

**Criteria and principles to underpin academic program quality assurance processes: Balancing views from different hilltops**

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# **Criteria and principles to underpin academic program quality assurance processes: Balancing views from different hilltops**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Academic program quality assurance (APQA) in higher education institutions requires, among other things, processes for deciding which new programs to offer, and for monitoring and improving the quality of existing programs. These decisions and processes require criteria to assist judgments about program quality. In addition, if a systemic and values-based view of quality is adopted, as we advocate it should be, then these quality criteria should be founded on principles and values that indicate the way of seeing quality assurance in a given context.*

*In recent years there has been an increasing expectation that higher education institutions use quality assurance criteria that go beyond what might be termed “internal pedagogical” criteria (e.g. curriculum content). This paper presents examples of principles and values, and criteria clusters to underpin APQA. It stresses the importance of student learning focused criteria and principles, but recognizes that other important perspectives (e.g. external stakeholders) need to be incorporated in APQA processes.*

## **Academic Program Quality Assurance (APQA)**

The main emphasis in this paper is “criteria and principles to underpin APQA processes”. Before moving to this, we need to briefly discuss what we mean by APQA. Of course, there is a bigger systemic picture for APQA, which needs to incorporate elements other than principles and criteria (e.g. evidence and data bases, systematic improvement processes). We cannot invest much space here to explore this bigger picture, but we do touch on some important aspects as we proceed.

The specific expression “academic program quality assurance” is not used widely. At the broadest level, where the concern is the overall quality of the academic program(s) in an institution, overarching descriptors vary. At the more detailed level, where the concern is the quality of individual academic programs (or other units, such as schools or discipline areas), terms such as “review” and “accreditation” are more common. Essentially, it is this level that we are addressing in this paper, although most of the principles, criteria, etc. discussed are applicable or have parallels at any level within an institution.

“Program review”, for example, means different things in different places, but its purposes are usually concerned with some level of program evaluation, associated reporting, and in principle at least, subsequent actions to make improvements. These purposes are covered by the term APQA as we use it in this paper. However, program

review (processes and outcomes) have often tended to be limited in terms of their efficacy for facilitating and reporting on substantive continual improvement in important qualitative areas of academic programs. It has been noted in many international forums in recent years that program review processes focus on aspects that have relatively little to do with the primary purpose of most academic programs, that is, student learning and capability development. Commonly, such reviews have focused more on aspects of a program's (or academic unit's) setting, staff qualifications, the print version of the curriculum, or similar matters. It is not that these aspects have no relevance; it is that other aspects that are arguably more important, are under-weighted or neglected.

Program review processes are also often based on review events (as snapshots) with long intervals in between. There is often a psychological response to such reviews. Much energy is invested in preparing for the review, and this often generates staff resentment. The review occurs and the ensuing report is vigorously responded to. Finally, the report is filed and often largely forgotten. Life moves on with little change and a sense of relief that the review is over and we can get back to "normal". Such an approach does not reflect the valuing of or encourage a continual or dynamic approach to quality assurance.

With the above concerns in mind, the following notes provide a brief summary of what we mean essentially by APQA in this paper. Issues concerning points 1, 2 and 3 are discussed widely in the literature (e.g. Boyle & Bowden, 1997; Bowden & Marton, 1998; Woodhouse, 1998).

1. By APQA we mean a systematic process that has two primary purposes: the facilitation of evidence-based continual improvement in the institution's academic programs; and the satisfaction of internal accountability, including reporting requirements of the institution and programs (or units offering programs).
2. We hold the view that the foundation of any sensible and effective approach to APQA must be the priority goals and values of the program and institution.
3. We hold a systemic and developmental view of QA, rather than a simplistic linear view. Thus, simple models based on rubrics such as Plan-Do-Measure-Adjust are not sufficiently sophisticated for QA in complex educational institutions.
4. This paper concerns internal APQA processes, although there are clear potential benefits in linking these to external ones (e.g. AUQA).
5. To make discussion a little easier, we are focusing on the level of the individual academic program (e.g. BSc (Psychology)), although drawing conceptual and practical links and parallels with other levels (e.g. faculty, institution) are desirable and relatively easy.
6. We are also focusing on academic programs that are essentially "coursework" based, rather than research based, although many aspects of the approach

discussed (e.g. a set of principles and values to underpin a QA approach) are applicable to an academic unit's research performance.

### **An Overall APQA Process or Approach**

While in this paper the focus is on “principles and values” and “criteria”, we are not suggesting that these elements are sufficient to define an overall APQA process or approach. To be effective, any overall QA process or system in education must have a range of integrated elements and conditions. Just as measurement, without relevant questions and judgments, is not sufficient for evaluation, having principles, criteria and (even) evidence, does not provide a real QA process. Before we narrow our focus to principles and values, and then criteria, we will touch on the matter of the important general elements of a QA process, in the particular context of APQA.

#### *Important Elements of an APQA Process or Approach*

As indicated earlier, usually an effective QA process should facilitate real quality improvement, and enable accountability and reporting requirements to be satisfied. If this overall (dual) purpose is assumed, an effective APQA process should include and be based on the following elements.

1. A view of program quality based on the institution's and program's primary academic and learning goals and values (as reflected in, for example, a learning and teaching strategy).
2. A set of principles and values that provides general guidance on how quality and QA are viewed and practiced.
3. A set of criteria or indicators that provides a framework for conceiving\*, improving and reporting on quality (\* meaning a way of seeing “quality”).
4. An evaluation strategy and key evaluation processes to gather evidence and information to make judgments about the program based on the quality criteria.
5. Systematic processes for implementing actions to facilitate continual improvement.
6. Means/processes for dynamically organizing and logging evidence (of findings from evaluation processes, and improvements and changes made or planned).
7. Explicit and effective structures to facilitate communication, including reporting, for the purposes of recognition and accountability.
8. Clear responsibilities assigned to appropriate individuals and groups for the proper implementation of process actions and stages.

Other participants in the AAIR Forum 2002 will probably discuss aspects of these elements. From this point, we will be concerned with elements 2 and 3 in the list above. We will present an example of a set of principles and values, and then some clusters of criteria. Both are needed in the foundation of an overall APQA process, and the desired shaping influence of quality principles and values on quality criteria is an important one.

### **A Principles and Values Base for APQA: An Example**

Table 1 is an example of a set of principles and values to underpin an overall APQA process. Such a set could be used to facilitate discussion and development in an institution or in particular academic units. There will always be debate about the individual principles and values proposed. Many of the issues commonly debated are covered well in the literature, although they are rarely synthesised and discussed in terms of a principles and values base (see for example Astin, 1991; Boyle & Bowden, 1997; Bowden & Marton, 1998; El-Khawas, 1998; Goodland, 1995; Peterson et al., 1997). The point we want to stress is that having an agreed set of principles and values is important. We suggest that over time, having such an element as part of any overall APQA process will be recognized as a characteristic of good practice in academic quality assurance.

**TABLE 1: A Principles and Values Base to Underpin an APQA Process**

1. Program quality is founded on and viewed in terms of the high priority strategic goals, relevant to the Program.
2. Quality assurance is an integral part of practice, not an addition to practice.
3. The primary focus is on student learning, including graduate capabilities.
4. Continual improvement and the achievement of excellence are the goals (both goals rest on a dynamic view of quality).
5. Systematic processes are used to facilitate improvement and reporting.
6. Accountability and reporting are important but are secondary goals and drivers.
7. Explicit criteria, evidence and information inform improvement and reporting.
8. Program stakeholders, including those external to the institution, are essential sources of evidence and ideas concerning Program quality.
9. A view of “quality with diversity” is encouraged, rather than “quality as conformity” (e.g. how quality criteria are interpreted across programs will vary).
10. Program staff and leaders are empowered and share responsibility for Program QA.

## **Criteria to Underpin APQA Processes**

### *A Brief Conceptual Discussion*

It is possible to define “criteria” in a number of ways. Without implying any disrespect for more fundamental philosophical approaches, the meaning adopted for “criteria” in this paper is essentially that used in the fields of measurement and evaluation, that is “whatever is to count as, indicate or help describe levels of merit, success or quality”.

Expressed a little differently, criteria can be seen as relatively concrete expressions of important values, variables or questions that show the adopted way of seeing “quality” and addressing QA. For example, it is common in university environments for student satisfaction with teaching to be one criterion (or secondary indicator) for the broader and more difficult to define (quality) variable “quality of teaching”. Similarly, there are criteria articulated to communicate what will indicate relative quality in the research work dimension of a university (or individual); an example being the value or type of external research grants obtained.

Other less tangible yet fundamentally important criteria can and should be incorporated in any comprehensive view of academic program quality. Such criteria relate to the informal processes and cultural features of academic program environments, such as staff attitudes to their program and their role in it.

Clearly, criteria that provide indications of quality, usually require evidence or information to demonstrate levels of quality. Evidence and information can be in a variety of quantitative forms (e.g. rates of on-time completions, measured increases in standards, levels and patterns of satisfaction ratings), and a variety of non-quantitative forms (e.g. changes in learning-teaching practices as a result of an innovation program). It is important to emphasise the necessary linkage between quality criteria and evidence to address those criteria.

In a later section we will provide a representation to illustrate the basic conceptual and systemic links between principles and values, criteria, evidence and some of the other key elements of an APQA process touched on earlier (see Figure 1).

### *Criteria Clusters to Underpin an APQA Process*

In Table 2, three criteria clusters are presented as an illustration. The cluster headings we have adopted are: Learning, Students and Teaching; Program Stakeholders; and Program Management and Organisation. As discussed earlier, the criteria listed suggest, in relatively concrete terms, “what will count as quality”, in the context of APQA as defined in this paper. Because what will count as quality will vary according to different perspectives (“views from different hilltops”), APQA criteria will tend to be relatively diverse. This diversity is demonstrated, both within and across the clusters.

**TABLE 2: Criteria to Underpin APQA**

**Criteria Cluster 1: Learning, Students and Teaching**

Evidence and feedback that indicates or enables description of aspects such as –

- 1.1 Graduate capabilities, both discipline specific and more general
- 1.2 Graduate employability and employment patterns
- 1.3 Graduate satisfaction with the Program and related institutional experiences
- 1.4 Assessment standards and validity in the Program
- 1.5 Student progress and success patterns
- 1.6 Student satisfaction with their educational experience, including teaching, supervision, the learning environment and student support processes
- 1.7 Extent of inclusiveness of and support for students having diverse backgrounds and profiles, including disabilities
- 1.8 Effectiveness and coherence of the Program in terms of learning-teaching principles and practices
- 1.9 Effectiveness of processes for evaluation, innovation and continual improvement of the learning and teaching aspects of the Program
- 1.10 Effectiveness of continuing staff development processes and outcomes concerning teaching, student support, and Program leadership and development

**Criteria Cluster 2: Program Stakeholders**

Evidence and feedback that indicates or enables description of aspects such as –

- 2.1 Standing of the Program in academic and other communities
- 2.2 Accreditation and/or benchmarking plans, processes and outcomes
- 2.3 Demand for the Program from professional and other community groups
- 2.4 Staff satisfaction with Program (e.g. goals, curriculum design, approach to teaching)
- 2.5 Effective external alliances and support mechanisms for the Program (e.g. collaborative links with other universities or organizations, alumni support)

**Criteria Cluster 3: Program Leadership and Management**

Evidence and feedback that indicates or enables description of aspects such as –

- 3.1 Organisational framework for the Program, including leadership responsibilities, Program strategy and quality development process
- 3.2 Program culture, including staff attitudes to the Program and their role in it
- 3.3 Effectiveness of mechanisms for creating conditions to enhance staff satisfaction, incentive and continuing development
- 3.4 Effectiveness of Program administration processes (e.g. enrolment)
- 3.5 Effectiveness of resource management processes (e.g. facilities management, business plan development, cost-effectiveness analysis)
- 3.6 Effectiveness of processes for ensuring equivalent quality levels for students across learning locations and modes

### *Discussion of the APQA Criteria*

It is worth making a number of general points about the criteria clusters presented in Table 2. First, many of the criteria (or indicators) presented are represented and/or used in some form in many universities in Australia and elsewhere, although priorities and terminology vary considerably, as do the quality of processes and evidence used to address them. Such criteria are also discussed, under various labels, in sources such as McKinnon (2000). In presenting these criteria clusters, we seek to illustrate a way of organising APQA criteria in a sensible way.

Secondly, the cluster headings are not meant to imply clear or necessary boundaries between the aspects or perspectives of program quality represented. Rather the clusters, and the relative diversity of criteria included, illustrate three (possible) “hilltops” from which program quality can be seen in somewhat different terms.

Thirdly, it can be argued sensibly that criteria relating to aspects such as “program resource management” belong elsewhere in an institution’s overall quality system, for example, in the budgeting framework and process. We have included such criteria, and the broader cluster “program management and organization”, simply to illustrate further the range of possible perspectives on program quality. In some institutional and program contexts, the management and organization aspects of a program, including resource management, will have much greater relevance and implications for quality than in other contexts. In very general terms, this relevance will increase where there is greater diversity in aspects such as the geographic location of students and learning environments, or in the infrastructure costs and conditions at different sites or for different modes of learning or program delivery. The relevance of resource management criteria to program quality increases also when important values in a program context have serious resource implications. An example of this would be where the development of students’ “hands-on” skills within their program is valued highly, but the availability of facilities or materials is an enabling condition for such development.

Fourthly, and importantly, the criteria used in our example are aligned with the broader principles and values base we have presented (Table 1). For example, there is an explicit focus on student learning, in terms of both outcomes and in-program experience. Continual improvement, based on evidence, is also emphasised, as is the importance of stakeholders, both external and internal to the institution, for providing input on what counts as program quality. Consistent with our systemic perspective, we believe that it is important to develop approaches to APQA based on a logical sequence, and alignment or integration of elements (such as principles and values, and criteria). First, a set of quality or QA principles and values should be agreed. Secondly, quality criteria, based on these principles and values, should be derived. Then, processes and other means should be developed for achieving the quality assurance purposes that have been established.

Finally, it is important to note that while the criteria presented address program aspects such as graduate capabilities, assessment standards, evaluation and improvement processes, program administration mechanisms, etc., they are not prescriptive in terms of



how such criteria should be applied in different program contexts. This is consistent with the principles/values of “quality with diversity” and “empowerment of staff” that we have put forward (see principles 9 and 10, Table 1). Clearly, such principles need to be manifested further in institutional policies, processes and structures concerning APQA.

There will always be debate about how many criteria or indicators to have, criteria that are missing and should be included, etc. Ultimately, strategic choices and balancing are required in institutions – based on values, mission, and the costs and pragmatics of evidence and information use and management.

Whatever criteria are adopted, they will be more or less useful at different levels in an institution. Particular criteria can be elaborated on or unpacked, or alternatively not used, depending on the level being focused on. For example, more focused criteria, or more specific sub-criteria are often more useful at course level.

### **Linkages between Criteria and Other Key APQA Process Elements**

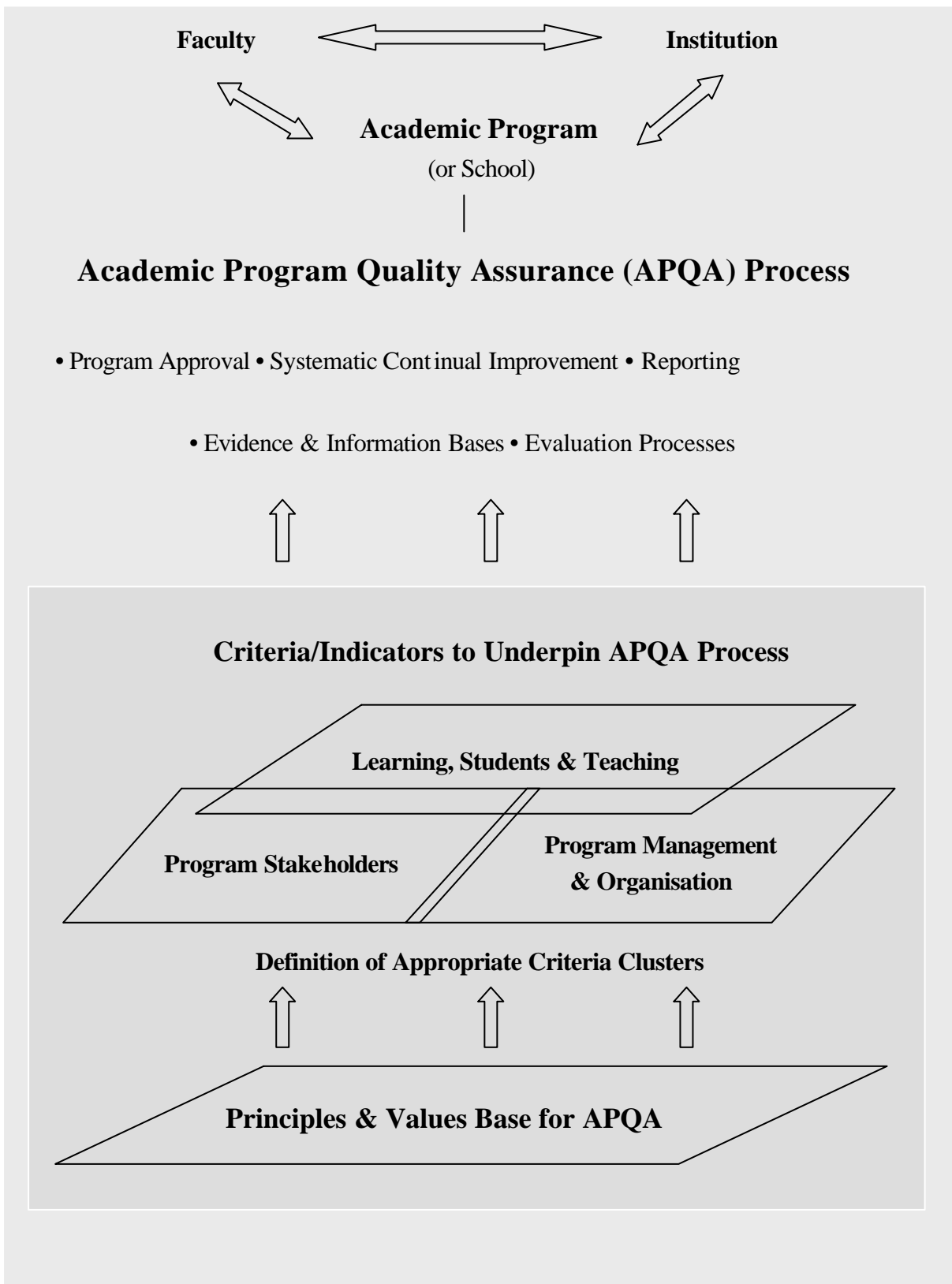
The scope of this paper does not extend to a discussion of the details of how the main elements in an overall APQA process are integrated, in design and operational terms. It is useful, however, to present a schematic overview that illustrates how these elements should be linked. We anticipate being able to discuss these linkages during our Forum session. Figure 1 provides such an overview.

### **Conclusion**

The main purpose of this paper has been to discuss the importance of principles and values, and appropriate criteria for indicating quality, to underpin or guide overall academic program quality assurance (APQA) processes. To facilitate this discussion we have provided examples of a set of principles and values, and a set of criteria. In providing these examples, particularly the criteria clusters, we have addressed a secondary purpose of the paper; to illustrate that different ways of seeing quality do exist, and that these need to be integrated to achieve what we believe will be a more effective and respected approach to APQA.

Because of our systemic orientation, we advocate that it is important for academic units (of any size) to ground their approaches to QA in a set of agreed principles and values, linked to the overall QA purpose and spirit they have established. Criteria to indicate quality should then be developed, and these should be consistent with the principles and values base. Similarly, other key elements of any overall QA approach (e.g. approval or improvement-change processes, evidence-information bases) should be designed to reflect the principles and values and enable the criteria to be addressed. For example, to extend the principle (and associated criterion) of “continual improvement” into successful action, responsive and agile institutional processes are needed to enable change.

**FIG 1: Linkages between criteria and other key APQA process elements**



## Notes on Contributors

### ADRIAN LEE

Prior to taking up his current position as Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education), Adrian had a conventional academic career at UNSW, commencing as a lecturer in microbiology and progressing to Professor and Head of School. Along the way he taught medical and science students and researched guts and stomachs. Having always been interested in high quality teaching, Adrian participated in many medical curriculum reviews and was a consultant in Medical Education for the World Health Organisation for more than ten years. In his current position, Adrian has responsibility for implementing strategies to improve the quality of the learning experience of students at UNSW as well as the development of the University's Quality System.

### PATRICK BOYLE

Since 1998, Patrick has been running his own consulting business Q Associates. For most of 2002, he has served as Principal Consultant, Quality System Development at UNSW. Patrick has held senior positions and undertaken consultancies in universities and other knowledge or service focused organizations in Australia, Asia and the Middle East. He has chaired a range of bodies concerned with quality assurance and development at institutional level. Patrick's areas of specialisation include the enhancement of quality systems in complex organizations, the exploration and development of international best practice in higher education quality assurance, learning and assessment, and evaluation practice. He has successfully led many major development and consulting projects in these areas, and is the author of a range of publications and commissioned reports. Patrick continues to miss the teaching and curriculum development work of his early career so he still does some occasional postgraduate teaching.

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