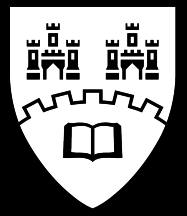

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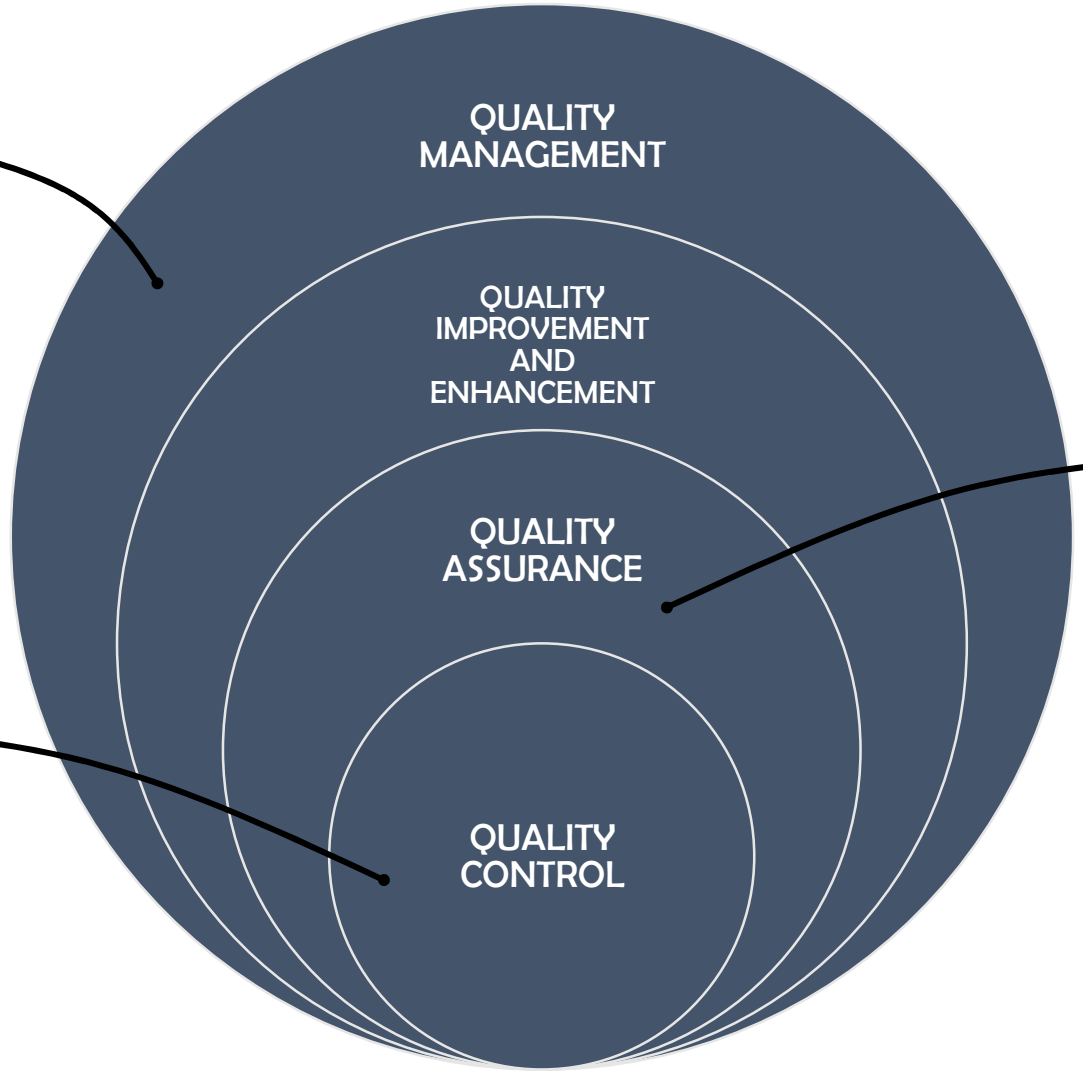
Are we reaching a TEAPing point?:

A qualitative study on managing quality in EAP

Daniel White

Quality Management Systems

SYSTEM-ORIENTED
Involves education system as a whole and the processes by which quality control/assurance is utlised to broadly improve and enhance quality
i.e. approaches to understanding and monitoring performance



PROCESS-ORIENTED
Management tool to *prevent* defects.
e.g. frameworks, accreditation, external examiners

PRODUCT-ORIENTED
Reactive in nature i.e. designed to *identify* defects
e.g. student-staff feedback, post-course review, peer observations

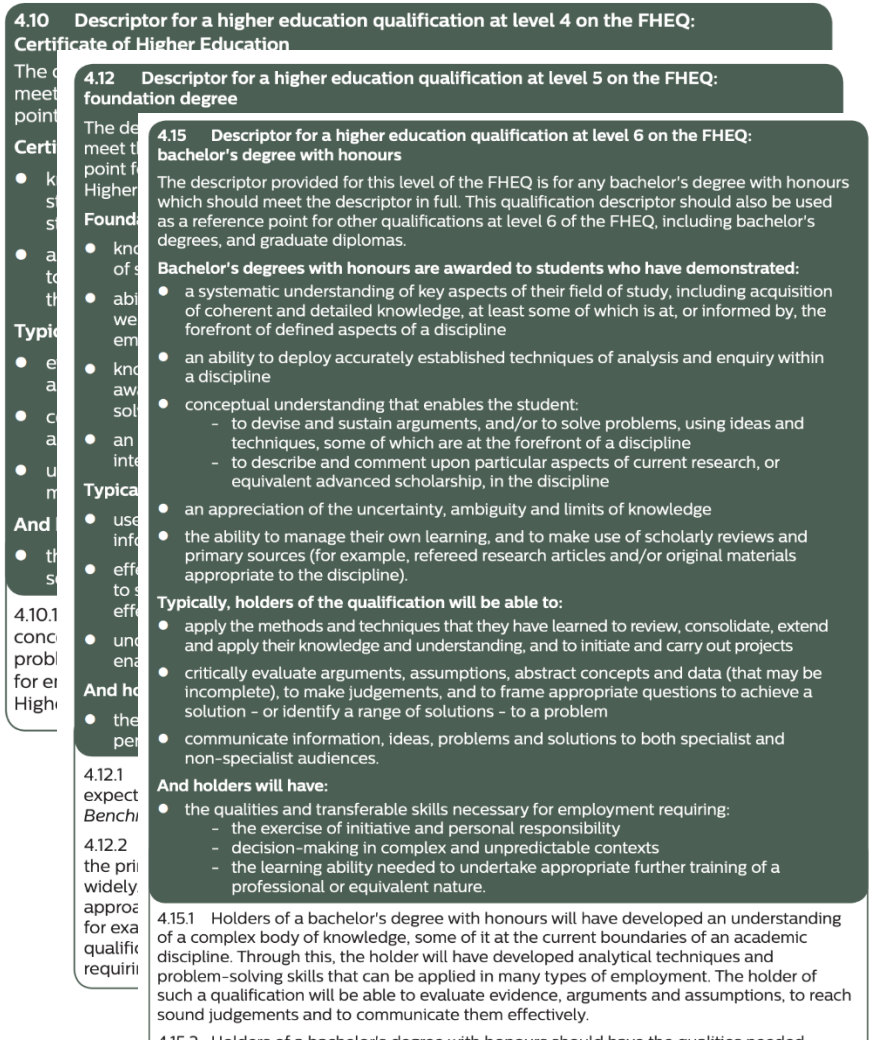
Neidermeier (2017, p. 319)

Quality in HE

- Bologna Process (1999)
- Growing interest in standardisation/quality assurance (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018)
- Introduction of University rankings, metrics and greater strategic orientation among HEIs > comparability measures (Williamson, 2019)
- Development of European standards (ESG, 2015)
- Development of UK standards (QAA, n.d.) and FHEQs [in 2001, revised: 2008, 2014]

Quality in HE

QAA FHEQs (QAA, 2014)



4.10 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 4 on the FHEQ: Certificate of Higher Education

4.12 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 5 on the FHEQ: foundation degree

4.15 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6 on the FHEQ: bachelor's degree with honours

The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any bachelor's degree with honours which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor should also be used as a reference point for other qualifications at level 6 of the FHEQ, including bachelor's degrees, and graduate diplomas.

Bachelor's degrees with honours are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline
- an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline
- conceptual understanding that enables the student:
  - to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline
  - to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline
- an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge
- the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (for example, refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects
- critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution – or identify a range of solutions – to a problem
- communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
  - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
  - decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts
  - the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.

4.15.1 Holders of a bachelor's degree with honours will have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the holder will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The holder of such a qualification will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements and to communicate them effectively.

- Part of UK Quality Code for Higher Education for:
  - Informing academic frameworks for awards
  - Setting and maintaining standards
  - Mapping to Europe/International quals frameworks (standardisation)

Quality in EAP

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- EAP quality management processes largely outside of national frameworks for educational oversight (Blaj-Ward, 2014), though may be considered internally

- BC/BALEAP(BAS) accreditation schemes [in 1989, revised: 2011, 2014, 2016] (baleap.org, n.d.)

- The CEM Model (Sloan & Porter, 2010) + Balanced Scorecard (Alexander et al., 2017)

Research aims

- To explore EAP programme/course quality management in practice

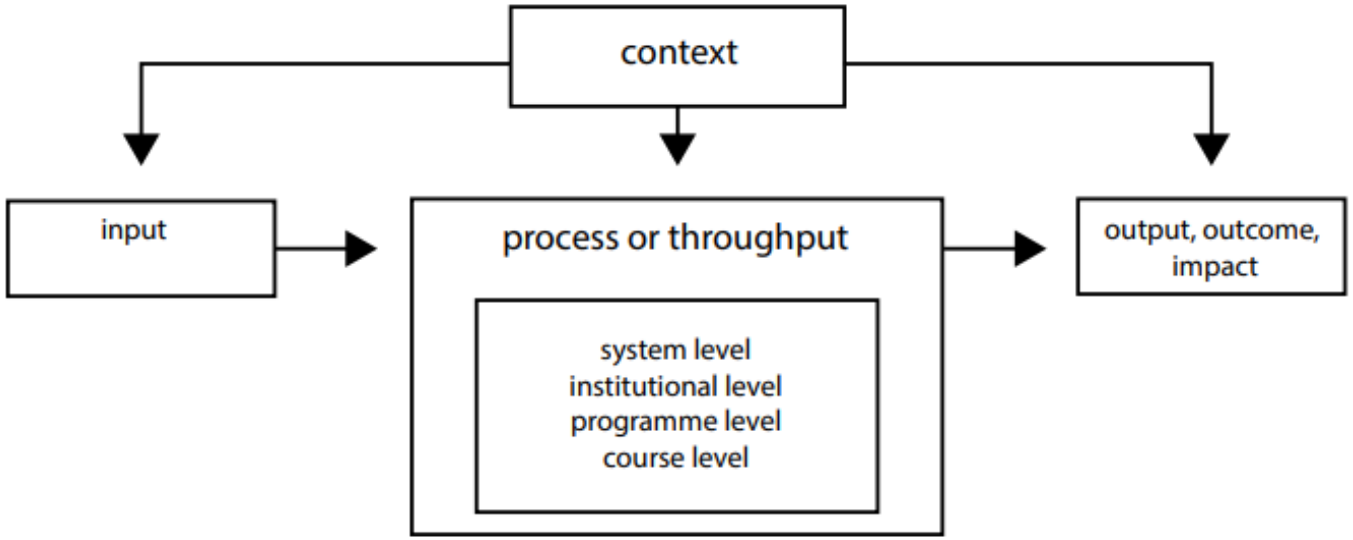
- To identify key challenges and opportunities regarding maintenance and enhancement of quality within the sector

Methodology

- Semi-structured interviews
- Senior Management in EAP (purposive sampling – Ebeto, 2017)
- 11 HEIs
- 2 institutions discounted due to different context (elite; British overseas JV)
- Analysis using content analysis (theoretical coding) (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014)

Primary role	n
Pre-sessional Programme Leader	5
Insessional Programme Leader	2
Centre Director	1
Other	1

CIPO Model (Scheerens, 2013)



CIPO	Description	Example
Context	Wider QA e.g. by governments/accredited bodies	Language: CEFR; UKVI; Skills: FHEQs; Graduate Characteristics (internal)
Input	Financial and materials resources & incentives; HR and staff qualifications; Service resources	Institutional/dept strategy/goals; budget; teaching qualifications
Process	Teacher/student behaviour; Administration; Quality Assurance; Curriculum	Programme design; assessments; content; admin; QA
Output	Output – end of the process; Outcome – what has changed as result of process; Impact – longer-term indirect result of process	Output: Progression from (e.g.) Pre-sessional Outcome: Student achievement over process Impact: Transferrable skills

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Results & Discussion

Theme 1: There is a mission statement, but it's not made clear to us

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> The director … might have goals, but he doesn't tell me about that … I'm not aware of any targets

Interviewee 1

> We haven't been given any direct aims. It's articulated [by me] in terms of overarching university strategy … [but] it's broad.

Interviewee 3

> There is a mission statement, but it's not made clear to us. You have to look yourself really, which I have done in the past and it's like 'oh that's what we're supposed to be doing'

Interviewee 4

Discussion

- Lack of institutional strategic alignment
- Uncertainty over where “language centres” fit
- (Mis)perceptions of EAP
- Unclear what constitutes ‘success’

Theme 2: The primary purpose is X, but I mean *for us*, the purpose is Y …

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The purpose of pre-sessional is to get the students that met the academic requirements for programmes, but not the English language requirements. **So, the whole point is to up that English**.

Interviewee 2

Students attend to learn English…

Theme 2: The primary purpose is X, but I mean *for us*, the purpose is Y …

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… to enable the students to get their English up to the level that they will be accepted by their department. I suppose that's the primary reason*,* **but I mean *for us*, the purpose is** to try and prepare them for university life [in terms of] UK academic culture and some of the norms like the things that we think [students] will be asked to do and so on

Interviewee 5

… but we see the main purpose as degree preparation...

Theme 2: The primary purpose is X, but I mean *for us*, the purpose is Y …

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…it's about preparing international students so that they're familiar with the **academic literacy skills** that are required … they **develop these skills** so they can basically cope when they start on their main programme.

Interviewee 3

For a lot of us, **we obviously don't teach them just English**, we teach them EAP and sort of stuff you might call study skills, so part of it is preparing them for kind of being successful once they join their degree

Interviewee 7

We would quite like to, in a way, **ditch the language element**

Interviewee 1

…focusing more on academic/study skills…

Theme 2: The primary purpose is X, but I mean *for us*, the purpose is Y …

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If I talk about it crudely, I would say **the emphasis is more on study skills because of the length of time we've got** … you can make a difference in a limited way in terms of their language skills … there's only so much you can do [but] you can take a student who knows next to nothing about academic writing [and] bring them on

Interviewee 3

… as we all know, **you can't do a lot with the English language in six weeks**, let alone four weeks

Interviewee 2

It's really tricky… I say to [our teachers] 'look, **we cannot do this in six weeks**. You can't. You can't go up 0.5 IELTS in six weeks… **[focus on] those [study] skills**, get them reading'

Interviewee 8

…because it isn't deemed possible to reach language goals within the timeframe

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”

For the university, it is the shortfall in students' language skills that determines the decision to offer a pre-sessional programme route as an alternative to re-sitting the IELTS exam. **However, for those teaching and working on the programme, the purpose and remit is wider.**

(Kirk, 2018, p. 122, emphasis added)

Impact of study skills focus (pre-sessional)

- Students entering via pre-sessional programmes perform less well than students entering directly (Lloyd Jones et al., 2012; Millar, 2002; Pearson, 2020; Ridley, 2006; Thorpe et al., 2017)

- Former pre-sessional students are more confident than direct entrants but not reflected in student outcomes (Terraschke & Wahid, 2011, p. 181)

- Student expectations of pre-sessionals different to staff (Pearson, 2020, p. 435)

Is there more to it?...

‘For … senior management team members in charge of internationalisation, **it just means bums on seats** [and is] an income stream’

Interviewee 10

The starting point is wrong because the starting point says in general UK students seem to be outperforming international students, therefore **there’s a problem with international students. They have a deficit** …

Interviewee 3

I often think **universities don’t help by not making it clear [what the differences in academic culture are]**

Interviewee 1

the first problem is that **you’re labelling students as being deficient**, which is not the intention, but comes across that way. And the second thing is, if almost every student is deficient, then how can you possibly provide the level of support needed differently? **Everybody requires [support]**

Interviewee 3

international student experience is not something that we do well enough as a rule of thumb

Interviewee 7

Discussion

- HEIs lack explicit embedded teaching on *how* to learn *on the whole*
- EAP has **self-defined** in order to address wider HEI gaps in L&T
- The discipline has largely evolved into eAP (with a small ‘E’).
- Yet still a (mis)perception of EAP as English language support

Theme 3: I don’t know really what others are doing … we all do our own thing completely

Because of experience, now I know what to focus on. But in the beginning I’m thinking back I would have asked the course leaders ‘so what do you want me to do?’ … but **they don’t have a lot of knowledge about what we do anyway, so they might say ‘grammar, vocabulary’**

Interviewee 5

[Contextualising is] very time consuming … you sit there for hours trying to find appropriate things

Interviewee 4

Everyone is left for themselves. People end up [duplicating teaching] … and it just makes it look really a bit shoddy to be fair

Interviewee 4

I don’t really know what others are doing. At the moment, **we just do our own thing completely** …

Interviewee 5

Theme 3: I don’t know really what others are doing … we all do our own thing completely

[On insessional...] **I don’t think the curriculum is based on any framework** as such, maybe just speaking with programme leaders and learning student and programme needs

Interviewee 1

I don’t think [there is any skills framework] I don’t think that’s a consideration when there are inspections at that level. We do have a look at what QAA are doing, but not in any great detail at all

Interviewee 8

Discussion

- Mapping student needs against different programme needs is a challenge

- Variation in support both within and between institutions
  - Negative impact on overall quality
  - Difficult to monitor/measure
  - Lack of coherence (overlap in provision)

Theme 4: I don’t feel confident with assessment design

We are always debating what’s the right way [to assess students]. You know, how do you do that while also making assessments authentic so that you get that positive washback

Interviewee 8

I couldn’t really confidently say that [listening and reading assessments] are aligned to CEFR ... it’s a bit subjective … you’ve got to judge the language level … identify questions you think will elicit that language, and then you’re setting a percentage ‘if you get x percent, it’s equivalent to this’ and it’s tricky

Interviewee 1

I don’t really link [assessments] to learning outcomes … I suppose the links I use to the assessment criteria are in my head

Interviewee 5

I don’t have any support at pre-sessional … We need to pilot … **my piloting is talking to a friend of mine just to see if it works**

Interviewee 2

Discussion

- Lack of framework/curriculum results in variability in quality of assessments

- Many lack expertise and confidence for English language assessment design, so difficult to determine accuracy of tests used in terms of language

Theme 5: Tracking student performance is something I'd like to do, but it would be so difficult

I've tried hard over the last few years to get something that really tells me [how students are doing on degree programmes], but the answer is not really. … We do get quite detailed information about a particularly group of students at programme level, but **in terms of systematic data where I can measure outcomes, no**.

Interviewee 3

Discussion

- Understanding outcomes/impact is challenging

- Opportunities to understand overall quality are lost

Conclusions

Context	• There is no framework that best fits what EAP practitioners do
Input	• Lack of clear direction from institutions in reference to EAP and its purpose
Process	• (‘Internationalisation’ has exposed gaps in HEI L&T support for all students) • English language specialists have attempted to fill these gaps for international students by broadening scope of teaching (holistic academic/study skills), which essentially has meant ‘self-defining’ the role outside of wider (or lack of) strategic guidance. • However, dual purpose of ‘EAP’ is problematic – lack of framework results in variation, yet aims are broadly similar • Lack of standardisation creates difficulty for assessment design
Outcomes	• Difficult to measure outcomes due to lack of standardisation

Recommendations

- Dialogue required around clear purpose of ‘EAP’ at an institutional level

- Broader scope (sector):

  - Pre-sessional - potential opportunities for national curriculum/centralised assessment design

  - Skills framework underpinning *all* student learning upon which skills development can be mapped for greater coherence of academic support

Limitations

- Only 11 HEIs considered – insightful, but not generalisable
- Timeframe short, which limited participation
- Scope was broad – this allowed holistic overview, but could be narrowed in further research to understand specific contexts

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