

## Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

**Implicarea persoanelor interesate în asigurarea calității: un exemplu de diferențiere și integrare**

**Cathal de Paor**

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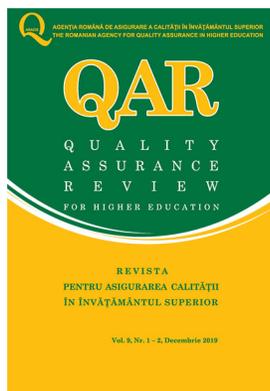
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## Stakeholder Engagement in Quality Assurance: a Case of Differentiation and Integration

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**Rezumat:** *Implicarea persoanelor („actori”) interesate (n.r. în engleză stakeholders – în ESG în limba română se menționează că „în cazul în care nu există altceva specificat, în document „actori interesați” se referă la toți actorii din cadrul instituției, incluzând studenții și personalul, cât și actorii externi cum ar fi angajatorii sau parteneri externi ai instituției”) în asigurarea internă și externă a calității este un element foarte important în Standardele și liniile directoare europene pentru asigurarea calității în învățământul superior (ESG). Totuși, acest aspect trebuie abordat cu grijă, pentru a conduce la cele mai bune rezultate pentru calitate. Acest element devine și mai important pentru toate acțiunile de creștere a implicării acestor persoane. Utilizând, în mod metaforic, o analiză a implicării acestor persoane interesate ca fiind esențial orientată către o „schimbare continuă”, articolul propune conceptele îngemănate de integrare și diferențiere ca un mod util de a aprecia implicarea persoanelor interesate în asigurarea calității. Astfel, creșterea implicării lor va contribui la obținerea unor beneficii optime și sustenabile pentru asigurarea și îmbunătățirea calității.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *implicare, persoane interesate/ actori interesați, asigurarea internă și externă a calității*

**Abstract:** *Stakeholder engagement in both internal and external quality assurance is a cornerstone in the ESG. However, this needs to be managed carefully so that there are optimum outcomes for quality. This becomes even more important in any moves to further widen stakeholder engagement. Using metaphorical analysis of stakeholder engagement as being essentially about ‘continuous change’, this article proposes the twin concepts of integration and differentiation as a useful way of thinking about wider stakeholder engagement in quality assurance. This will help ensure that the increased engagement will bring optimum and sustainable benefits for quality assurance and enhancement.*

**Keywords:** *engagement, stakeholders, internal and external quality assurance*

## **Introduction**

In the literature on quality assurance (QA) in higher education, the focus of attention may be at the level of the institution or programme (ESG, 2015). Or it may be on one of the three core missions of universities: teaching and learning, research and service. Or it may be on discrete thematic areas, for example quality of administration (Kivistö and Pekkola 2017). It should be noted that the focus in the article here is on quality assurance at the programme level, although much of this is applicable to provision, broadly understood.

Regardless of the focus, however, stakeholder engagement in quality assurance enables HEIs to hold their work up to scrutiny by relevant groups, and use the results for ongoing improvement. Stakeholder engagement, if it is to be effective, must involve all relevant stakeholders, so that all perspectives can be taken into account. This is not always so straightforward, given that engagement with certain stakeholders may be more easily operationalised than with others. For example, it is generally recognised that while student and staff engagement in quality improvement has received in-depth research attention, ‘the need for listening to expectations of potential employers and professionals is still under-explored’ (Romenti et al. 2012, 209).

Stakeholder engagement must also be an ongoing and continuous feature of quality assurance in HEIs, so that it becomes part of the quality culture. Relationships are an essential part of successful stakeholder engagement, and as such, need to develop and evolve over time, in response to changing needs. Without such change, engagement may stagnate, and be perceived as tokenistic and performative, with no obvious benefit for programme enhancement. Conceptualising stakeholder engagement as ‘continuous change’ reflects the fact that it must be a process, rather than an event or even a series of events, evolving in response to changing contexts.

The need for prudent management of stakeholder engagement becomes even more important in the context of widening existing stakeholder engagement (as discussed in this journal edition). This article focuses on the significance of stakeholder engagement as ‘continuous change’ and uses metaphorical analysis to suggest two important considerations for managing such engagement.

### **Stakeholder Engagement: Continuity**

The promotion of ongoing stakeholder engagement in quality assurance is a cornerstone in the ESG in both internal and external quality assurance (ESG 2015). The first standard for internal QA requires HEIs to develop and implement a QA policy ‘through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders’ (Standard 1.1). With regard to external quality assurance, the ESG states that ‘Stakeholders should be involved in the design and continuous improvement’ (Standard 2.2). This requires the HEI to situate their stakeholder engagement in the

context of an institutional quality assurance policy, thereby giving prominence to the role of stakeholders.

Recent years as seen concerted efforts to widen stakeholder engagement in quality assurance (Vettori and Loukkola 2013). However, optimum stakeholder engagement remains a challenge. For example, with regard to student engagement, the Bologna Implementation Report concludes that, ‘there is still improvement to be made to meet the Bologna Process commitment to full student engagement’ (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018, 135). As for employers, the same report notes that in 19 out of the 48 countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), there are no formal requirements with regard to their (i.e., employer) involvement. This state of affairs has provided the rationale for ongoing work on the part of national QA agencies, for example the ESQA (European Solutions of Quality Assurance in VET) project.

While the foregoing illustrates stakeholder engagement as continuous, it also needs to be dynamic, and to evolve in response to new and emerging contexts (Coates 2006). Otherwise, it becomes something to be endured, undertaken out of obligation or compliance, but with little expectation that it can make a positive difference. This requires stakeholder to have a say in how the engagement is planned and undertaken. For example, it has been shown that academics’ support for quality assurance depends on several factors, including their sense of ownership (Cardoso et al. 2018). If academics do not feel they ‘own’ QA processes and procedures, their attitudes and participation at this level are more likely to be inconsistent and inconsequential (Bendermacher et al. 2017). In other words, if academic staff is not actively and willingly engaged, it may end up resisting, contesting or developing ‘game playing’ strategies to quality assurance, which can constitute a real obstacle to its purposes and goals. This requires processes to be dynamic and to evolve in line with what stakeholders’ experience.

Maintaining meaningful engagement also requires that the results of stakeholder engagement are used, and are seen to be used, to inform ongoing programme enhancement (Coates 2006). For example, based on her review of examples of student evaluation of teaching (SET), Palmer writes:

If the vast resources devoted to student evaluation of teaching are to be effective, then the data produced by student evaluation systems must lead to real and sustainable improvements in teaching quality and student learning, rather than becoming an end in itself. (Palmer 2012, 297)

This short review illustrates the extent to which stakeholder engagement needs to be characterised by continuous change. It is this notion of continuous change which the article seeks to explore, in order to reveal new insights about how such stakeholder engagement can be best managed, especially in the context of efforts to further widen it.

## **Methodology**

The article uses a concept from mathematics to provide the basis for the metaphorical analysis being proposed. The fields of quality assurance and mathematics may seem very far apart, but on the other hand, such a pairing may be justified in light of what is known about novelty in metaphorical association, as discussed below, i.e., the weaker the association, the greater the potential insight. Therefore, the uses a brief analysis of continuous change in mathematics to generate some new insights about managing stakeholder engagement in quality assurance.

A metaphor makes a comparison between two ideas that are not alike but that have something in common. It has what Schön (1983) classified as a ‘generative’ quality in that it may develop new perspectives and help clarify the concepts involved. Metaphor analysis represents an abductive (i.e., a more expanded inductive) approach to reality as opposed to a deductive approach associated with positivism (Xu and Li 2011).

Particular metaphors may have limitations but may nonetheless offer potential for understanding the concepts in question, thereby promoting new insights about them that may be useful for application purposes. Novel metaphors are created when people put together ideas that are only loosely associated. While the association between both parts (topic and vehicle) will be weaker in novel metaphors (as opposed to conventional metaphors), the insight may be greater. Riddell (2016) draws on neuroscience literature to explain how ‘these more novel pairings are more likely to happen when the focus of attention drifts beyond the problem at hand’ (Riddell 2016, 371).

Using metaphor to extend our understanding about an issue such as stakeholder engagement in quality assurance may seem unusual. On the other hand, such ‘methodological pluralism’ (Csorba 2014) can ‘open doors to new worlds of comprehension’ in ways that may not otherwise gain our attention. Referring to the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and writing in the context of Romanian teacher education, she notes that metaphors are not a simply matter of words, but also of, and especially of action.

The reason is that our conceptual system, which governs our thinking and daily life, is carried out by means of metaphorical concepts. In this sense, metaphors govern our life. This government, metaphorical in itself, is quiet at the surface and we are rarely aware of it. But when we say Life is a journey... there is inner, strong impulse to hit the road! (Csorba 2014, 772)

The link between metaphorical analysis and action is particularly important for the area of stakeholder engagement, given that it needs to lead to action for improvement.

With this in mind, the text that follows moves from the world of quality assurance to the field of mathematics. Within mathematics, the study of continuous change known as calculus has two major branches, differential calculus and integral calculus. Could these two branches, differentiation and integration be used to generate some

new insights on how best to manage a widening of stakeholder engagement in quality assurance? This is what is attempted in the analysis that follows.

## **Differentiating Engagement**

It is readily apparent that differentiation in stakeholder engagement is essential to take account of the dynamic and situational nature of quality itself (Ursin et al. 2008). It may be useful to frame such differentiation in terms of two dimensions – stakeholder identity (who) and quality criteria (what).

### **Differentiating Who**

The need to differentiate according to stakeholder identity reflects the diversity among the relevant parties. Stakeholders in higher education may be categorised as internal or external (ESG 2015). The former refer to HEI staff and students, while the latter are more wide-ranging, involving alumni, employers, and extending in some cases to other groups from the community, enterprise, NGOs, professional bodies, etc.

A broader interpretation of stakeholder is also possible. It may be argued that given the role of education in a country's development and socio-economic well-being, citizens of any country have a stake in the quality of higher education provided in that country. They may also have a stake as taxpayers, contributing routinely to state investment in education. They will also in all likelihood at some point avail of services/products that depend on the quality of higher education graduates, for example, as patients treated by doctors. Any discussion on widening stakeholder engagement could therefore extend very widely.

Thinking further afield, there is also a case for considering stakeholder engagement across national boundaries, with the preceding paragraph applicable to the EU context. In other words, all Europeans are stakeholders in the higher education in any of the member states, whether as citizens, taxpayers, or as consumers. This is becoming more apparent given the increasing level of integration and mobility within Europe. In fact, extending this further from the EU 28 to the 48 countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the recent Bologna Follow-Up Users Group (BFUG) report states that, 'The impact of internationalisation can be perceived in a number of developments related to quality assurance – including cross border activity, and cooperation in relation to joint programmes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018, 135). But of course, the net could be cast even wider, given that all of humanity has a stake in the quality of education, regardless of where it is provided, as articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal in Education (UN 2015).

It is clear therefore that stakeholders, broadly understood, are wide-ranging, including everyone from a registered student having first-hand experience on a particular programme to a member of the wider public. They will therefore be able to offer very different perspectives. But individual stakeholders may themselves

encompass a variety of perspectives. For example, employers will have formed views of a programme based on their employment of the programme graduates, but as members of broader society, they may also have more general opinions about certain issues that are also relevant for the quality assurance of the programme in question. Stakeholder engagement can also happen vicariously, as it were, whereby a programme team will draw on relevant policy or research literature, and use their own professional experience rather than having to embark on wide scale and direct engagement with such a range of stakeholders every time.

### **Differentiating What**

Differentiation in engagement is also needed by reference to the focus of the quality assurance exercise. As noted, the focus of attention may relate to one or more of the three core missions of universities: teaching and learning, research and service, it may be a particular programme, or it may be thematic such as administration (Kivistö and Pekkola 2017).

Regardless of the focus, the broader context also needs a certain level of attention. And for this purpose, it may be useful to think in terms of primary, secondary and latent dimensions as Kivistö and Pekkola (2017) have done in their study of quality in administration. Thus, in that particular study (i.e., quality of administration), primary quality assurance activities deal explicitly with administrative services and processes. Secondary quality assurance activities still have relevance for administration quality but are embedded in the regular quality assurance of teaching and learning, research and third mission activities. Finally, latent quality assurance activities are undertaken without any explicit relevance for the issue in question (in this case, administration), but are still relevant, albeit more marginally. These three differentiated dimensions can help HEIs plan stakeholder engagement, regardless of the focus, as Gover et al. (2019) have shown in some work on student-centred, teaching and learning. These authors also suggest combining this three-dimensional categorisation with a model for programme QA such as the PDCA cycle (Plan, Do, Check, Act) to form a matrix for planning purposes. They report that users of this matrix found it to be ‘a challenging yet fruitful framework for mapping the diverse aspects of institutional quality assurance systems and reflecting on their goals and functions (Gover et al. 2019, 16). For example, programme design can be regarded as a secondary quality assurance process in the ‘planning’ stage, and recruitment processes as latent and belonging to the ‘doing’ phase.

But even within a particular focus (whether institution, programme, theme etc.), there is a range of criteria to contend with that require differentiation so that the engagement is manageable and so that scarce resources are used in an optimum way. This will determine who and how stakeholders should be engaged. For example, in the French-speaking community in Belgium, the criteria for external programme evaluation include: (1) appropriate institutional QA policy; (2) programme relevance; (3) programme coherence; (4) programme effectiveness and efficiency; (5) ongoing programme review and improvement (AEQES 2015).

It is clear that not all stakeholders will be able to offer an informed opinion on each of these. For example, employers may not be as familiar with the programme design (e.g., coherence between modules, assessment methods) as current students or recent alumni, and will therefore have less to contribute to the QA for that particular criterion. It would therefore be unwise for the HEI to invest resources in engaging with all stakeholders on all these criteria. It is also the case that exploring a particular criterion will require differentiation in terms of data collection methods, questions, schedules, etc.

## **Integrating Engagement**

Staying with the mathematics metaphor, the case for an integrated approach to stakeholder engagement can rest in large part on what has already been noted with regard to a differentiated approach. This is because in their work on the study of continuous change, it is customary for mathematicians to consider differentiation as being the flipside of integration.

In any case, it is readily apparent that having differentiated, there will be a need to integrate in order to make sense of the results. For example, having identified four stages (input, process, output, and outcome) for examining the quality of provision, Romenti et al. (2012) propose in their integrated framework to bring together all the data collected from these four sources in order to identify future action. Therefore, differentiation will itself require a certain follow-on integration and co-ordination, in order to make sure that collectively, all the constituent parts of the evaluation form an integrated whole.

The need for integration also derives from the fact that stakeholders may have views that on their own do not provide sufficient guidance for action, but when combined with other sources, can provide a way forward. But this may not be a simple case of adding one body of results to another. Quality itself is a contested concept, where diverse and often competing views may exist about what is desirable, necessary, etc. This makes it difficult for the HEI to draw conclusions and formulate actions for improvement, and may also even reveal a more fundamental divergence. For example, in his study of the separation between quality assurance and quality enhancement, Williams notes that: ‘the roots of this separation may be traced to differences between perceptions of different stakeholders, particularly those of academic staff and those of governments (Williams 2016, 98). Staff, tend to be more interested in quality improvement whereas institutions and governments tend to be more interested in accountability.

There may also be disagreement among the programme team as to how to interpret stakeholder views and how much merit particular views carry relative to those expressed by others. The reason for particular problems raised may not be attributable to the programme itself, but may lie elsewhere, perhaps even within the group articulating such criticisms. For example, in a study from Ukraine, Bezpalko et al. (2016) HEI teaching staff insisted on the importance of students having a

sense of personal responsibility for the quality of education. They note that that ‘the teacher competence requirements are greater every year, and students remain almost constant. This leads to the fact that the teacher is responsible for the student’s academic failure’ (Bezplko et al. 2016, 66).

It is also the case that integration can occur, not just with regard to combining the results of the engagement, but with regard planning and undertaking the engagement. Thus, in the process of engagement, consultation with two separate stakeholder groups could occur in tandem. Joint events might even enrich the feedback process, allowing a more thorough interrogation of the opinions being expressed. And within such integration, there could still be scope for differentiation, for example, in the kind of questions used.

Another context in greater synergies in its stakeholder engagement might occur relates to HEIs providing professional higher education (PHE). This could involve some dovetailing between stakeholder engagement carried out for external quality assurance and that carried out by external regulatory bodies for professional accreditation. While professional accreditation and external evaluation constitutes one process in certain cases, being carried out by the same external body, this is not always so. In certain contexts, depending on the country and profession, there may be two separate bodies and processes involved. This is therefore an example, where the HEI can use the results from the same stakeholder engagement, to prepare submissions to two separate authorities, one for professional accreditation, and the other for external QA exercise.

But there is also another situation where the actual process of accreditation and external QA might be more integrated, at least to some extent, thereby reducing the burden on HEIs. There are example of this from engineering programmes, where a ‘general’ QA agency and a professional accreditation body might collaborates to use the one site visit to cater for both external QA (at institutional or programme level), together with professional accreditation at a programme level. Within the field of engineering education in France for example, Le Haut Conseil de l’évaluation de la recherche et de l’enseignement supérieur (Hcéres) and Commission des Titres d’Ingénieur (CTI), which is responsible for the professional accreditation of degrees in engineering, have collaborated on a joint accreditation-evaluation process since 2017. Known as “Évaluation coordonnée” this requires the HEI to prepare and submit a self-evaluation report, responding to different criterial or référentiel (Hcéres 2018). Each of the two agencies appoints its own panel of experts, with both of these visiting the institution at the same time. This allows a certain streamlining in schedules, for example, using a joint committee to carry out some interviews. Each agency then formulates its own report with findings, recommendations, etc., and submits this of the HEI.

Apart from reducing the administrative workload, this combined approach enables HEIs to adopt a mutually enhancing institutional and programmatic focus, given that it is responding to both the institutional criteria of the HCERES and the

programme standards of the CTI. Another example is reported by in the French-speaking community of Belgium (Duykaerts and Chaparro 2014). It is readily apparent how such integration, and the accompanying stakeholder engagement, could enable a pooling of resources and ideas, thereby having a more appreciable impact on the development of a quality culture.

At the same time, caution has been expressed with regard to the purposes of accreditation that may impinge on quality assurance where such dovetailing is not managed carefully. The nature of the engagement with the external professional body, especially where HEI staff perceived as being overly judgemental, unsympathetic or harsh could also adversely affect the motivation among academics. There is a view that professional accreditation can lead to an ever-narrowing academic standardisation at the expense of innovation. If not managed carefully, this can damage staff morale, and therefore constitute a threat to the HEIs progress otherwise in the promotion of quality.

### **Combining Both in Programme Evaluation**

The following example shows how stakeholder engagement could be designed and undertaken along differentiated and integrated lines. The example is drawn from the field of programme evaluation more generally (as opposed to academic programmes), but it has the advantage of being generic enough to be relevant to any academic programme context. It illustrates the fundamental way in which stakeholder engagement can be differentiated, i.e., engaging stakeholders on those aspects of programme quality on which they are best placed to comment, and then integrating these in order to prepare the basis for action. The CIPP model of programme evaluation was developed by Daniel L. Stufflebeam (1969; 1971; 2003) based on the following definition of evaluation:

Evaluation is the process of delineating, obtaining, providing, and applying descriptive and judgmental information about the merit and worth of some object's goals, design, implementation and outcomes to guide improvement decisions, provide accountability reports, inform institutionalisation/dissemination decisions, and improve understanding of the involved phenomena. (Stufflebeam 2003, 34)

As the definition shows, the kind of evaluation envisaged is comprehensive, serving both formative and summative purposes. Evaluation are summative when they provide a definite judgement as to a programme's worth, while evaluations are formative when, 'they proactively key the collection and reporting of information to improvement' (2003, 34). Although the CIPP model of programme evaluation has not been developed for use in the evaluation of academic programmes, it is readily clear how it might be appropriated for use in the context of QA in higher education. The four evaluations contained within the overall CIPP model of evaluation are: context evaluation; input evaluation; process evaluation; and product evaluation.

These four focus correspond respectively to programme goals, design, operation and impact.

Context evaluation examines whether present goals and priorities are sound and meet the needs of the intended beneficiaries. In the input evaluation, the main aim is to examine the programme design and to explore and critically examine other possible designs, as suggested by stakeholders and from good practice reported elsewhere. Process evaluation is an ongoing check on the programme's implementation plus documentation of the process involved, determining the extent to which activities are carried out as planned. Finally, the purpose of a product evaluation is to measure, interpret, and judge a programme's achievements and to ascertain the extent to which the programme as implemented meets the needs of all the beneficiaries. As much as possible, it assesses all outcomes, intended and unintended, positive and negative. Using these four evaluation types it is possible to identify certain lines of enquiry that could inform decisions about programme improvement. Once these have been identified, the programme team is in a better position to determine which stakeholders are best placed to offer feedback on which aspect of programme quality (i.e., goals, design, operation or impact).

In a later version of this model (Stufflebeam 2007), the fourth evaluation type, product evaluation, was further divided into four parts, i.e., impact, effectiveness, sustainability, transportability. This addition was seen as a way of further increasing the comprehensive nature of the CIPP model and maintaining the focus on sustainability and scalability for longer-term planning. These additional foci also offer further possibilities for quality assurance. Thus, in an academic programme context, the issues of sustainability and scalability (the extent to which learning from the programme can be transferred to other programmes) are particularly relevant, where HEIs deliver many separate programmes but where lessons learned about the quality assurance of one programme can be used in supporting the quality of other programmes.

## **Conclusion**

Quality assurance, including stakeholder engagement, entails a heavy workload on the part of HEIs. In such a context, HEIs may be inclined to ask if wider stakeholder engagement in quality assurance is justified or if HEIs could make greater strides in programme quality through focusing on others means. Should they focus instead on deeper engagement with those stakeholders already engaged? How can they ensure that the results of wider engagement will translate into enhanced programme quality? Could wider engagement distract programme staff from the important work of teaching, learning and assessment? It is therefore imperative to consider carefully the value added from stakeholder engagement and for any proposals to widen it. And as we've seen, widening engagement need not necessarily add to the work already underway.

Using insights from a mathematics metaphor to extend our understanding about stakeholder engagement in quality assurance may seem unusual. However, the analysis shows the extent to which the twin concepts of differentiation and integration can help inform how stakeholder engagement might be managed and widened for optimum value added for quality assurance and enhancement.

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