed marking rationales for each portfolio separately justifying the mark given in order for them not to be rejected internally. I subsequently met the person in charge of QQI in the supermarket, who apologised to me profusely and said that all my work was of course completely unnecessary but that the centre had insisted on my doing it despite her saying it was unnecessary.

This isn't the only time a marking scheme was rejected by one moderator only to be embraced by another, a situation described as both time-consuming and demoralising. Another voice raises concern about "high standards of work being constantly nit-picked for errors through EA and IV processes" and a fixation with presentation over content is revealed. One educator refers to "the obsession with student portfolios", another where "we have had externals who are more concerned with the colour of folders than the learning content!" In another contribution,

Over the last number of years based on EA and IV reports we have had rigorous procedures and policies put in place. It has all become about the portfolio rather than the student and significant learning. Re-creation of mainstream education which has failed our students first time round.

One speaks about a loss of trust when “questioned by an IV on the extent to which I had read my student’s work”, a judgment determined because the educator deliberately chose not to correct a spelling mistake with pen. There was no consideration for student-educator relationships when supporting an adult-learner scarred by a negative school experience. Other concerns relate to EAs who are not experts in the field of study they are moderating, to providers reportedly not implementing QQI guidelines, to the problematic nature of cross-moderation, and repeatedly of a heavy administrative burden.

Twenty percent of experiences shared are positive with most referring to the benefits of feedback. One contribution captures sentiment sharing,

Overall our experience with External Examiners has been very positive. Their feedback is normally constructive and helpful and generally leads to some form of course improvement for future cohorts of students.

Further thoughts shared

Fifty-two percent (n71) of contributors responded to the question “*What other thoughts do you have about quality assurance that you would like to share?*” A spectrum of responses emerge ranging from “QQI QA policy is worse than useless!!” to “QA works! but difficult to implement QA without teaching staff feeling as if QA is something to be dreaded.” Three recurring themes emerge. The first of these is a re-assertion of support for QA including its focus on measurability and standardisation. Amongst these responses there is a sub-theme - that uniform standards are not currently being achieved. The locus of blame shifts with some interrogating QQI guidelines described as “not clear” and in constant flux. Others seek to mirror practices in the school system where there is a standardisation of assessments and materials. This contribution captures this perspective.

QA is necessary and well intentioned, but unfortunately is open for misinterpretation. I think that the amount of work that goes into the whole process has become beyond a joke, and I think it would be easier and more appropriate at this stage if properly qualified people designed the assignment briefs along with the module descriptors so that the rest of us can get down to teaching and stop wasting all this time.

Others blame educators and providers for the absence of unified standards and express concern about differing provider expectations across NFQ levels.

A second, contradictory and equally strong theme opposes uniform standards believing these to be incompatible with the heterogeneity of adult education. Two chosen contributions echo this.

We are dealing with people not industry or business. In community education we are often dealing with the most disadvantaged for most of whom school was not a good fit. QA is placing restrictions on the idea of adults setting their own agenda in education.

And,

I agree our students are entitled to a quality service, not a Mickey Mouse. That said for the most part, in the name of QA, we have got rid of what we had; learner centred adult education based on the needs of the learner. I do believe it really depends on the ethos of management and tutors.

A third recurring theme, and one that emerges throughout the survey, is dissatisfaction with administrative demands of QA. Although QQI documentation suggests QA administration should be “integrated into normal activities” (QQI, 2016, p. 9), this isn’t how educators experience it as captured in the extract below.

Nothing more than a box ticking exercise. Is not effective or fit for purpose. The main reason for this is that there are no resources allocated to ensuring QA is effective. Lecturers and teachers are heavily burdened with a crippling amount of administration work and there is no space for serious QA.

The expression ‘tick-box’ that appears in the above quote is repeatedly used. To give an example,

We are corporatizing education into a didactic, tick box approach which serves the externally imposed standards regime.

From another,

Learner’s needs should be paramount...the ticking of boxes should come next, but in this system and to my horror, I’m afraid sometimes, the learners’ needs can be overlooked.

This final contribution, captures many of the power-laden experiences and emotions surrounding QA.

I was struck how much internal QA processes [are] dictated by the structure, style and content of summative portfolios and the myriad supporting documents (often outnumbering student's work) that they contained. I tried to work holistically and with the themes that emerged from the groups – it was hard for QQI-interpreted processes to deal with this. I used to end up writing long narrative pieces at the front of folders explaining, and justifying, to IVs and EAs the sometimes untraditional composition of folders. It used to make IVs in particular a bit anxious. We never, as tutors, had any conversations with the EAs about our work (good or bad) – just vague comments and big relieved thumbs-up from coordinators. A very one-way QA process.

Findings

In other survey findings there is praise for provider flexibility in the assessment of learning, disquiet about educators teaching modules they are not subject experts in, and concern that some modules are outdated. This is illustrated through the comment “I had to ask my students to send a fax as it was on the module descriptor, the hardest part was finding a fax.” QQI are criticised for being unavailable to providers, and providers are criticised for not engaging with QQI. One believes that awards at the lower rungs of the NFQ face greater scrutiny and two respondents believe quality standards have fallen since QA was formalised through QQI. Repeatedly the QA fees structure is blamed for squeezing out smaller providers. One community educator is worried about future institutional capacity sharing,

We are very concerned about reengagement and validation of programmes ...we need support / mentoring and are also very concerned about costs of developing the new QA and reengagement costs [and] validation of programmes.

Conclusion

Despite its illusive nature, adult educators do care about quality. Outside perspectives are welcomed where less entrenched perspectives can nurture reflective capacities and can enhance a person's skills-set. However, this study uncovers philosophical tensions in how QA should be approached. Some seek homogenised, standardised accreditation not dissimilar to practices common within the school system. Others resist this model viewing it as incongruent with person-centred, contextualised approaches that are fundamental to adult education. Symptomatic of these tensions, the study uncovers a variety of

experiences, both positive and negative, with internal and external moderation. Given the contested nature of quality, it also uncovers a failure to achieve standard outcomes even by those who support this approach.

If implemented, in a prospective, forward-thinking way, QA has the capacity to support divergent philosophies. This isn't the case though as, although QQI and other international regulatory authorities seek to respect provider-autonomy and to devolve policy design, they cannot extract themselves from a more powerful, employability discourse which reveals the true colours of the neoliberal state. In the shadow of a power-laden culture of surveillance, QA, perhaps unwittingly, helps monitor the implementation of neoliberalism's restrictive, market-oriented, utilitarian agenda.

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