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| Subject | Maintaining Quality within the Institution |
| Module | The Quality Cycle: Evaluating and Improving |
| Topic | 3.2 Evaluating |

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1. Introduction



The Evaluating aspect of the quality cycle is obviously concerned with gaining information in order to be able to judge the effectiveness of Actions undertaken to maintain or improve quality; the Actions themselves often originating in Plans. There are various approaches and many measures that can be used for evaluation including evidence gained from different epistemologies (theories of knowledge), including positivism (scientific methods, often using quantitative measures), hermeneutics (understanding human intent and actions, often using qualitative methods and evidence) and action research (research originating from preferred social values, often using qualitative methods but also mixed qualitative and quantitative methods and measures).

This topic discusses the evaluating aspect of the quality cycle and the various approaches and measures that can be used for evaluation.

Objectives: Evaluating

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to

- identify the various approaches and measures that can be used for evaluation

2. Evaluating

While measures and methods from research are used for quality purposes, the quality purpose is not research but institutional improvement. For example, measures from student evaluation of units and teaching are commonly used with their validity and reliability taken from the vast research literature in that area. Again, the key focus from the quality perspective is not to research and improve the measures - that is for discipline area research - but to utilise the measures for the purpose of improvement. There is always a temptation to research an interesting area ever more closely, especially, when interested areas such as Teaching and Learning or Academic Development Centres are involved, and so it is important that the major focus of action to produce institutional improvement is not lost.

Every method of evaluation and every single measure used for quality improvement is problematic from a particular perspective. For example, according to a particular grand narrative, Evaluation is a reductionist attempt to simplify the complex nature of teaching and learning in higher education so that it may be controlled by

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managerialist interests intent on an economic rationalist recasting of the academy. Even at the micro-level of data, measures such as attrition, retention and progression which have widely agreed definitions and formulae for calculation are subject to interpretation when the data originate in different student database systems in different institutions, which has led to differences of interpretation in data coding, amalgamation and reporting.

In short, for the academic with the intention of publishing papers and critiquing methods and measures, there is ample scope for activity. For the quality professional with the intention of producing organisational improvement, there is the necessity to work with reasonable data, as there will never be perfect methods or measures. It is important to start from this stark view of the difference between research and institutional improvement practice in order to then consider areas of cross-over, the most common of these being the need to publish the results of institutional improvement derived through quality initiatives. This is a complex area, as work on institutional improvement does not automatically fall into the definition of research (in terms of national research council definitions, for example) and it can be regarded as a part of the normal operations of an institution to improve its operations. The fact that a report is published in a research journal also does not automatically mean that the work itself constitutes a research project requiring ethical approval through the normal research channels, as some of the publications concerning quality improvement is post hoc reporting outside of a planned and approved project (rather like post hoc general practice medical research looking for improvements or changes). That said, it is of course without question that quality activities for institutional improvement are conducted according to normal ethical standards and having external validation of this can be helpful. For example, a normal criterion for ethical approval is informed consent from participants with informed meaning among other things, informed as to the use of the data. For this reason it is usual for even routine surveys of student evaluation of units or teaching, to state that the information may be used for publication with regard to institutional improvement.

3. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- In short, for the academic with the intention of publishing papers and critiquing methods and measures, there is ample scope for activity. For the quality professional with the intention of producing organisational improvement, there is the necessity to work with reasonable data, as there will never be perfect methods or measures.
- It is important to start from this stark view of the difference between research and institutional improvement practice in order to then consider areas of cross-over, the most common of these being the need to publish the results of institutional improvement derived through quality initiatives.