Spanners in the Works:

Quality Professionals in Irish Higher Education

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Sinéad Mary O'Sullivan

Supervisor: Dr John Walsh

Declaration

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Summary

This thesis examines how quality professionals in Irish higher education perceive their professional identity, the tasks that they carry out and the behaviours that they use to navigate the different cultures within their institution.

A single embedded case study approach is used to enable for comparison between the three subsectors of Irish education – degree awarding bodies, institutes of technology and private/independent institutions.

Data was gathered using a survey of purposefully sampled individuals who had quality in their role title or had a quality related role. The primary purpose of the survey was to provide contextual information about role titles, the placement of quality roles and the range of tasks carried out by those in quality related roles. This data was complemented by 39 semi structured interviews with 22 of the survey respondents, other quality professionals, senior leaders in higher education and sectoral representatives.

Anteby, Chan and Di Benigno's (2016) framework of occupational analysis was adapted to answer the research questions through the lens of professions, social identity and boundary spanning theories.

The findings of this research suggest that although those who work in a quality role do not necessarily align with a quality related professional identity, they do consider themselves as **being** professional and **a** professional. The behaviours that they exhibit using collaboration, co-producing, and brokering identify quality professionals as boundary spanners within higher education who act as connected or connective (Noordegraaf, 2020) professionals.

The findings also provide the basis for the development of an occupational profile for a quality professional in higher education. This occupational profile demonstrates that quality professionals from all three sectors require the same knowledge, skills, and competence to carry out the role, albeit that the findings show that there are some variations by sub sector as to the frequency and priority in some tasks.

The study also suggests that there is a tension at sectoral level on how quality is defined. An appreciation of different interpretations of quality by government agencies, academic staff, policy makers and quality professionals may alleviate that tension.

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Glossary of Acronyms

DAB	Degree Awarding Body
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines for Higher Education in the European Area
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HECA	Higher Education Colleges Association
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IOT	Institute of Technology
PSRB	Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Body
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
THEA	Technological Higher Education Association

1   Introduction

The quality of higher education or of the student experience is a phrase that is used in higher education policy documents and in institutional strategy documents. It is assumed that readers of these documents understand what these mean. To many quality is an abstract concept and exists in the eye of the 'beholder'. The experience of 'quality' is often more tangible when it is not present through a poor learning or service experience within a student's time at an institution.

Quality assurance has been a feature of higher education for many decades, present through activities such as peer review of academic papers and external examination of assessment. The formalisation of quality assurance and its extension into many aspects of the academic institution is seen by many academics as a manifestation of greater control and a managerial mindset at both institutional and national levels.

Quality assurance in the Irish higher education context has been experienced differently in different sectors. Other than peer review and external examination, the university sector remained relatively untouched until the 1997 Universities Act.

Regional Technical Colleges and other non-university institutions experienced quality assurance through engagement with the activities of their awarding bodies e.g. the National Council for Education Awards (NCEA) which was established in 1972.

The Qualifications (Education & Training) Act 1999 created a governance framework which formalised and required all higher education institutions to establish and agree quality assurance procedures with either the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) in the case of the universities and Dublin Institute of Technology or the Higher Education & Training Awards Council (HETAC).

The later Quality & Qualifications Act (2012) created the current legislative framework for quality assurance in Irish higher education. In doing so it has created a single quality assurance agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) which has responsibility for oversight of quality assurance arrangements within the State.

Despite the existence of a prolific body of literature on quality in higher education, the perspective of those required to implement quality assurance (QA) policies and procedures has been missing until very recently.

The publication of core quality assurance guidelines which are common to all regulated higher education institutions affords an opportunity to explore the roles, tasks, and perspectives of those responsible for the development and implementation of policies that support the quality assurance and enhancement of higher education across the sector as they navigate the boundary between multiple professional cultures and an increasingly market led and regulatory bound education system.

I have a vested interest in this study as a quality professional with over 15 years' experience in role at Director level. This experience has been gained in the private not for profit higher education sector, where QQI was the institutional awarding body and more recently in the university sector. The idea for this research arose from reflecting on my own career and wondering 'how did I get here'? 'Do others feel the same as I do?'

My position on quality within higher education is that it is a multifaceted concept. My approach to quality is rooted in a concept of customer service which is based on my initial career as a librarian and providing a good service to users of the library. Taking a holistic view of the higher education institution, taking this service approach to quality is transferable to services such as the library, academic services such as admissions, student information etc. These services tend to be transactional in nature and it is possible to set out terms of service that can be achieved in a standardised way and the service is deemed fit for purpose.

This approach, however, is problematic when we consider quality in a learning environment. While we can set out expectations in terms of what a student can expect in the context of programme information, qualifications of teaching staff and a commitment to good programme management, learning is not a transactional process. Students also need to engage with their learning and with institutional policies and procedures.

I acknowledge that my previous academic study in public management, organisation studies and business improvement together with positions in senior and executive management have informed my views and approaches

to the subject. As a quality professional I believe that quality assurance frameworks can be facilitators of positive change and knowledge management within an institution through the documentation of processes and sharing of information and practice.

1.1 Research Questions

A review of literature in the areas of quality in higher education the formation of professions and professional identity, resulted in the formulation of the following research questions

1. What professional identities do QA practitioners align with and has that changed since taking on the role?

2. How do QA practitioners negotiate the cultures that operate within their institutions and within Irish Higher Education?

3. How do they perceive their status, role, and influence within their institution?

4. Is QA practice in Irish higher education emerging as a profession due to the influence of national and/or European policy on the creation of a common occupational profile?

The study was designed to answer these questions based on the experiences of those working in roles that considered to be quality related roles in higher education. While the primary focus is on those working directly in quality roles, the perspectives of senior leaders and representatives from sectoral agencies on these questions have also been sought.

1.2 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 presents a review of literature on quality assurance and enhancement in higher education. It addresses models for quality assurance which can be found in the literature and whether internal and external quality assurance practices have been effective. The role of an organisation's quality culture in having an effective system is also reviewed. Finally recent work from Elkin et al (2020) on what constitutes quality work within higher education is considered.

The administrative and policy landscape for higher education and quality assurance and enhancement in Ireland is presented in Chapter 3. This chapter includes a description of the higher education (HE) system, the legislation underpinning the system and a review of recent policy documents and report outputs relating to quality in the HE system.

The review of literature on professions and professionalisation is presented in Chapter 4. This chapter considers theories of professions and professional identity. Literature on boundary spanning, third space professionals and how quality professionals can work across occupational subcultures is also discussed. Finally recent extant literature on quality professionals in higher education is presented.

Chapter 5 outlines the research approach and provides a description of Anteby et al's framework of occupational analysis which I have chosen as a conceptual framework. The chapter goes on to describe the research design used to answer the research questions and the process of data collection, interview, and data analysis. Reflections on my role as an insider researcher are also provided. The findings of the study are presented in Chapters 6 to 9. Chapter 6 sets out findings on how roles are defined and where the quality function is placed and the maturity of those roles within different institutions. Linking to the concept of 'quality work', which is introduced in Chapter 2, the tasks that are considered quality work by participants are analysed. In this section the concept of institutional versus programmatic quality work is discussed.

The perspectives of participants on their professional identity and whether the role that they have can be described as a profession is presented in Chapter 7. Participants reflect on their career and how they have found themselves in quality roles. Perspectives on being professional and being 'a' professional are discussed. The chapter goes on to present findings on the knowledge, skills, and competences that quality professionals use and need to fulfil their role.

Chapter 8 looks at findings on how quality professionals interact with their colleagues, managers, and representatives from external agencies. A range of strategies and soft skills are used such as brokering, co creation and influencing.

The final set of findings set out in Chapter 9 looks at the challenges experienced by quality professionals within their institution and challenges for the quality agenda at a sectoral level. The supports available to quality professionals at an institutional level and from sectoral agencies such as the HEA or QQI are also discussed. The role and interpretation of quality at a sectoral level is also considered with implications for how quality is integrated at a strategic level in institutions.

Chapter 10 presents a discussion of the findings adapting the occupational analysis framework created by Anteby et al (2016) as a conceptual framework. The discussion reflects on the findings using lenses of 'being', 'becoming', 'doing' and 'relating' to ascertain the status of the occupational group of quality practitioners. Using these lenses and sub filters identified by Anteby et al (2016), the findings suggest that a distinct occupation of quality practitioner exists with a range of defined categories of work and practices.

Further reflection on the definition of a profession suggests that those in the quality occupational group can be defined as connective professionals. Characteristics of an occupational profession can also be found through observance of a common formation within the higher education sector, the definition of a body of knowledge required for quality work in higher education and the creation of an outline occupational profile.

As the first study of quality professionals across the regulated higher education sector in Ireland, this study gives voice to quality professionals in Irish higher education. It also contributes to the wider European literature in this area.

1.3   A note on Quality Practitioners and Quality Professionals

The term 'quality professional' is used in the text of this thesis to encompass all those who work in quality related roles. The literature uses quality practitioner to describe these roles in some cases and in others quality professional. In some cases, the term is used interchangeably. Where the literature refers explicitly to quality practitioners, quality practitioner will be used in the text.

The findings of this study suggest that most of those interviewed prefer to be called quality professional rather than practitioner (see section 7.2).

2   Quality Assurance & Enhancement in Higher Education

The question of defining quality, its assurance and its enhancement is a vexed one within the higher education sector and after decades of discussion is considered elusive, ephemeral and subjective (Hazelkorn, Coates, & McCormick, 2018).

There is societal interest in not only the quality of individual institutions, but also in the education system as a whole, where government and employers have an interest in higher education. These interests include the performance and accountability of institutions from a funding and productivity perspective as well as from a quality-related perspective (Hazelkorn et al, 2018).

Table 1, taken from Harvey & Stensaker (2008) applies typical definitions of quality to the higher education context. Each definition has applicability with that of over emphasis on accountability being highlighted by academic staff, rather than any evidence that quality assurance enhances the transformational nature of education.

Definition of Quality	Description
Exceptional	A traditional concept of quality linked to the idea of 'excellence', usually operationalised as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. Quality is achieved if the standards are surpassed
Perfection or consistency	Focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet. Quality in this sense is summed up by the interrelated ideas of zero defects and getting things right first time. Often thought not to apply to a learning situation where no one wants students to be all the same, it does, however, have relevance in areas such as consistency of academic judgement
Fitness for purpose	Quality is judged by the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose. The purpose may be customer-defined to meet requirements or (in education) is usually institution-defined to reflect institutional mission (or course objectives), or

Definition of Quality	Description
	indeed defined by external professional bodies. Fitness for purpose is often allied with another so-called definition of quality 'fitness of purpose', which evaluates whether the quality-related intentions of an organisation are adequate. It provides a check on fitness for purpose. As such, fitness of purpose is not a definition of quality per se
Value for money	Quality is assessed via return on investment or expenditure. At the heart of the value-for-money approach in education is the notion of accountability. Public services, including education, are expected to be accountable to the funders. Increasingly, students are also considering the value for money of their own investment in higher education
Transformational	this view sees quality as a process of change, which in higher education adds value to students through their learning experience. Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant. This leads to two notions of transformative quality in education where the student is enhanced through learning and empowered through their learning experience.

Table 2-1: Definitions of Quality in Higher Education (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008)

Within the modern higher education context, the range of stakeholders has extended far beyond the student, each of them having a heterogenous set of needs with a differing set of expectations.

Situations where customers "define quality in relation to their expectations and value in a market transaction" (Houston, 2008, p62) is a definition of quality used in sectors outside of education which when used within education contributes to the association of quality assurance and its activities as a manifestation of managerialism and new public management within higher education. Quality assurance is seen as a management

technique imported from business where continuous improvement is considered as a 'hallmark' (Morley, p.47) of new managerialism. According to Morley, the language of quality assurance – enhancement, improvement and development is seen to be difficult to contest, however its implementation has been associated with bureaucracy, impression management and putting order on procedures. (Newton 2000).

The use of the term 'customer' to refer to the student in higher education is problematic as the relationship between the student and the university has a moral dimension which is based on student transformation rather than market based one (Houston, 2008).

The problematic attribution of industry based models and language to the higher education context is highlighted in the literature and these quality models have had limited success in higher education due to the prevalence of academic culture and collegialism (Davies, Douglas, and Douglas (2007); Davies (2008); Houston (2008); Temponi (2005)).

Providing a single definition of what quality means in HE is hampered by what Elken & Stensaker (2020) describe as the 'complex quality agenda' (p.3) in higher education. These drivers of an increasing emphasis on quality include requirements for increasing efficiency, the marketisation of higher education and an excellence agenda being pursued by universities which is associated with their economic role. These agendas meet the traditional values and norms of universities which focus on research and education. Therefore there are many meanings and understandings of quality depending on the emphasis of the institution and those working within it.

> "In other words, when led by management objectives, `quality' appears as `accountability' and `managerialism', whereas, at the operational level, quality is understood relative to how actors construe and construct `quality' and the `quality system'. Thus, situational factors relating to organisational context, work environment, and actors' subjectivities prevent accountability and improvement from being reconciled and undermined". (Newton, 2000 p.155)

For the purpose of this study, quality assurance is defined as adopted by QQI where UNESCO defines quality assurance (QA) as "…an ongoing,

continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving) the quality of … [an] education system, institution or program' (QQI, 2016).

Quality enhancement is defined as the promotion and spreading effective practice in an ever-evolving quality assurance system (QQI, 2006).

2.1 Quality Assurance Models for Higher Education

The introduction of various quality assurance models and frameworks has been attempted by many academic organisations internationally. The use of other industry based, externally assessed quality models such as European Foundation of Quality Management (EFQM), Baldrige, Total Quality Management, International Standards Organisation (ISO) is reviewed by Brookes & Beckett (2007) . Although these models are introduced internally rather than imposed as a statutory requirement, a review of English language literature on the implementation of these models in higher education finds that while they have yielded benefits in administrative functions, there is little evidence of the models being able to measure the effectiveness of teaching and learning. A later review by Tarí and Dick (2016) also found that there was little consensus in the best model to be used in higher education, but that any model can be used in practice.

Higher education has a number of its own excellence models that are specific to the sector. The EQUIS and AMBA accreditation systems use similar frameworks of self-assessment and review that are used by HEIs to supplement their national or professional accreditations. These can be viewed as badges for marketing purposes rather than mechanisms to sustain continuous improvement. To counter the importation of business-led models of quality assurance to the academic environment, some authors have developed models that are perceived as more appropriate to the sector.

Biggs (2001) quality model introduces the concept of the reflective institution which highlights the need for 'prospective quality assurance'. In improving quality in teaching and learning, an appropriate quality model (QM), is one which is made feasible (QF) by removing policy and procedural barriers to good teaching and which is supported by continuous improvement through enhancement (QE). Looking at quality as a measure

of accountability, numbers of research papers, PhDs on staff etc. is seen as retrospective quality assurance (QA). Biggs' view is that the agenda of retrospective QA which is seen largely as the purpose of external review, is primarily managerial rather than academic. This view is supported by the research of Langfeldt et al (2010). Prospective QA therefore is seen as an internal activity where the Quality Model is derived from theories of learning. Biggs includes the use of external examiners and validation panels as QF activities where these external elements of the QA process can be seen to negatively affect innovation as they can have an undue influence on the process where the curriculum is influenced by individual panel members' biases and programmes are designed to 'get approval'. Innovation and improvisation are discouraged in the pursuit of compromise and compliance. Brennan and Shah (2000) categorise values of quality which underpin an approach to quality into four areas: academic, managerial, pedagogic and employment focus.

Quality Value	Description
Type 1: Academic	Focuses on the subject and professional authority Quality Values are seen to be variant across the institution
Type 2: Managerial	Focus is on the institution, policy and procedure, managerial authority. Quality values are invariant across the institution
Type 3: Pedagogic	Focus is on the skills and competences of people. Staff development/educationalist influence Quality values are invariant across the institution
Type 4: Employment	Focus is on outputs, graduate standards & learning outcomes Employment/professional authority Quality values both variant and invariant across the institutions

A difficulty with this approach is that in adopting a singular model or value set, stakeholders that align to other value sets will be alienated, which will lead to resistance.

Srikanthan (2010) Quality Management in Education (QME) conceptual model synthesises the disparate approaches to quality addressing the ability to apply industry led models in the service areas of higher education while recognising the difficulties in applying them to the complex area of teaching and learning. The QME model is described as holistic and meshes the industry led models with models developed for higher education. In addressing the implementation of this model, he draws on knowledge management and organisation learning literature using deep learning and transformational innovation and change. Srikanthan argues that despite resistance from academic staff, the rationale for the adoption of quality management in higher education is sound and the '…general way of making it happen is by empowering all areas….so that there is a perceptible coincidence of autonomy and accountability'. The model advocates greater collaboration in response to greater complexity. This is an attractive model for those involved in the implementation of quality assurance methodologies as it allows significant scope for localisation within the organisation's individual context rather than the imposition of a sectoral or funding body led generic methodology.

Stensaker et al (2011) review of the impact of the ESG on guiding reviews by European national quality assurance agencies raises a critical question regarding what is being reviewed by these processes – the process of quality assurance or the transformational nature of quality; specifically in this instance the transformational learning experience of the student. Gynnild (2007) also raises concerns in this area, citing the lack of valid and reliable data that quality efforts are making a difference to student learning. Brennan & Shah (2000) and Houston & Maniku (2005) also reflect on the appropriateness of a one size fits all approach to external quality assurance. The differences between states and organisations in terms of size, mission and cultural context have to be taken into consideration when applying a national or international standard. Using Brennan & Shah's (2000) categorisations, it appears that the national quality assurance agencies and accreditation bodies appear to favour the 'managerial' quality model where there is a focus on the institutional level with a standard approach to everything. A published review of the implementation of the ESG guidelines has found that 'further work could be done to raise awareness and ownership…. particularly amongst faculty staff directly involved in teaching & learning' (ENQA, 2011).

2.2 External Quality Assurance

Much of the literature finds that these external reviews of organisations result in improvement at a structural or organisational level rather than at a grass roots level ((Haapakorpi, 2011);(Westerheijden, Hulpiau, & Waeytens, 2007)). This is attributed to the fact that those working to meet the requirements of the external review are not those actually working in the area of teaching and learning. There is evidence that where outcomes of reviews were positive there was little impetus to continue with any improvements – demonstrating external compliance but not any intrinsic continuous improvement activity.

2.2.1 External Peer Review

An accepted practice in the academic environment is the inclusion of external experts from other institutions to critically evaluate new programmes, departments, and services. This practice stems from the collegial nature of the academic environment and the concept of peer review which is deeply rooted in academia and is a form of collegial regulation (Freidson 1983) in the academic world. As competition increases among institutions, there are delicate balances between ensuring that institutions and programmes are objectively reviewed by external experts and exposing new products or innovative services to potential competitors through the external review process. These concerns raised about the subjectivity and potential for cronyism in the self-evaluation and peer review process have been raised in the literature (Van Kemenade and Hardjono (2010); MacNab and Thomas (2007); Stensaker et al, (2011)). Langfeldt et al (2010, p4) indicate that 'there are strong indications that the whole peer-review process is under pressure by the emergence of the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance, by the emergence of new national indicators and benchmarks intended to guide the whole review process, and not least by the emergence of qualification frameworks in higher education'. Through the integration of standards and indicators as measures of quality, the role of the academic peer reviewer who would have taken a scholarly and more flexible approach to review may be reduced.

There is a link between external review and the internal quality assurance processes used by organisations as quality assurance agencies expect that external engagement will exist as part of internal quality assurance. This is evidenced in a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of external

evaluation within the Norwegian context by Langfeldt et al (2010) which identifies external review activities as review of quality assurance activities, institutional accreditations, programme accreditations and reaccreditations and national surveys.

This study is one of the very few empirical reviews of the impact of external review. Their questionnaire addressed all aspects of the activity of the organisation to all stakeholders in the process and in agreement with other reviews, the outcome was that managers and administrators are most positively disposed to their impact. Interestingly students are least positive about their impact. Another outcome was that different types of external review had differing degrees of impact. Haapakorpi (2011) presents similar findings in the Finnish context, however he also argues that quality assurance also facilitates the wider strategic goals and the integration of disparate 'academic tribes' through the collaboration that can take place between disciplines when preparing for external reviews.

Notwithstanding these issues raised about the peer-review, Cheng's (2009) study of the attitudes of academic staff to internal and external quality review demonstrates that academics as professionals, prefer peer evaluation. For an external review to be perceived as valid, those evaluating are required to be seen as peers of those being evaluated however, the time spent on preparing the paper trail for external review is viewed as an inconvenience and would be better spent on the real priority of teaching or research.

2.3 Internal Quality Assurance

Academic institutions use a range of internal processes to assure the quality of services and teaching, including annual programme review, student feedback, internal programme validation or accreditation processes. The characteristics of internal quality assurance systems are the result of the requirements of external accountability from state agencies or professional bodies as well as internal organisational factors. (Elken, Frølich, Maassen, & Stensaker, 2020). While institutions have autonomy in how they structure their internal quality assurance, the threat of external sanction from such agencies requires institutions to create organisational infrastructures to support these requirements. The internal quality assurance system has been seen to deliver on its core role of 'customer protection' but is also likely to

gain additional functions such as information provider and data processors (Beerkens, 2015). In doing this the internal quality system can be seen as fulfilling three different functions ; adherence to standards, contributing to strategic institutional leadership and the enhancement of local quality processes (Elken, Frølich, et al., 2020).

2.3.1 Benchmarking

The use of explicit benchmarking and the formalisation of processes is relatively new to the higher education sector. (Burquel & van Vught, 2010) conclude that the growth of benchmarking in higher education reflects the search for continuous quality improvement and more effective ways of improving performance in an increasingly diversified higher education sector. Benchmarking from the perspective of external measurement and comparison with specific national indicators is more likely to initiate compliance behaviours, rather than benchmarking carried out in a voluntary collaborative way. In the case of voluntary benchmarking, co-operation and collaborative inter-organisational learning between institutions are at the core of the approach in order to improve practices, procedures and modes of operation.

Benchmarking requires a high level of trust and confidentiality between participating institutions. Successful benchmarking exercises are those grounded on a strong institutional willingness to increase organisational performance and to become a "learning organisation" and are placed in an overall context of transformation and progress (Burquel & van Vught, 2010).

This requirement of trust has become more acute in an era of greater competition among higher education institutions, particularly in small economies or in regional areas.

2.4 Rankings

The role of institutional rankings also enters the international debate on quality in higher education. Rankings appear to have more credence in the public mind as a proxy for quality than institutional based assessment (Hazelkorn, 2007), However, these rankings are not measures of quality but measures of research activity and reputation recognition. As this is easier to present to the public as an indicator (of any kind), those not involved in research but in teaching are left to argue that they are

meaningless rather than develop public measures of standards and outcomes (Massaro, 2010). This disparity has been addressed to some extent with the development of the U-Multirank ranking in the European area (HEA, 2011), albeit those institutions who place well in the traditional rankings systems perpetuate their usage as proxies for institutional quality.

2.5 Culture and Compliance

An organisation's culture, 'how it does things' is reflected its artifacts, values and assumed values (Schein, 2010) or the organisation's power balance, uncertainty avoidance and long term orientation (Hofstede & Bond, 1984). Like quality, culture is an abstract concept which Schein (2010, p.14) describes as being to a 'group what personality or character is to an individual'. Observable behaviours and norms which are visible within an organisation as well as its tacit covert processes can contribute to an organisation's culture. According to Schein it is the stability, breadth, integration and depth of these behaviours and norms that defines 'the' culture and what he calls the 'social learning' of the organisation.

2.5.1 Compliance

Compliance with a policy or process can be a measure of the stability and integration of an organisational culture. Compliance is defined by Kelman (1958) as occurring when an individual 'accepts influence because he hopes to achieve a favourable reaction from another person or group'. This influence is accepted on the basis of the receipt of reward or approval, or the avoidance of punishment rather than any belief or commitment to the content. Hellweg, Geist, Jorgensen, and White-Mills (1990) review several compliance instruments which demonstrate the compliance gaining techniques used in organisations. The techniques illustrate the importance of elements of an organisational culture – power, control, relationships, influence, and persuasion within an organisation.

Much of the compliance literature refers to compliance with regulation within the financial services, medical sector or within a health and safety context. There is limited literature on compliance with general organisational policy and the effects of compliance or non-compliance on the operations of the organisation.

Contributing to the complexity of this subject is that compliance can be gained by exact behaviour; - by ticking the box – however, there can be failure to comply with the intended spirit of the measure which would require significant engagement in the issue or behaviour.

True compliance will depend on the context of the innovation or change being implemented. If those required to implement the innovation understand how it contributes to the overall success of a process or the organisation itself, then compliance is more likely to increase (Anderson & Johnson, 2005).

Resistance to review processes in higher education is often (Cheng, 2009), rooted in the knowledge that what is on paper may not actually reflect what is happening in practice. An expectation by many organisations and quality assurance agencies is that if compliance is measured it will increase. However, accurately measuring each behaviour that is expected, would drown an organisation in bureaucracy and contributes to the discussion in academic environments about the bureaucratisation of quality improvement (Newton, 2000) This inability to measure everything allows individuals to selectively comply with organisational mandates and non-compliance with other practices and policies remains unchanged.

The audit nature of some quality reviews creates a sense of defensiveness and results in academic staffs perception of the removal of trust that they know what they are doing (Jones & Saram, 2005). This removal of trust can create an environment producing sterile and ritualistic (Jones & Saram, 2005) game playing (Newton, 2002) techniques that can be found in the generalist compliance literature reviewed above.

Harvey and Newton (2007) argue that improvement does not occur as the result of regulation but occurs through critical engagement. They see accountability and improvement not as two related dimensions of quality, but as distinct and opposite. According to Harvey (2010), quality assurance has created an illusory tension by pretending that intrinsic quality is linked to the process of monitoring quality. This view is at odds with Biggs, (2001) and Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) who see accountability as a necessary component of the overall quality discussion. Engagement beyond compliance can only be achieved if a real value is placed on the rationale for review or improvement rather than it being seen as a form filling

behaviour. As Cheng (2009) found that these tensions are not as a result of the act of monitoring quality rather as the requirement to produce evidence leading to an increased workload that intrinsic quality exists.

Newton (2000) & Morley (2003) observe a culture of compliance with quality assurance procedures which they attribute to 'pragmatism jostling with resistance' (Morley p.50). There is an acceptance that quality assurance has to take place yet concerns about accountability and performativity remain.

2.5.2 Quality Culture

The creation of a quality culture is an objective of the statutory external review of Irish higher education institutions (QQI, 2017). Creating such a culture within an organisation first requires definition and then implementation. The European Universities Association embarked on a project which enhanced its 2006 definition of a quality culture as referring

> "to an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/ managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts". (EUA 2006 p.10)

Vettori and Lueger (2011) put forward the view that this cultural/ psychological element of a quality culture within the higher education environment is built by helping colleagues in their 'sensemaking' and integrating patterns of social learning (Schein, 2010). In this approach quality does not merely involve or allow staff to participate, it requires the building of a culture 'from the organisation' (p.53). Using Weick's (1995) theories of organisational sensemaking, they propose that a quality culture is not about having procedures to be followed, but is about creating an environment that promotes action, provides direction and "supplies legitimate explanations that are energizing and enable actions to be repeated" (Weick, 2000 p.163 in Vettori & Lueger, 2011 p.53). Rather than translate external frameworks and standards to be interpreted within the organisation, existing and successful practices should be formalised and translated into the language of quality assurance and 'made sense of'.

This sensemaking approach to quality assurance was developed further in an analysis of documents surrounding the debates within the Austrian higher education system where five patterns of quality were identified. (Vettori, 2018). His findings show that although actors within the system – within government, quality assurance agencies, students' unions and higher education institutions are using the same 'professional language', the meanings of this language are understood differently. Therefore, where there may be perceived harmony in this use of shared language without having shared meaning, there are underlying conflicts which are not addressed.

	Consumer protection pattern	Educative pattern	Entrepreneurial pattern	Managerial pattern	Quality engineering pattern
Notion of quality assurance or quality management	QA ensures the quality of a product or process and provides product information for consumers	QA induces and facilitates improvement-oriented change	QA helps to reduce cost, advertise institutional strengths, and offers competitive advantages	QA helps to improve the performance of individuals or institutions	QA supports the definition, operationalisation, measurement, and control of quality
Notion of higher education institution	Service or goods provider	Organisation in need of development	Entrepreneur/competitor	Company	Ensemble of structures and processes
Main actor constellations	Provider-consumer-regulator	Institutions as learners-government and agencies as	Entrepreneurs-competitors	Managers-managed	Functional parts of a system/system developers and maintenance workers

	Consumer protection pattern	Educative pattern	Entrepreneurial pattern	Managerial pattern	Quality engineering pattern
		educators			
Main sponsors in the discourse	Employers/Students/QA agencies	Ministry/QA agencies /senior management	Ministry/QA agencies/senior management	Senior management/QA and management experts	Senior management/QA and management experts
Main instruments and approaches	Standards and checklists; institutional certifications and accreditations	Benchmarking; rankings; evaluation	Rankings; instruments of	Rules and regulations; management information systems	'Toolbox 'approach: different instruments for different purposes

Table 2-2: Five patterns of quality (Vettori ,2018)

While these patterns demonstrate the different patterns that are evident, there are also similarities. In this analysis Vettori makes the point that when looking at the actors involved, the role of senior management is prominent but that of the academic or teaching staff is not.

Another approach to describing quality culture uses cultural theory where individual behaviour is impacted by the group and external rules and regulations. Adapting cultural theory from Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky (1991), Harvey and Stensaker (2008) propose four types or modes of quality culture ; responsive, reactive, regenerative and reproductive which depend on the strength or weakness of control.

	Organisational Reaction	
Degree of group-control Intensity of external rules	**Strong**	**Weak**

	Organisational Reaction	
Strong	*Responsive*	*Reactive*
Weak	*Regenerative*	*Reproductive*

Table 2-3: Quality Cultures (Adapted from Harvey & Stensaker, 2008)

The **responsive culture** is primarily led by external demands and takes advantage of these requirements to pursue an improvement led agenda. Compliance and accountability are prominent and institutional buy in is limited as the culture is seen to be seen to be outside of their control. Although the institution will seek to encourage its staff to embrace it, it is seen to 'exist in a parallel reality that staff journey to periodically.'

The **reactive culture** will take some advantage when compliance with external demands is linked to reward such as funding. The reactive mode does not have faith in the improvements that may come from quality activities and engages for compliance and accountability purposes and mourns the loss of trust and autonomy.

The **regenerative quality culture** focuses on its internal agenda while fully aware of external requirements. While taking advantage of any external rewards and initiatives, this is done in the context of the organisation's own agenda and these activities are undertaken where they add value to the organisation. There is a recognition that the direction of the organisation may change, that improvement is taken as a norm and accountability is evidenced through that improvement. This mode takes a learning organisation approach, managed from within the team. If interfered with from the outside or by senior management, this culture could have the potential to take subversive action.

The **reproductive quality culture** mode focuses on maintaining the status quo. Although rooted in day-to-day practice, there are well defined boundaries, and the culture is opaque and coded into taken for granted practices. Any attempt to develop or take a self-critical approach is met by resistance.

Acknowledging that various versions of these four types are to be found in higher education settings, Harvey & Stensaker argue that the organisational

culture can only be developed by understanding localised settings creating the culture from within and that the creation of structures alone are not enough to enhance quality.

2.5.3 Occupational Sub-Cultures

Within any organisation, there are a range of cultures and sub-cultures, created by sets of shared values and practices. These cultures may be observed within the organisation or transcend the boundary of the organisation. Within an organisation, there may be differing sets of values and beliefs which can lead to tensions within the organisation (Hofstede, 1998; Trice, 1993). As differing groups compete for resources, maintenance of the status quo or attempts to transform, intergroup conflict can arise.

Conflict between professional groups may be driven by competition influenced by continuous technological or socio-cultural change. This battle for jurisdiction forms the contested space in which 'third spaces or boundaries can be created, and legitimisation practices begin. Managerialist environments find third spaces useful as professional power is eroded in favour of pockets of expertise (Verbaan & Cox, 2014). For the individual, the third space can be challenging as identity is fluid and expertise temporary. In highly professionalised environments such as higher education institutions, the autonomy, strong sub culture and identity restrict managerialist management and in such organisations, this may weigh against the benefit of professional expertise. According to Verbaan and Cox, jurisdiction can also be placed around a concept as well as an object. In the context of this study, the jurisdiction of the concept of quality is under evaluation.

QQI's (2016, p.6) quality assurance principle is that higher education institutions must demonstrate a 'quality culture...the outcome of individual staff and collective organisational commitment to continuous improvement.'.... where 'QA procedures are not viewed as a bureaucratic burden, but as tools to drive improvement and enhancement.'

To create and maintain such a culture requires an understanding of the existing several cultures that exist in higher education, ranging from the discipline led academic cultures, the profession-based cultures of support staff and the leadership cultures of senior management.

2.5.3.1 Academic Sub-Cultures

The concept of the 'academic tribe' is long established. Becher's (1989) text *Academic Tribes & Territories* puts forward a thesis that the behaviours and values demonstrated by academics are strongly influenced by their academic discipline. The culture that they subscribe to is that of their discipline and not necessarily their organisation. Trowler, Saunders, and Bamber (2012) update this concept in the context of multidisciplinary structures and programmes that are a more representative face of the modern academic institution. Academics are frustrated by the inability to carry out their 'own work' such as research, due to the increased interruption of other work such as teaching, administration and other activities (McInnis, 2009). Within the academic landscape, not only are there contested spaces between academic, professional, and administrative staff, these spaces are also emerging between established disciplines and newer domains of study which are vying for legitimacy. Writing of the British academic profession, (Shattock, 2014; Whitchurch, 2008) conclude that the profession as defined by Perkin in 1972 as the 'key professional...that educates other professionals' no longer exists due amongst others to the erosion of the 'special' place that higher education had in society. A study of the Irish academic profession in 2015, found a profession that had experienced a deterioration in working conditions due to financial cutbacks, intensification of academic work and increasing precarity of contracts. This study demonstrates an affinity of the academic with their discipline over their institution. Of some interest is that female academic staff have a higher affinity with their institution than their male colleagues. In terms of overall influence, 74% felt that they had no influence at institutional level, with most influence perceived at their local school or departmental level (Clarke et al., 2015).

2.5.3.2 Non Academic Sub-Cultures

There is a growing body of literature which addresses the range of 'non-academic' roles within higher education. The nomenclature of these roles is a subject of significant discussion with the term 'non-academic' seen as derogatory and 'less than' the academic role. (Sebalj, Holbrook, & Bourke, 2012), (Kolsaker, 2014). The perceived invisibility of these roles is a subject of the literature (Szkeres, 2011, Trowler, 2014) as is the rise of newer roles such as educational technologists (Hudson, 2009), learning and teaching specialists, student affairs specialists (Carducci, 2013), faculty managers

and researchers and research assistants (Berman & Pitman, 2009). As the nature of the academic organisation changes to support more externally facing activities and to comply with ever increasing demands from government and regulatory agencies, the changing roles, functions and identities of these 'non academics' are being examined ((Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2013), Kallenberg, 2016, Lock, 2017, Karlsson & Ryttberg, 2016) .

2.6   What is Quality Work?

There is a significant literature on quality assurance, quality culture and the experience of academic staff engaging with quality representing a multiplicity of perspectives between quality culture and quality management. This can be seen as an indication that some aspects of quality in higher education are not yet systematically captured (Elken & Stensaker, 2020c). A recent addition to the literature on quality in higher education is a proposal to shift the perspective away from these perspectives of quality management and quality culture to looking at what quality work actually entails (Elken & Stensaker, 2018); (Bloch, Degn, Nygaard, & Haase, 2020); (Elken, Maassen, et al., 2020).

Elken and Stensaker (2018) propose the concept of 'quality work' as being a new perspective between discussions on quality management systems and quality culture. By examining the 'mundane day to day activities that are undertaken to enhance and maintain quality' (p.189), they propose an analytical framework to study institutional attempts to work with quality. Building on literature relating to institutional work developed by Lawrence et al (2013), they define quality work in the academic institution as "a set of activities and practices that address the quality of its educational provision" (p.190) . According to them, this emphasis places quality work in multiple organisational levels and places within the organisation, incorporates a range of formal and informal processes and engages different actors within the institution.   In a major study of quality in the Norwegian higher education system they differentiate between organisational and pedagogical aspects of quality and propose six complementary dimensions of quality work as summarised in Table 1-4, where the work in question is intentionally engaged with issues of quality.

Dimension	
Negotiated and Dynamic	Practices are tested against the established norms associated with educational delivery
Balance	Balance is sought between multiple expectations
Individuals may function as local problem solvers and innovators	Leadership can happen at all levels of the organisation; change may be incremental through small routine changes
Open ended outcomes	Small incremental change or imperfect imitation may lead to surprising results or outcomes
Pragmatic solutions	As problem solving is driven by the need to find pragmatic solutions.
Autonomy is needed	For quality work to be negotiated, and individuals to work as problem solvers, individuals need some discretion in order to solve problems and exercise their responsibility.

Table 2-4: Dimensions of Quality Work (Elken & Stensaker, 2018)

They present an argument that quality work is integrative and acts as the invisible glue of organisational life (Elken & Stensaker, 2020b) and call for researchers to look at where there are tensions within an organisation where individuals and groups may co-ordinate and balance different interests while exploring 'interesting' (p.10) rather than 'best' practice. By engaging in this approach, they argue that actors are not only shaped by institutional or disciplinary norms of quality, but they also get to shape what quality means.

2.7 Summary

This chapter has introduced the literature on quality assurance and enhancement within higher education. It has outlined the difficulties in defining quality within HE and shows that there are many understandings of what quality is. The chapter goes on to provide an overview of the models of quality assurance and the methods such as peer review, benchmarking

and rankings that are used to evaluate or demonstrate quality in higher education.

The effectiveness of quality assurance is often linked with organisational culture and how quality is perceived. Much of the HE literature written from the perspectives of academics discusses quality assurance as an instrument of a managerialism and responsible for the creation of a compliance led or 'responsive' (Harvey & Stensaker,2008) quality culture. Having a quality culture is important to national and European agencies however, different forms of quality culture have been observed with the literature. A common understanding of what is meant by quality within the institution and across different occupational cultures is key to having an effective quality culture. Finally, Elken & Stensaker's (2018) work on the concept of 'quality work' provides a new perspective on which to consider quality. It draws on the difficulties in defining quality and the different drivers of the quality agenda to propose that there are many different types of quality related work, at organisational and programmatic levels where autonomy, pragmatism and balance is needed.

3   Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland

Higher Education in Ireland had traditionally been classified as being a binary system populated by seven universities; - their constituent colleges and 'linked providers', Higher Education Authority (HEA) funded colleges of education and an institute of technology sector which has grown out of a regional development and vocational training remit in the 1960s and 1970s

As this study has progressed the landscape of Irish higher education has changed significantly with the creation of a medical university and the creation of a technological university sector.

The context within which the higher education sector is set has also changed significantly with the creation of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in 2020. The creation of a governmental department which separated higher education from primary and secondary school education was seen as "recognising the central importance of universities and other third level institutes' (IUA, 2020).

There are also a number of independent providers, both for- and not-for-profit, which though not in receipt of state funding, are subject to the statutory requirements of the state quality assurance agency through accreditation and programme validation methodologies.

Like other jurisdictions, the Republic of Ireland has seen the continued massification of higher education and has a high participation rate of 58% among school-leaving groups (HEA, 2018) . In 2019, over 40% of the population aged 15-64 years had achieved a third-level qualification, an increase of 5% since 2011 (Indecon, 2021). This participation rate is set to continue due to the rise in the school-going population as well as the returning to education of many mature learners who are either entering higher education for the first time and/or upskilling and changing career which is in part driven by the economic climate and labour market shifts.

Undergraduate tuition fees have been paid by the state since 1996 when a nominal registration fee of £150 was charged to students. This 'student contribution charge' has now risen to €3,000 per year. Publicly funded higher education institutions are struggling to cope with the additional intake and lower state funding which in turn has opened a debate on the

ability of institutions to maintain their current academic standards. Globalisation has also impacted the sector as higher education institutions seek to replace lost state funding with revenue from international students.

The sector has also been influenced by the EU through the Bologna Process and its impact on research funding and strategy and by the OECD. Table 2-2 outlines the level of reporting, analyses that the sector has been subject to over the last decade. Much of this policy development and analysis has been shaped by the 'logic of globalisation and mediated through supranational agencies' (Walsh, 2018, p.490)

Author	Title	Year
Hunt et al (2011)	National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030	2011
Van Vught et al (2012)	A Proposed Reconfiguration of the Irish System of Higher Education	2012
Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education	The Role, Value and Scale of Higher Education in Ireland	Jan 2015
	Optimising Resources in Irish Higher Education	June 2015
	Attitudes to Higher Education	June 2015
	Funding Irish Higher Education— A Constructive and Realistic Discussion of the Options	October 2015
	Final Report	July 2016
Bekhradnia, (Bekhradnia, 2015)	Funding Higher Education in Ireland – Lessons from International Experience	
Higher Education Authority	System Performance Reports	2014 2015 2016

Author	Title	Year
Dept of Education & Skills	International Education Strategy Action Plan 2016-2019	2016 2016
Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	Strategy Statement 2021-2023	2021

Table 3-1: Policy Context 2009-2016

3.1 Development of the Binary System

The Irish higher education (HE) system has developed over the last century with the most significant periods of transformation being experienced between the 1950s and 1980s (Walsh in Loxley, Seery & Walsh, 2014) and in the period from 2011 to the current day.

Prior to the 1960s what we now consider the HE system consisted of elite universities, technical colleges, and teacher training colleges. According to Walsh a combination of the impact of free post-primary school education and a political change in attitudes to higher education which was re-positioned as an investment in 'human capital', coupled with wide-ranging implications for the socio economic environment of the country, led to a policies which focussed on a 'quantitative expansion of participation, coupled with a far-reaching diversification at system, institutional and subject level' (p.5). This expansion was to be informed by a policy of equal opportunity which increased enrolments at post primary level which in turn led to increased demand for access to higher education.

Technical education had been neglected within the tertiary system and proposals to expand technical education during the 1960s through the creation of the Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) provided additional options for vocational school students, to continue their education and created a diversified system. The RTC sector developed further during the 1970 and 1980s providing a network of regional institutions across the state.

The original remit for these institutions was to provide a skilled technical talent pool to meet the demands of the economy nationally and within their

specific region. Courses were to include leaving certificate courses in technical subjects, apprenticeships, and adult education (Walsh, 2014). They also had a remit in higher education offering technical and professional qualifications. To support this new sector, the National Council for Education Awards (NCEA) was established which provided a framework for the recognition of qualifications.

A further step in strengthening the recognition of courses offered in the technical sector was achieved through the validation by Trinity College of courses offered by the existing technical colleges in Dublin which were run by the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC).

Further diversification was introduced with the establishment of the National Institutes of Higher Education in Limerick (1972) and in Dublin (1980). These institutions, although not universities at least initially incorporated many features typically associated with universities.

In terms of governance and funding, the development of this technical strand of higher education led to the emergence of a binary system populated by the universities and NIHEs on one side and the regional technical colleges, CDVECs and colleges of education on the other. The universities/NIHEs were governed and funded by the HEA whereas the remainder were governed and funded directly or indirectly by the Department of Education. According to Clancy (2015), retaining this level of control made it possible for the state to direct the activities of the colleges in pursuit of government objectives and a policy preference for retaining the binary system implied an acceptance by the State that the university sector would be less amenable to meeting market needs or delivering on government policies

The HE system suffered from a lack of investment during the 1980s as a result of financial recession. Rapid massification of the post primary system as well as high unemployment put further pressures on the higher education system to provide opportunities for students. The NIHEs secured university status in 1989 which became the first statutory change to the university system since the establishment of the NUI in 1908 (Walsh, 2014, p 36).

From the late 1980s a more involved and arguably intrusive State can be observed. A range of policies were introduced during the 1990s which

focussed on influencing the types of programme through the provision of targeting funding. Additional regional technical colleges were added in Tallaght, Blanchardstown, and Dun Laoghaire to support participation in those areas. The most significant policy change occurred in 1996 with the introduction of 'free fees' which supported government policy of increasing participation by underrepresented groups.

Further legislative reform took place with the Regional Technical Colleges Act in 1992 which put the RTCs on a statutory basis but stopped short of giving the RTCs the same autonomy as the universities. The minister and Department of Education retained significant powers.

Similarly, the DIT Act of 1992 established the Dublin Institute of Technology as a self-governing institution with the ability to confer sub degree awards and the potential to apply for degree awarding powers. Although the DIT failed to achieve university status at this time, it was granted degree awarding powers in 2001.

The 1995 White Paper Charting our Education Future included a commitment to '*balance institutional autonomy with the needs of public policy and accountability*' (Walsh in Loxley, Seery & Walsh, p40). The White Paper continued governmental commitment to the maintenance of the binary system and paved the way for the 1997 Universities Act which introduced changes to the governance of universities and the introduction of institutional quality assurance which would be monitored by the HEA. Despite greater state control, the universities succeeded in gaining commitments to their autonomy and academic freedom and primacy of responsibility for quality assurance and evaluation remained with the institution itself. (Clancy, 2015).

Of relevance to this study is the enactment of the Qualifications (Education & Training) Act, 1999 ('the 1999 Act'). This legislation repealed the NCEA Act and created three statutory bodies, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Higher Education & Training Council (HETAC) and the Further Education & Training Council (FETAC). All three institutions were responsible for quality assurance with the NQAI having an oversight arrangement with the universities and DIT, HETAC for the institutes of technology and private HE providers and FETAC for the further education sector. The 1999 Act also had a provision for the delegation of authority of

HETAC awards which institutes of technology could apply for. This paved the way for increased autonomy of institutes of technology in terms of their ability to manage programme validation and other quality related work.

The following years saw a continued expansion of participation in Irish HE. An OECD review in 2004, advised a continuation of a differentiated mission between the universities and institutes of technology. Among others the review also advocated the reduction in the size of governing authorities, a proposal that is still under discussion within the sector.

Following the outcome of the OECD review, the Institutes of Technology Act (2006) amended the governance of the RTCs and DIT to bring them under the remit of the HEA while giving a similar commitment to academic freedom that was provided to the universities.

The debates of the 1970s on the sustainability of a binary higher education system were to be echoed in the 2010s with calls for clusters and mergers and a consolidation of the system as a whole, which particularly influenced the new national strategy for higher education in 2011.

3.2 The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt, 2011) more commonly known as the 'Hunt Report' after its chair Colin Hunt, was published in 2011. The Hunt report presented a strategy for higher education which addressed the context of higher education in the early 21st century, the mission of higher education and the governance and funding arrangements required to support the higher education system. The strategy recommended a rationalised and consolidated higher education system which emphasised economies of scale and greater efficiency. (Walsh 2018) The creation of the technological university sector from merger of IOTs was also a key recommendation from the strategy.

The strategy makes several references to quality as it relates to the quality of the student experience, the quality of teaching and learning and the need for an effective quality assurance system. The Hunt report was published prior to the publication of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was in the process of being established. As a result, references to QQI are described in future tense and optimistic. Hunt refers to the 'quality and efficiency' of the Irish system as

being confirmed by a 2009 ECOFIN survey on the efficiency and effectiveness of public spending on tertiary education. Hunt goes on to say that the 'specific measures of quality' have been impressive, with the example chosen to demonstrate this being Ireland's ranking in an employability ranking system (Hunt, 2011, p.42). In reflecting on efficiency and effectiveness as '*value for money'*, the report references the requirement to '*maintain standards'* through the clustering of expertise.

In addressing quality assurance specifically, Hunt refers to the maturity and positive international recognition of the quality assurance mechanisms. Under the section 'Teaching and learning', Hunt recommends the creation of subject guidelines to support the NFQ and a review of the external examining and grading. Concerns are raised about grade inflation and the effectiveness of student feedback mechanisms. It is of note that the reference to quality assurance processes is contained within a section of the report titled 'Efficiency and Productivity'.

The implementation of the strategy on higher education, in the context of the economic recession which followed its publication has allowed initiatives such as Employment Control Frameworks and changes to work practices under industrial relations agreements. This restructuring of the higher education system has had less impact on the traditional university sector and has impacted the institute of technology and teacher education colleges through mergers and the creation of technological universities; however, this is still in an evolutionary state. The question of funding the sector has been avoided by successive governments despite several reports on the matter.

It is accepted that the two most pressing challenges facing the sector are the demographic 'bulge' which is due to peak in 2029 with an expected demand for full-time higher education to be 25% greater than 2015 and how best to fund the sector to meet that demand and achieve the national ambition to 'create the kind of engaged, small-group, high-trust, high-expectation teaching and learning necessary for the next phase of Ireland's economic, social and cultural development ' (Department of Education, 2016)

Later strategies, following Hunt (Department of Education & Science (2016) and Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and

Science (2021) set out visions for an internationally recognised education and training system which has goals of improving the learning experience, increasing access to education, talent development and meeting the needs of a knowledge economy. Quality in these strategies is synonymous with improvement, the development of metrics and enhanced systems of governance.

The latter part of this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The short-term impacts of the pandemic on the higher education system in Ireland have mirrored the rest of the world with impacts on staff and student wellbeing, a short-term increase in central funding to support initiatives to minimise the digital divide, the development of new work practices and the acceleration of a move to online and blended learning.

3.3   Institutional Context

3.3.1 Universities

Ireland has seven traditional universities, the oldest of which dates from 1592, the newest being created in 1989. The universities are governed by the Universities Act, 1997 and a number have subsumed Colleges of Education as part of the implementation of the higher education strategy and the report of the international panel on initial teacher education, the 'Sahlberg Report' (Department of Education and Skills, 2021) . Other institutions such as the Institute of Public Administration (IPA), Mary Immaculate College and the Garda College have retained 'linked provider'' or recognised college status with the Universities.

3.3.2 Institutes of Technology

The Institute of Technology (IoT) sector has arguably undergone the   most significant change in the last decade. From their roots as agents for regional development and the provision of vocationally based education and training to the goal of attaining technological university status, IoTs have found the last decade challenging. The reasons for this challenge have been identified as a failure to enact technological university legislation speedily, financial austerity and a lack of strategic leadership and management capacity (Thorn, 2018). The most significant change has impacted the IoT sector through the Government's agenda of merging previously independent institutes of technology to create new technological universities (TUs). The

creation of TUs had substantial political support as their establishment enhanced regional reputations and those of the institution's leaders. (Walsh, 2018). Table 2-1 sets out the name of the new institution, the date that it was incorporated (or planned to be) and the institutes of technology that are impacted.

Technological University, Dublin (January 2019)	•Dublin Institute of Technology •Institute of Technology, Tallaght •Blanchardstown Institute of Technology
Munster Technological University (January 2020)	•Cork Institute of Technology •Institute of Technology, Tralee
Technological University of the Shannon: Mid West, Midlands (October 2021)	•Limerick Institute of Technology •Athlone Institute of Technology
Technological University of South East (expected January 2022)	•IT Carlow •Waterford Institute of Technology
Connaught Alliance (TBD)	•Galway Mayo Institute of Technology •Institute of Technology, Sligo •Letterkenny Institute of Technology

Table 3-2: Merged and new institutions in Technological Sector

Only two of the original thirteen institutes of technology will remain as standalone institutions, Dundalk Institute of Technology and Institute of Arts, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire.

3.3.2.1 Degree Awarding Powers

Prior to January 2020, Dublin Institute of Technology was the only institute of technology that was designated as an awarding body in its own right, the others having delegated authority to make awards from QQI. In January 2020, all institutes of technology were granted degree awarding powers for programmes up to level 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications and are now classified as degree awarding bodies.

3.3.3 Linked Providers

A number of other institutions operate in the sector which as a result of the Quality & Qualifications (Education & Training Act, 2012 ('The 2012 Act') are termed 'linked providers. These consist of institutions which are

recognised colleges of the Universities, ranging from teacher training colleges, specialist business institutions (Institute of Bankers, Institute of Public Administration) and others. Several of these institutions had their own provisions and structures for quality assurance prior to the 2012 Act but are now subject to the provisions of their awarding body and to a more structured external review process as required by the legislation.

3.3.4 Private and Independent Sector

Writing in 2012, Limond in Loxley et al (2014) highlights the 'fast moving and entrepreneurial' nature of private provision in Ireland. There is a sizeable private higher education sector in the Republic of Ireland ranging from niche discipline providers in health, counselling, and teacher training to larger institutions who provide a wider range of disciplines in business, computing, technology, journalism, and fashion. These institutions consist of for-profit and not-for-profit companies, some with charitable status and are characterised by both full- and part-time provision, in subject areas where there is limited public provision. Where these institutions engage with the NFQ, they too are obliged to have quality assurance procedures in place. The recession in 2008 had a knock-on effect on these institutions as employers' funding of part-time education was curtailed. However, many of these institutions for the first time were able to compete for public funding in discipline areas such as computing and green energy, which were targeted for labour activation schemes. Their success in responding to these calls has highlighted where the private sector can help meet demand where the public sector is not in a position to.

Calculation of the true size of the sector is difficult as private institutions are not required to make statistical returns to the HEA. The definition of private or non-profit is complicated by special relationships that some institutions have with the State. These institutions secure state funding but retain their independence from the State. Enrolment numbers cited by Clancy (2015) are based on 2011 data which suggest that the private sector accounted for almost 10% of enrolments in higher education at the time. The Cassells report estimates the number to be at 7% of enrolments (Expert Group on the Future Funding of Higher Education, 2016 p.65). The provisions in the 2012 Act which allow private institutions to apply for delegated authority to grant awards as well as the provisions in the HEA reform bill (Department of Further and Higher Education, 2021) to allow

institutions to be registered as 'Designated Institutions of Higher Education' suggest that the Government is open to the private sector playing a greater role within the overall HE landscape.

3.4 Administrative and Regulatory Frameworks

3.4.1 Higher Education Authority

The HEA Act 1971 established the Higher Education Authority (HEA) as the statutory funding authority for higher education, the HEA has a 'statutory responsibility, at central government level, for the effective governance and regulation of higher education institutions and the higher education system'...... with the 'the objective of creating a coherent system of diverse institutions with distinct missions, which is responsive to the social, cultural and economic development of Ireland and its people and supports the achievement of national objectives'(HEA, 2021).

The HEA's contentious role in Irish higher education has been documented in Walsh (2018) up to the point of the implementation of 2012 Act. The role of the HEA has changed from being that of an intermediary between Government and the Universities to a de-facto regulator as a result of the Hunt Report and the government response to the economic crisis.

Its most overt imposition on the sector, felt most acutely in the University sector has been the development of mission based compacts for each HEI through the 'strategic dialogue process' during which institutions report their progress against agreed performance targets.

The HEA is subject to reform under the Higher Education Reform Bill which is currently in consultation. This new legislation is intended to *"put in place a co-regulation model of governance and accountability which provides that primary responsibility for governance of a HEI is with the HEI themselves (*DFHERIS, 2021, p.5 *).*

In an update document to the bill reform published by the DFHERIS in February 2021, the government seeks to reassure institutions on issues of autonomy but emphasises the requirements for accountability, particularly in respect of exchequer funding. Of interest to this study is that the proposed legislation has a provision that the Chief Officer of higher education institutions will have specific responsibility for the

implementation of "internal quality assurance and improvement policies and procedures and address the output of external quality assurance" (DFHERIS, 2021, p15).

The proposed legislation (Ireland, 2021) also provides for the establishment of a student panel which will provide information to the HEA on student experience of programmes and their experience of higher education. Students will be invited to raise issues of concern, inform the development of new programmes, and engage in any other issue related to the functions of the HEA as appropriate. This role for students mirrors the internal quality assurance role that students have within institutions, and it is unclear how this panel will work without duplicating or impacting the autonomy of institutions' quality assurance systems.

A new feature of the public sector system is a series of service level agreements between the Department of Education & Science and other agencies. Such an SLA exists between the Department and the HEA and in turn between the HEA and the state qualifications and quality assurance agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

3.4.2 Funding & Performance in Irish HE

In his recent comparative study of the Irish Higher Education system, Clancy (2015) provides a history of the evolution of the funding mechanisms for Irish HE. The mechanisms have evolved from an incremental budgets system to a formula-based system. Ireland's public funding model for higher education has three components: institutional funding for education, capital funding for infrastructure and facilities, and research funding. Since 2006, institutional funding is dependent on student numbers and is weighted dependent on the type of programme being taught. This funding has three components. 95% is attributed to core funding which uses a model of weightings based on subject price groupings; the level of credit assigned to students and the number of students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. An additional 5% of funding is allocated to specific initiatives such as labour activation initiatives and managing the overheads of support services which are commonly provided across the sector. A third element which Clancy views as 'scarcely been implemented' is performance-based funding. Although a part of the funding model since 2006, performance funding has come to the forefront the of relationship between the HEA and

institutions as a result of the implementation of mission based performance compacts (See 3.3.2.1 below). Research funding is typically competed for via national structures and EU funding.

More recently private institutions have been eligible to compete for public funding as part of Government initiatives to reskill and upskill the labour force arising from the recession.

3.4.2.1 *Mission Based Performance Compacts*

Monitoring the organisational performance of HEIs has been formalised through the implementation of the Higher Education System Performance Framework. First introduced in 2014 and renewed in 2018, each publicly funded institution has agreed institutional key performance indicators (KPIs) through a series of 'mission-based performance compacts' which were agreed under 'strategic dialogue'. Through this process the compact is used as instrument through which the HEA and the institution agree on the institution's mission, profile and strategy, and it will formally set out the institution's agreed objectives with institutional KPIs used to monitor contribution to the overall system as well as building organisational capacity (HEA, 2018, p.3). Future funding of the institution is dependent on its performance against these KPIs. These compacts are similar to those implemented across several European and US states.

The purposes of the framework can be summarised as follows:

- To hold the system accountable for performance for the delivery of national priorities and monitor performance of the system as a whole.
- To articulate all the expectations on the system of different areas of government/agencies across the various dimensions of higher education activity.
- To increase the visibility of performance of the system to Government and the wider public.
- To contribute to system and policy development by highlighting structural and other deficits including data capacity.
- To allow HEIs to identify their strategic niche and mission and agree a performance compact aligned with funding with the Higher Education Authority

The initial intent was that approximately €5m of funding will be related to performance funding with an expectation that this will grow over time[1]. (Boer et al., 2015). The HEA has published its evaluation of the performance of institutions using three categories highlighting that the purpose of the compacts is 'not an exercise in finger-wagging and punishment … …. process is designed to encourage higher-education institutions to act strategically, to prioritise and to differentiate their offer' (Boland, 2016b).

In correspondence to higher education institutions in February 2016, the HEA outlined to HEI management that it will 'as the process matures' withhold up to 10% of funding in the case of poor performance as a 'means to drive performance and accountability across the system ((Boland, 2016a).

3.4.3 Quality Assurance System in Irish Higher Education

In parallel with the structural changes of the HE system, its associated quality assurance system has also gone through a period of change. Embryonic quality assurance policies were set out in the National Council for Educational Awards Act, 1979, such as the composition of Boards of Study and the roles of consultants and assessors. The key features of the university quality assurance system were developed as a pre-emptive strike by university leaders during the 1990s before they could be imposed centrally (Walsh, 2018) and largely persist today. The creation of the IUQB by the university sector allowed the universities to retain ownership of their QA (Clancy, 2015). The term 'Quality Assurance' was first introduced on a statutory basis under the Universities Act 1997, and the Qualifications (Education & Training) Act, 1999. Responsibility for a national framework of qualifications (NFQ) rested with the National Qualification Authority (NQAI) whereas the quality assurance oversight of academic institutions was split between the HEA which had a supervisory oversight over the university sector and by the Higher Education & Training Awards Council (HETAC) which included the IoTs and the private/independent sector in its remit. The IoTs were required to agree their QA arrangements with HETAC, which was both quality assurance agency for the institute of technology and independent sectors and the awarding body for their awards. Private

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[1] See (Boer et al., 2015) p91-103 for comprehensive overview of the Irish HE funding context

institutions could apply to be a recognised provider of HETAC and then became subject to its regulations as an awarding body and as a quality assurance agency. Under the 1999 legislation, Institutes of Technology could apply for delegation of awarding powers subject to a review of their quality assurance arrangements. The Dublin Institute of Technology agreed its procedures directly with NQAI.

3.4.4 Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

In 2010 as part of an overall rationalisation of state agencies after the economic crash, the functions of NQAI, IUQB, HETAC and of the Further Education and Training Council (FETAC) were amalgamated into a single organisation, Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI) which was created by statute in 2012. The 2012 Act set out wide ranging functions for QQI including among others to 'review and monitor the effectiveness of providers' quality assurance procedures', While recently published statutory quality assurance policy documents by QQI outline how all institutions regardless of their type must refer to national guidelines, (QQI, 2016) which in themselves are informed by European guidelines (ENQA, 2015), there is sufficient scope for differentiation of mission and purpose of the institution whilst maintaining a commonality within the system. The 2012 Act was amended in 2019 to strengthen QQI's statutory basis by giving it additional powers including the creation of a national scheme for the protection of learners, a legal basis to evaluate the corporate fitness of providers and to prosecute essay mills and other entities involved in academic cheating.

QQI's level of power however, in relation to different HEIs is somewhat different as the legislation maintains the autonomy of the established universities in defining their own QA procedures and requires the Universities only to 'consult' with QQI prior to providing their finalised procedures. All other institutions within the sector must provide a draft 'for approval' which can be approved or otherwise. However, all institutions in the sector are bound to comply with QQI's statutory quality assurance guidelines in core areas as well as in research, blended & online learning, and collaborative projects, putting an additional onus on institutions who do not have their awards validated directly by QQI to evidence policy and practice in meeting these guidelines.

A new provision, Section 55 in the 2019 amendment to the 2021 Act requires awarding bodies to apply to QQI to have their awards listed on the NFQ. This addition of this provision has caused disquiet within the university sector as it is seen to undermine institutional authority with regard to the approval of awards. This section of the legislation has not yet commenced and a protocol for operation is in discussion between QQI and the degree awarding bodies.

The relationship between QQI as a quality assurance agency and institutions that come under its remit is managed through a process of 'monitoring and dialogue'. This is supported by annual dialogue meetings and the production of an annual quality report (AQR) by each institution to QQI. which is defined as a contemporary record of quality assurance within an institution. These individual reports are required to be published by each HEI, thus ensuring transparency to all stakeholders. The potential for sanctions as an outcome of monitoring of institutions with their own awarding body powers is unclear. QQI has had a more direct involvement and greater authority over the activities of the IoTs or private HEIs where programmes are validated by QQI. This authority has been further diluted as the IoTs were given designated awarding body status in 2020 and as they become technological universities. Although it is early to adjudicate on the influence of QQI in the sector (Walsh, 2018) the 2012 Act and its amendments have created an agency which is much more powerful than its predecessor organisations.

3.4.4.1 Annual Quality Reports

The Annual Quality Report (AQR)[2] serves as a compliance vehicle for HEIs to provide 'QQI with assurance that QA procedures and improvements are being implemented; that regulatory requirements, consistent with European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) are adhered to, and that institutions have regard to QQI Statutory QA Guidelines in their QA procedures'. (QQI, 2020)

The AQR was introduced first in 2017 to report on quality assurance and enhancement activities of public HEIs in the 2016-17 academic year. The

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[2] The report was known as the Annual Institutional Quality Report (AIQR) from 2017-2020. See Annual Quality Assurance Report (qqi.ie)

AQR has been extended to QQI awarded institutions on a pilot basis in the 2019-20 academic year.

As well as demonstrating compliance with and providing evidence for compliance with European Standards and Guidelines or the Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines, the AQRs demonstrate the range of quality assurance and enhancement activities undertaken by HEIs which can be used as a determinant of what an institution deems as quality work. While elements of the report require reporting on specific areas such as adherence to the ESGs or statutory guidelines, HEIs can choose to describe their perspective on what quality work or quality related activities are. These range from activities such as programme accreditation, periodic programme review, quality reviews of academic departments, support and professional services departments, professional body accreditation, teaching and learning enhancement activities and the institutions' participation in national and international initiatives.

In reporting on quality review activity, AQRs from the institute of technology sector show that the majority if not all activity reported is at a programmatic level and that their quality assurance systems have not yet begun to systematically review support and professional services functions. There are some exceptions to this for example IT Carlow and Letterkenny IT.

Also evident from AQRs within the institute of technology sector is the impact of preparations for application for technological university status on institutional planning and quality matters.

The AQRs are presented in a positive light with very limited reference to the impact of declining funding and challenges facing quality assurance professionals in either responding to the quality assurance requirements of the national system or in implementing internal quality assurance and enhancement activities.

The development, resourcing, and staffing of quality assurance units or of quality work is referenced only where new appointments are made or if there are plans to create a quality related post arising from external quality assurance reports.

3.4.4.2 Institutional Review Findings and Institutional Follow Up Reports

The CINNTE review cycle commenced in 2017 and as of March 2021, 10 reports have been published by QQI with initial follow up reports and yearly progression reports available for seven institutions.

These reports reflect the findings of a process which examines a self-evaluation report, additional documentary evidence and dialogue with institutional staff over a period of 3-5 days. Of the ten reports published, only two highlight the resourcing and staffing of quality assurance units within the institution.

"This office was initially established in the President's Office last year however this role and a separate Quality Office have been included in Strategic Plan 2019-2023 and these new offices will be fully operational later this academic year." (Letterkenny Institute of Technology, 2019, p.7)

The reports also comment on the complexity of quality assurance systems, how quality should be further embedded as an institutional culture and institutions "are encouraged to make more systemic a quality culture that relies less on the requirements of external agencies" (QQI, 2018, p.11).

A significant thematic finding from the CINNTE process thus far is the lack of systematic use of data within the Irish system in monitoring quality and quality enhancement (QQI, 2021).

3.5 Quality Assurance and its Structures in Irish Higher Education Institutions

In order to understand the purpose and context of quality assurance in Ireland it is necessary to examine institutional interpretations of its role beyond the context of compliance with legislative requirements. This relationship between the overall regulation and funding of the sector and the functions and structures to assure and enhance quality is illustrated by the memorandum of agreement between QQI and the HEA where an intersection of functions on QA is acknowledged: 'Cooperation between the HEA and QQI in this regard has the potential to ensure that accountability and quality-improvement of the higher education system go hand-in-hand (QQI/HEA, 2015).

The expectations of role of the quality office or function in the university sector is illustrated by this description of the role of the quality office as described by the IUA and IUQB in 2007.

> "Each of the universities has a quality office with responsibility for quality assurance and quality improvement in academic, administrative, service and support areas. Working within the common set of principles outlined above, each institution has devised a quality assurance and improvement framework. The roles of the quality offices vary according to institutional structure but normally include:
>
> o Providing professional support for the development of university policy in relation to quality assurance and improvement in line with good international practice,
>
> o Driving new initiatives designed to resolve issues arising repeatedly in review reports, · Promoting a sense of ownership by individual departments and units of the university's quality assurance and improvement systems and procedures,
>
> o Supporting departments and units in implementing internal and external quality review processes,
>
> o Publishing review reports and other relevant reports,
>
> o Working with the other universities and with the IUQB to improve cooperation in support of the Board's programme of sectoral projects and annual conferences."

(IUA/IUQB, 2007, p.36)

The Framework for Quality in Irish Universities, 2007 refers to the 'expanding mandate' of the quality office from its original remit of managing organisational reviews to take on additional roles which contribute to a more holistic approach to quality assurance and enhancement such as student feedback, institutional research, external

examining, staff development, supporting programme accreditation and involvement in sector-wide projects (IUA/IUQB, 2007). This experience is consistent with Beerkens' (2015) observations regarding the expansion of the remit of quality roles over time.

A review of the websites of the universities, institutes of technology, linked providers and members of the Higher Education College's Association demonstrates the variety and organisational placement of the quality office function and roles held within that function as understood in Ireland. In all but one of the Universities, a 'Director' role exists. This suggests that the quality function has importance within the organisation. Its organisational placement within the university sector is mixed between being part of strategy & planning axis, a teaching & learning axis or having a direct reporting line to the head of the university.

The predominant model within the Institute of Technology sector is that the Registrar or Vice President for Academic Affairs role is the named office holder responsible for ensuring quality, supported in many cases by quality assurance officers or managers. Similar role titles exist with HECA colleges, many of which are a function of the size of the institution. This similarity of role within the IoTs and HECA institutions is most likely influenced by their common heritage with QQI and its predecessors as an awarding body and the influence in turn in those sectors on organisational structures through recommendations made at quality assurance reviews at programme and institutional level.

3.6 European Influences on Irish Quality Assurance

The Irish quality assurance and enhancement landscape is influenced by directives and guidelines that emerge from the European Union. The European Association for Quality Assurance in HE (ENQA), a membership association for quality assurance agencies, is the most influential body as it publishes the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and maintains the European Quality Agency Register (EQAR). The ESG exist both for individual institutions and for quality assurance agencies. Other agencies such as the European Universities Association (EUA) and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) are also influential as

membership agencies for networking, external peer review and collaborative projects.

3.6.1 European Standards & Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG)

Under the 'Bologna Process'[3] all higher education institutions (HEIs) in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are subject to the ESG (ENQA 2015). Under the ESG, each HEI is responsible for its own internal quality assurance processes. Whilst there is autonomy in terms of developing the processes for quality assurance, the implementation of the ESG is externally reviewed usually by the State agency for academic quality assurance. Similar processes are engaged in by regional and federal state agencies in the United States as well as subject related accreditation agencies. Under the ESG, The HEI must have policy and procedures for

- Effective Quality Assurance
- Approval, Development, Review and Evaluation of Programmes
- Assessment of students
- Quality assurance of teaching staff
- Learning support
- Information systems
- Public information

Each of these standards is supported by guidelines which require the publication of the standards being used by HEIs, and the requirement to monitor and evaluate each of the activities. How monitoring and evaluation takes place is within the responsibility and control of the organisation. This separates the 'what' of quality assurance from the 'how', allowing each institution to decide on and develop its own quality assurance framework.

The reality however, that can be observed is the development of a homogenised approach to review processes, the management of programmes and learning and the implementation of quality assurance procedures which may be appropriate for the majority of organisations even within a given jurisdiction, but not to all. The nature of review panels can

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[3] See http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/ for comprehensive information on the Bologna Process in Higher Education

proliferate and impose inappropriate and unworkable quality assurance frameworks on smaller organisations, or on organisations with a particular culture (Van Kemenade & Hardjono ,2010; McNab & Thomas,2007; Langfeldt, Stensaker et al ,2010). Langfeldt et al 2010).

At the outset the EHEA has recognised that different stakeholders within this process will have different views on the purpose of external evaluation of quality assurance – whether primarily a matter of consumer protection or the provision of advice and guidance in pursuit of improvement. (ENQA, 2015). The basic principles of the ESG outline the requirements of both perspectives, highlighting the need for efficient and effective organisational structures, the use of external expertise and perhaps surprisingly for many academic staff that processes should not 'stifle diversity and innovation' (ENQA, 2015 p.14).

In providing these guidelines, the ESG is silent on how internal quality assurance systems should be resourced and while indicating that those responsible for teaching should be appropriately qualified, no equivalent guidance is provided for those supporting and implementing internal quality assurance systems.

3.7 Professional Networks

There are a number of interdisciplinary networks serving the Irish higher education community. When examined the groupings most active are those engaged with professional development of higher education teaching and learning technologists or instructional designers. This profile is further supported by the continuing work of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning (the Forum): a HEA supported project to engage with leaders, managers, teachers and students, the Forum 'mobilises expertise and inputs from across the entire sector to extend and shape best practice in all institutes of higher education in Ireland' (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning, 2021).

A corresponding sector wide forum for quality professionals or those with an interest in quality work does not currently exist. The Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) was created in 2003 in response to an agreement among stakeholders that 'it would be helpful if the main organisations with a role or significant interest in quality assurance in

higher education and training in Ireland were to meet to discuss quality in a national context, with a view to working towards the development of a common national position on key quality assurance issues and to inform the debate on those same issues at a European level' (IHEQN).

Unlike the teaching and learning networks, this network's membership is listed as representative bodies within the sector such as the Department of Education & Skills, Irish Universities Association (IUA), Technical Higher Education Association[4] (THEA), Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA), rather than a network of interested individuals. The NQAI initially held the secretariate for the IHEQN and this role passed to QQI in 2012 when it was set up as the national quality assurance agency.

QQI updated and revised the terms of reference to reflect its strategic leadership role for steering the group and stimulating the quality assurance and 'mostly a quality enhancement agenda'. While discussions were ongoing between QQI and the Department of Education on the position of chair of the network, a 'review of quality' was placed in the department action plan at that time. The range and scope of this review was unclear, and it was decided to delay the relaunching the IHEQN until the scope of the review was decided. In September 2021, QQI has proposed the creation of the Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum. The membership of this forum is planned to reflect the issues across the tertiary education system and the many other active stakeholders that are impacting on the quality and qualifications agenda such as professional, regulatory, statutory bodies.[5]

Of note also is the UK & Ireland Higher Education Institutional Research (HEIR) network which focuses on the role of institutional research in informing teaching & learning practice and organisational enhancement in general.

Thus, when looking at the role and status of quality assurance professionals within the Irish Higher Education system, at first glance there appears to be

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[4] Up to 2016, was Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI)

[5] The status of the IHEQN and Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum was confirmed through correspondence between the researcher and QQI in August 2021.

limited scope for direct comparison across the sector. Representation both at the organisational placement level and within professional networks appears to imply a disparate grouping which is based on legacy and current relationships with QQI and lacks a coherent network.

As the sector converges toward a common compliance and reporting line to QQI on matters relating to quality assurance and in particular for the publicly funded sector to the HEA, further investigation of the day to day role and influence of quality functions and professionals is warranted beyond structural differences and organisational size to confirm this or to find an emerging profession or at minimum a community of practice.

3.8 Summary

This chapter has set out the context in which quality assurance and enhancement is legislated for and the systems that engage in it. A brief history of the development of higher education in Ireland since the early 1960s provides context for the development of the binary public higher education system and the different trajectories these institutions have had in terms of governance and funding. The presence of quality assurance has been increasingly made more prominent through legislative developments impacting both the public system and private higher education and strengthening the role and powers of QQI and the HEA.

Recent changes to the structure of higher education brought about by the Hunt Report provide a new context for the role of quality assurance particularly for the new technological university sector as the former institutes of technology (excluding DIT) have responsibility for their own awards and are no longer reliant on QQI for that function.

A review of annual quality reports, institutional review reports and published institutional information shows that there are different forms of quality offices across the sector, although in most cases responsibility for quality assurance lies within the Vice President Academic Affairs/Registrar role. There appears to be different emphasis in annual quality reports on what constitutes quality work in different institutions with the universities concentrating on institutional quality and institutes of technology reporting on programmatic quality.

The influence of European directives and standards is briefly discussed with emphasis on the ESG which form the basis of national guidelines. A degree of homogeneity has been observed within the literature on the nature of external quality assurance in particular and the potential for inappropriate systems to be imposed in diverse jurisdictions or types of organisation.

The concluding paragraph of the chapter looks at the professional networks that are present in the Irish system. Unlike other professional groupings such as academic staff, library/information service staff, educational developers, there isn't a sector wide network available to those working in quality related roles. The networks that do exist are specific to the sector that they operate in, for example universities or private higher education institutions. A national quality network (IHEQN) did exist but was a representative or invitational network which did not allow participation by all working in quality related roles. A new forum, Irish Quality & Qualifications Forum is now proposed to take its place.

4 Professions, Boundaries, and Identities in Higher Education

This chapter examines the current literature on occupations and professions and how they compete for occupational jurisdiction in organisations. The emergence of new roles that are required to bridge these contested spaces to enable each side to converse or to create new spaces in which both can co-exist is examined. The nature of identity of the individual and of the occupation is briefly reviewed and the specific sub-cultures of the academic and non-academic are outlined from the literature. A review of the literature on specific roles within the academic environment demonstrates that the role of the quality professional has only recently begun to be addressed in any detail.

4.1 On being a professional

In considering professions, there is a need to differentiate the meanings associated with being professional and being a professional (Burns, 2019). Using professional as a noun has over time ascribed meaning to an individual. What they do is considered professional and ethical. This meaning is described by Burns as having political consequences where 'individualised professional interest mixes with legal and formal stewardship of expert knowledge' (p.52).

In her study of 'third space' professionals in higher education Whitchurch (2012, p104) introduces the 'paradoxical professional'. Whitchurch uses the concept of the 'third space' which is rooted in the field of cultural studies to describe roles in higher education that do not fit into traditional binary descriptors of academic and administrative/support. Her study finds that participants are ambivalent about the concept of being a professional in the traditional sense. Using Evetts' (2003) concept of a professional as someone who can enable a client to deal with uncertainty, Whitchurch found that third space professionals were able to deal with ambiguity and use tensions between other occupational groups. They make connections with different parts of their organisation through the work that they do. This ability to make connections within the organisation is a characteristic of what Noordegraaf (2015) describes as the 'organisational professional'. Whitchurch relates these to Freidson' s (2001) elite professionals who apply their expertise to individuated tasks rather than the standard professional characterised by the definitions (Abbott, 1988) and others. (See 4.2, p. 74)

4.2 Occupations and Professions

The concept of the profession and its differentiation from expert occupations has troubled researchers (Evetts, 2013). The development of new ways of looking at professions and occupations has been precipitated by the increase in public private partnerships, the mobility of professionals, calls for professionalism in the charitable and voluntary sector and the increased regulation of occupational groups. Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno (2016) define occupations as 'socially constructed entities that include: (i) a category of work ;(ii) the actors (are) understood—either by themselves or others—as members and practitioners of this work; (iii) the actions enacting the role of occupational members; and (iv) the structural and cultural systems upholding the occupation' (p.187). Anteby et al, (2016) go on to further define an occupation 'as broader membership in a shared community that spans across jobs. A given occupation is therefore a category of work that is concretely instantiated as particular jobs in particular organizations under particular job titles' (p.188).

Professions are defined as a 'certain type' of occupation that has succeeded in convincing audiences they are characterized by "(i) abstract, specialized knowledge, (ii) autonomy, (iii) authority over clients and subordinate occupational groups, and (iv) a certain degree of altruism" (Hodson & Sullivan, 2012 p282).

According to Burns (2019), definitions of professions that refer to elite occupations doing specialised tasks through the application of bodies of knowledge to problems by a group are incomplete. He refers to these definitions as being sociologically limited as they do not explain why a particular profession has come about, whether the status of the profession is desirable or how the profession should continue.

Muzio, Aulakh, and Kirkpatrick (2019) propose three lenses with which to look at the theory of professions: a functionalist lens, a power lens, and the institution lens.

The functionalist lens is situated in the work of Durkheim where the self-regulating profession focuses on the value of the profession to wider society. Professional values are seen as essential and maintaining high barriers to entry are necessary. Traits based models of professions are a

characteristic of the functionalist approach where the stages of development of a profession could be tracked over time through its stages of development.

The study of professions then shifted towards looking at professionalisation as a process, for example how occupations accomplish and maintain professional status. This approach has power as its focus where an occupation takes control over a work jurisdiction. According to Muzio et al, (2019) in this approach professionalism emerges as an ideology that any occupation can aspire to. They argue that this view has been influenced by the work of Weberian, Marxist, and Foucauldian theorists. The Weberian theory refers to a systematic attempt by a profession to achieve its goal of 'occupational closure'. Characteristics of this approach take the form of credentialisation, through the acquisition of formal qualifications. These credentials are seen as a mechanism for maintaining monopolies and regulating the supply of labour. This interpretation of professionalisation has declined in popularity although it is often used in gendered discourse where professionalisation has been a positive force for female dominated occupations (Evetts, 2013).

Abbott's (1988) system of professions is situated in this power strand, and it describes a world of pushing and shoving, of contests won and lost, Jurisdiction is sought over work through the acquisition of power to regulate those who may enter it, through the creation of a public image associated with that profession and through direct competition with other occupations and professions. This battle for jurisdiction forms the contested space in which new spaces can be created and legitimisation practices begin.

The Marxist (e.g., Freidson, 1983) and Foucauldian strand of literature within the power lens highlight challenges to professional autonomy which are linked to the demands of the state or a capitalist labour process. The position of the profession is dependent on their ability to control work and use their professional knowledge to form part of the apparatus of the state for example, in public education and health. As well as exercising control, professions can also be subject to control through the commoditisation (Susskind & Susskind, 2015) routinisation and rationalisation of work where while some professions may gain power, others may lose control and their status.

Muzio et al (2019) turn to institutional theory to introduce a third lens with which to examine professions. This perspective classifies professions as institutions that behave according to institutional logics.

Professional associations are set up to promote the interests of the profession and their members, setting up formal entry requirements and criteria for maintaining such memberships. Professional identity is maintained through one's own internalised role identity and through the stories, rituals, social and symbolic capital gained through socialisation and relations with others.

Anteby et al (2016) have synthesised a review of occupation and professions literature on a chronological basis and in doing so present a framework to analyse an occupation using three lenses of becoming, doing, and relating. The ***becoming*** lens looks at the socialisation processes and method by which individuals can join an occupation. Part of this socialisation process may be the surrendering to the control of the norms of the occupation. The socialisation process within the occupation may also contribute to becoming 'unequal' where segregation by gender, race or other attribute can highlight 'who' can or can't enter the occupation. The ***doing*** lens examines the tasks, jurisdictions and emerging areas not already taken by other occupations. This area of 'doing' addresses both inter- and intra-occupational relations in their contested spaces. The most recent additions to the literature on occupations are categorised as addressing the ***relating*** aspects of occupational interaction. The emphasis is on collaboration, co-producing and brokering. Here the literature demonstrates an emphasis that is less on occupational expertise and more on a network of relationships that connect occupations or act as intermediaries:

'Rather than erect boundaries, they bridge across them. Rather than concern themselves only with their own occupational group's advancement, they connect people and tasks to benefit the entire network, and in the process, they often help implement change and reform, coproduce innovative products and services, or get their and other's work done' (Anteby et al, 2016, p.218).

These relating occupations have been described elsewhere in the literature as third space professionals, boundary spanners or boundary workers.

4.3 Boundaries & Boundary Spanners

There are several boundaries associated with and within the contemporary organisation. Boundaries are seen between hierarchies or status (vertical), functional groups or professions (horizontal), between the organisation itself and its stakeholders. Historically, these boundaries were hard and organisational information is supplied by gatekeepers. Leifer & Huber (1977) define boundary spanners as operating 'at the skin' of the organisation, with a function to interpret environmental conditions and relay that information to organisational decision makers. This role of the gatekeeper has evolved into 'the systems thinker, with an understanding of the specific needs and interests of their organisation and whose greatest asset is their ability to move across and through the formal and informal features of the organisation' (Fox & Cooper, 2013, p.1) This definition of the boundary spanner infers an individual with a broad expertise, an ability to be flexible and with networking skills. As organisations strive to create value through greater innovation by using cross functional learning, those in boundary roles can accrue influence and power within their organisations. Although the notion of boundary management is not new within organisational literature, the emergence of new technologies and ways to provide services have necessitated the need for boundary spanning work (Levina & Vaast, 2013). As types of professional work involve multiple actors with different professional cultures, they each need to cross into 'territory in which we are unfamiliar and to some significant extent, therefore unqualified' (Suchman, 1994, p25 as cited in Akkerman & Bakker (2011)).

In their comprehensive review of boundary literature and its application to learning theory, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) have identified four areas of literature which they categorise as identification, co-ordination, reflection and transformation. The identification literature focuses on the process of boundary crossing where previous lines of demarcation between practices are under threat because of similarity or overlapping processes. In order to negotiate the boundary, the differences between the practices are highlighted and a reason for the co-existence of both are agreed. In doing this the boundaries are reconstructed without necessarily overcoming the initial overlap. Co-ordination of boundaries is achieved through the use of boundary objects, the artefacts used in boundary spanning for example, policy documents or procedural templates that can be used by both sides to maintain a common identity but allow for each side to preserve their own

identity. Through translation of the language and values of each side, these objects allow both sides to interact and co-operate through the flow of information and operation of procedures. In this case, the boundary is overcome rather than reconstructed.

The reflective form of boundary crossing allows both sides to appreciate each other's perspective. While having similar attributes, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) see the reflective boundary crossing process as having a different focus to the identification process although initially experiencing the same sense of conflict of identity, as it results in a wider perspective and 'construction of a new identity which informs future practice' (p.146). For transformative boundary crossing to take place, a problem forces the intersecting sides to confront and seriously reconsider their practices and relations. Such transformational interventions are difficult to achieve. It involves the creation of a shared problem space where a new hybrid form can emerge. This may be a new practice which necessitates the creation of a working group, or a collaborative project. As this evolves a new boundary is created and new practices are embedded, and new routines learned. Ernst & Chrobot-Mason's (2010) model of boundary spanning leadership proposes a similar approach where a 'nexus effect' of success is achieved through development of boundary spanning practices of buffering, reflecting, connecting and mobilising, weaving, and transforming. Buffering involves the definition of group identities and protecting the group from outside influences or threats to identity. Reflecting requires the sensitisation of each group to each other's values, beliefs, and norms. Connecting and mobilising practices allow groups to forge a common ground. Connecting through meeting in neutral zones and creating spaces that allow relationships to develop such as away days builds trust between the groups. The purpose of connecting is to break down boundaries where mobilising creates a new group identity that encompasses all group members. Mobilising practices include creating a new goal and building a shared identity and values to achieve that goal. Ernst & Chrobot Mason identify the importance of the creating a continued interdependence between groups which allows for a sustained relationship after the initial goal has been met. Through weaving, the purpose of each group is recognised as being distinct and the continued integration of each creates a state of mutual dependence which can play a greater part in the transformation of the organisation as a whole.

In reviewing the literature, the boundary spanner is described in different ways, for example, as 'third space' professionals (Berman & Pitman, 2010; T. Kallenberg, 2015; Veles & Carter, 2016; Watermeyer, 2015; Whitchurch, 2008, 2012, 2015), or 'hybrid' professionals inhabiting liminal spaces (Bamber, Allen-Collinson, & McCormack, 2017; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016a, 2016b; Simmons et al., 2013; Williams, 2016). Whitchurch's 'third space' concept describes the creation of new spaces and emerging roles rather than necessarily 'moving' between existing groups. Hybrid professionals are individuals with a professional background who take on managerial roles, requiring them to move between different organizational groups (Croft, Currie, & Lockett, 2015). All three concepts, boundary spanner, third space professional and hybrid professional, acknowledge the challenges that arise for the individual in particular, conflicts of identity, and the nature of power and influence within the organisation. Both the hybrid and boundary role definition acknowledge the broader understanding or perspective of the individual, having a 'two-way-window' (Croft et al., 2015), beyond the profession of the role-holder.

Kroeger & Bachman (2013) describe three classes of function carried out by boundary role holders; instrumental, uncertainty absorption and representational. The instrumental role is classed as administrative, the processing of inputs and outputs within organisations. Of greater interest to this review is the role of the boundary role holder as an information filter and buffer from external pressures and as a representative of the organisation to the wider environment and vice versa. These ideas suggest that the boundary holder does not merely operate within an overlapping shared space, but that they create, however temporarily, a new social space where the boundary spanner becomes a 'reflexive actor' creating a new context.

Drawing on Bourdieu's practice theory, Levina & Vaast (2013), take a practice approach to boundary spanning and hold the view that rather than focus on the difference between organisations, focus should be on the shared context of boundary spanning role holders or activities.

Using field of practice perspective, they argue that the social space in which expertise is formed, how differences are resolved, and the power relations involved can be identified. In examining power relationships, they extend the literature in examining how existing power relations affect boundary

spanning processes rather than focusing on relations within novel situations. They propose two types of behaviour that boundary spanners use– practices that preserve the original fields of practice in which they occur, or those that transform those fields. In examining the role of the quality professional, situations may arise where both behaviours are desired – preservation in the context of compliance and transformation in the context of enhancement and improvement. It can also be envisaged that conflict may arise where one group may wish to preserve the field, and another may wish to transform.

4.4 Identity

There is an expanse of literature on the subject of identity; personal, organisational, professional and social, all with roots in the sociological or psychological fields. The literature ranges from a structurally oriented approach, where identity is stable and fixed to an action oriented approach where identity is fluid and malleable (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). The existence of a repertoire of identities for individuals that are made more salient depending on role and context is accepted (Ashforth, Johnson, Hogg, & Terry, 2001). Rosenberg's (1979) four sources of identity – personal/individual, role-based, category-based and group membership based provide a basis on which to examine the contexts in which the identity of the boundary spanner may be affected. The role-identity is defined as a social position that a person holds within a larger social structure, is self-descriptive and relates to at least one other person. As this identity is self-descriptive it is therefore internalised and part of the 'self-concept' (Owens, Robinson, & Smith-Lovin, 2010). These role-identities are based on recurrent interactions and have recognised role expectations. Categorised or group-membership identity are based on how we perceive ourselves as a result of being a member of a socially meaningful category or group, for example, academic or administrator.

Marcia's theory of identity development can also be used to understand how those working in liminal or boundary spaces develop a new identity (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). His theory provides four possible outcomes – identity diffusion, identity moratorium, identity foreclosure and identity achievement. Each of these outcomes is dependent on identity exploration which refers to the process of questioning one's identity "givens" and actively exploring alternative identities, and identity commitment which

refers to the process of making choices among options considered and engaging in activities to implement these choices.: identity diffusion occurs when no identity exploration or commitment take place. Identity moratorium takes place where the individual questions their identity givens without commitment to a new identity. Identity foreclosure involves making a decision to change identity without questioning and identity achievement involves a commitment to a new identity after a period of questioning.

Individuals can use a number of motives to develop or redevelop their identity or identities (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Examples of such motives include belonging and self-advancement. Ashforth & Schinoff propose a model of identity development in organisations which is influenced by the sensebreaking and sensegiving action of the organisation where the organisation desires that the individual develops a particular identity and the sensemaking activities of the individual who is constructing their identity in that context.

Social identity theory (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Hogg, 2016; Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004) can be used to understand the positive and negative outcomes that result when members of different identity groups interact. Intergroup anxiety caused by previous relations and prejudice stemming from stereotyping can be a primary determinant of conflict and having a strong sense of belonging to a group can result in opposition towards outsiders. The notion of the 'organisation' here is important – if, as is well documented in the education literature, academic staff identify more closely with their subject rather than their organisation (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Clarke, Drennan, Harmon, Hyde, & Politis, 2015), it can be inferred that any group outside of the discipline is seen as an outsider and such tension is therefore not limited to those outside of the organisation in which they are employed.

Korschun (2015) examines boundary spanning employees using a social identity lens and proposes a framework which suggests that boundary spanners will engage with external stakeholders based on how they perceive them within the social landscape at work. That employees will have multiple identities arising from their profession, gender or ethnic background can be used to create linkages across boundaries rather than a linear sense of belonging to an organisation.

Employees who identify with their organisation have been found to engage in helping behaviours with fellow employees within their organisation and to develop ties with departments or business units that fall under that organisational umbrella. However, in examining behaviours with representatives outside of their organisation, a greater identification with their organisation resulted in adversarial behaviour with representatives of other organisations.

4.5 Professionalism

Professionalism is usually considered as a set of beliefs and protocols which are worth promoting and valuing (Burns, 2019; Evetts, 2013). Burns highlights the need to have clarity on the meaning of professionalism. To become a member of a profession is to act professionally. However, entry to a profession is based on qualifications in a field or in many cases a legal status, the requirement to think or act in a particular way may not be adjudicated on. In her interpretation, Evetts (2013) views professionalism as a value system that involves trust, discretion, analysis of risk, expert judgement, and expertise. It includes quality of service and professional performance in the interests of both customers and practitioners (Egetenmeyer, Breitschwerdt, & Lechner, 2019; Evetts, 2013).

A move towards professionalism by an occupational group initiated 'from below' by employees and practitioners can be seen as a positive force, however a move towards professionalism from above by management may be seen as control from a distance by organisational management which is trying to cajole and convince employees and practitioners to behave in a particular way (Evetts, 2003).

Recent literature has moved away from the study of professions and professionalisation to look at new 'organisation professionals' (Brès et al., 2019; Heusinkveld, Gabbioneta, Werr, & Sturdy, 2018; Noordegraaf, 2015) or 'connected or connective professionals' (Noordegraaf, 2020). Studies on corporate social responsibility (CSR) practitioners (Brès et al., 2019), project managers (McKevitt, Carbery, & Lyons, 2017), health service researchers (Nigam & Dokko, 2019) and graphic designers (Kunrath, Cash, & Kleinsmann, 2020) have questioned the traditional definition of professions. Professionals that were traditionally seen to be self-employed,

for example accountants, engineers, architects are being increasingly employed by large bureaucracies.

Evetts (2013) compares occupational professionalism and organisational professionalism in the context of knowledge based work as summarised in Table 4-1.

Organisational Professionalism	Occupational Professionalism
Discourse of control used by managers	Discourse constructed within professional groups
Rational/legal forms of authority	Collegial authority
Standardised procedures	Discretion and occupational control
Hierarchical structures	Practitioner trust by clients and employers
Managerialism	Controls operationalised by practitioners
Accountability by regulation, target setting, performance review	Professional ethics monitored by institutions and associations
Linked to Weberian models	Located in Durkheim's model of occupations as moral communities

Table 4-1: Different forms of professionalism in knowledge based work (Evetts, 2013)

Whitchurch (2012) proposes an orientation to professional practice for those working in the third space or at the boundary of occupations (see section 4.3 p.70 above) where although organisationally rather than occupationally based, professionalism is encapsulated in the creation of an individualised knowledge base, the professional body is seen as a network rather than gatekeeper and qualifications are only one aspect of the portfolio of skills. Professional development takes place through work-based on the job learning and authority is exercised through the building of relationships.

Noordegraaf (2020 has expanded Anteby et al's (2016) relating lens beyond what he calls the more traditional relating concepts of collaborating and brokering to describe connective professionalism. Professional powers are produced or granted to 'connected professionals' not as a result of who they are or how they act or collaborate but by the surroundings and

processes of their work. According to Noordegraaf, "Connective professionalism rests upon the ability to navigate relations, get wired in, understand social experiences, navigate risks, and gain respect" (p.218). This form of professionalism emphasises the ability of the professional to create relationships with the right people and networks, to be involved in or to inform decision making, to be able to relate experiences to evidence and emotions, to navigate ambiguity and dilemmas and to gain and maintain trust through micro and macro practices.

This pushing of the boundary of what professionalism is and what it means to be a professional is seen to create new spaces and roles in order problematise activity and work in the 'interesting spaces' that Elken & Stensaker (2020c, p.10) speak of when looking at the future of quality work. (see section 2.7 p.27 above.)

4.6 Quality Professionals as Boundary Spanners

Whitchurch (2008) originally placed the quality function in the academic institution as a niche role, rather than one that occupied the 'third space'. However, her view had changed by 2018, where she cited quality assurance as an example of 'where academic and professional staff work together in mixed teams' (Whitchurch , 2018, p.5) . These mixed teams have different microcultures (Kallenberg ,2016b) and are part of a 'patchwork of coalitions' that make up the academic environment (Kallenberg,2016a).

Categorising Heads or Directors of Quality as 'educational administrators' who are required to practice as third space professionals, Kallenberg (2016b) describes similar mechanisms to those identified by Akkerman & Bakker (2011) as boundary spanning practices; identification, co-ordination, reflection. Those working in third spaces are required to be able to switch roles from manager to colleague to subordinate (linking with the concept of identification from specialist to generalist); to interpret and translate abstract and strategic language into concrete and operational language and to translate and the language of academics and the language of the administrators (*coordination*), to negotiate and seek compromise (*reflect*) and gather insight from senior management, students, external stakeholders. Thus, as third space professionals' quality professionals use boundary spanning practices to negotiate the cultures and micro cultures in their organisations.

4.7 Views of Quality Professionals

Despite the large body of literature relating to quality, quality assurance and quality enhancement in higher education, there has been very little emphasis on the role and opinions of those charged with managing and implementing quality systems in higher education.

Middlehurst (2009) noted the emergence of quality assurance as a professional area. The professionalization of quality assurance has been facilitated by the creation of European standards with which to regulate agencies and individual institutions. She concludes that 'the picture is now complex, competitive, and dynamic. The practice and profession of quality assurance (QA) are definitely 'borderless.

Whilst Middlehurst's analysis is helpful to developing the concept of QA as a profession, it does so at a macro level. The role of professionals within a QA agency is quite different from those tasked with implementing legislation and standards at an institutional level.

A 2017 UNESCO-IIEP study of internal quality assurance identified 'a dedicated person i.e. quality officer in charge at institutional level' as being the third most important factor in quality assurance, with the commitment of the president and vice president being considered more important (Bollaert, 2019). In the wider quality literature, Antony & Sony (2021, p.1) described 'quality management practitioners or (quality management professionals)'. ...as representing. 'the social order of employees responsible for performing quality management practices.

This gap has been recently addressed through research focusing on 'professional quality administrators' in Chile (Scharager Goldenberg (2018), p108)., quality managers in the German higher education system (Seyfried, 2019; Seyfried & Reith, 2019, 2021), a study of European quality 'experts' (Alzafari & Kratzer, 2019), a study of Finnish quality practitioners (Overberg, 2019), quality assurance professionals in private institutions in Ireland ((Ni Bheolain, 2019) and Vietnamese quality assurance staff.(Nguyen, 2021).

According to Seyfried and Reith, quality managers belong to a structurally disadvantaged group, which has nothing to offer but more work and further restrictions of academic freedom (Reith & Seyfried, 2019).

Alzafari & Kratzer's (2019) sample at European level includes vice-rectors, secretaries general, quality directors and leaders of quality projects. Their paper outlines the challenges of quality management and categorises them as organisational challenges, leadership challenges and implementation challenges. While the paper shows results across these categories by country, it does not provide detail by role, so it is not clear if quality directors have different opinions to for example, vice-rectors. Organisational challenges include lack of definition of quality, the complexity of the educational system, a lack of experience in quality of staff in general and in quality units where learning has been self-reliant and experiential. This is similar to a finding in the literature outside of higher education where in a global study of quality management practitioners, nearly 37% of respondents hadn't taken a quality management course at university level. Furthermore, quality managers and quality engineers are less likely than quality directors to have had more than 30 hours formal training. (Antony & Sony, 2021).

Additional organisational challenges include the requirements of external stakeholders. Implementation challenges are identified in funding constraints, enhancing the competency of academic staff, administration, and students in the use of quality tools and in executing, for example, the need to develop data driven decision making, developing implementation plans and overcoming internal resistance.

Seyfried et al's series of papers in the German context looks at quality managers' self-perception of the efficacy of their actions (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018), quality managers' approach to quality assurance based on their identity or world view (Seyfried, 2019), how quality managers respond to resistance (Reith & Seyfried, 2019) and how quality managers respond to different stakeholders or 'principals' (Seyfried & Reith, 2021). Table 4-2 summarises the theoretical frameworks and findings.

Perspective	Theory Used	Findings
Self-perception (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018)	Self Determination Theory of Motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985)	Support from higher management is essential as is autonomy from external demands to promote a sense of effectiveness. Effectiveness

Perspective	Theory Used	Findings
		is decreased if task is to implement procedures. This finding is seen to mirror academic staff view of QA.
Identity or world-view (Seyfried, 2019)	Institutional Logics (Thornton & Ocasio,1999)	QPs perception of quality management is driven by current practices and by individuals' backgrounds. The occupational background becomes significant where quality management is seen as an instrument of control or an instrument of dialogue.
Resistance (Reith & Seyfried, 2019)	Organisations' strategic responses to institutional processes (Oliver, 1991)	Resistance is considered on a temporal basis as short-term or long-term. Using a compromising strategy, QPs use balancing, pacifying, and bargaining tactics to overcome resistance. QPs use a "soft" approach because academics have opportunities to avoid or circumvent their initiatives. Consequently, the strategy of compromise points toward academics' support and commitment. However, the possible result is fragile and strictly bound to the willingness of academics to cooperate.

Perspective	Theory Used	Findings
Organisational Actors who respond to different contexts (Seyfried & Reith, 2021)	Principal-Agent theory (Lane & Kivisto, 2008)	QPs will follow the interests of their principals, acknowledging that they may be contradictory and use this knowledge to shape their self-interests and position among these principals.

. Table 4-2: Analysis of Quality Managers views using different perspectives

The theme of managing and overcoming resistance is also addressed by Overberg (2019). In her work she outlines the strategies used by Finnish quality practitioners to overcome resistance from academic staff. The strategies used include repetition of the value of quality work with communication on how quality is achieved and managed, the use of non-technical language, the involvement of academic staff in working groups to work on quality matters, and an acceptance that some academic staff will never agree with quality management. For quality practitioners who have come from an academic background, they share an empathy with those who are experiencing the pressures of the quality system. The involvement in a national quality manager network is also seen as helpful. (Overberg, 2019) These strategies bear a similarity with those reported in the German study.

Ní Bheoláin's (2019) unpublished taught master's degree study is of interest to this work as it relates to Ireland and to a subsector of the Irish, HE system. Her findings support the categorisation of quality assurance professionals (as she describes them) as boundary spanners who use personal attachment to build relationships.

4.8 Competencies Required of Quality Professionals

Other literature relevant to the role of quality practitioners relates to the knowledge and competencies that they have or should have. As cited above, Seyfried (2019) has highlighted a perceived lack of formal quality training among those working in quality areas in higher education. Nguyen's study of Vietnamese quality practitioners highlights requirements for technical knowledge, interpersonal skills and English language competencies (Nguyen, 2021)

A recent study in the quality literature outside of higher education looked at the competencies needed for quality management (Martin, Elg, Gremyr, & Wallo, 2021). In a case study which looked at the work of 33 Swedish quality practitioners, Martin et al propose a competency framework for quality management practitioners based on the work that they do and the competencies that are in use. (Figure 4-1).

Human Competence Dimension
- •Change Management
- •Communication
- •Pedagogical abilites

Methods and Process Competence Dimension
- •Organisation specific quality management concepts
- •Established tools and methods for quality management
- •Standards and management systems
- •Data analysis
- •Information processing and visualisation

Conceptual Competence Dimension
- •Customer perspective
- •Harnessing technology
- •Holistic strategic understanding

Contextual Competence Dimension
- •Experience from other contexts
- •Experience rom Internal contexts
- •Contextual Adaptability

Figure 4-1: Competency Framework for Quality Management Practitioners (Martin et al, 2021)

They expand this framework further to differentiate the competencies required for strategic and operational roles within the quality management architecture of an organisation.

A number of competency frameworks have been developed for those working in quality assurance agencies in the higher education sector. (Cheung, 2015),(ENQA, 2016),

The ENQA Quality Assurance Professional Competency Framework was developed from a project within ENQA to create a set of professional competencies for staff of quality assurance agencies. These competencies are designated as outlined in Figure 4-2.

Knowledge
- Higher Education
- National Quality Assurance
- International Dimension of QA and QE

Technical
- Project Management
- IT and Data Skills
- Problem Solving Skills
- Analytical Skills

Interpersonal
- Diplomacy and Political Sensitivity
- Communication
- Professional Attitude
- Teamwork/Flexibilty
- Personal Resilience
- Autonomy/Proactivity
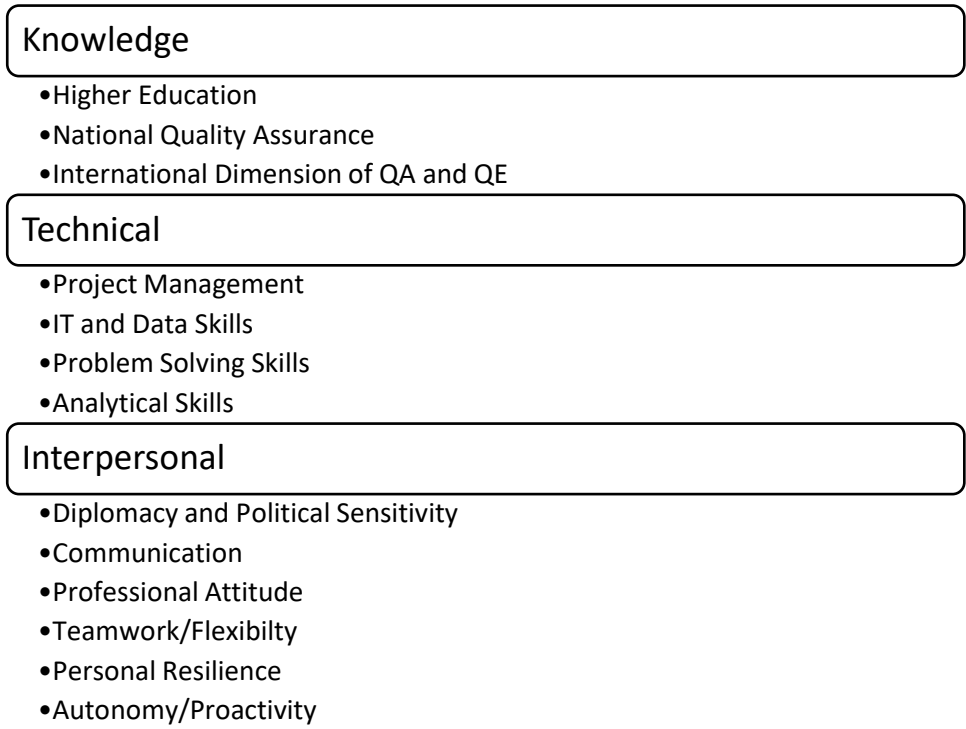
Figure 4-2: ENQA Quality Assurance Professional Competencies Framework

Cheung's framework is developed from a desk review of similar professions such as programme evaluators, content of modules of study delivered by higher education institutions and sectoral agencies and related literature. Cheung's model describes 6 dimensions as set out in Figure 4-3.

Professional Practice

Systematic Enquiry

Situational Analysis

Project Management

Reflective Practice

Interpersonal Competence
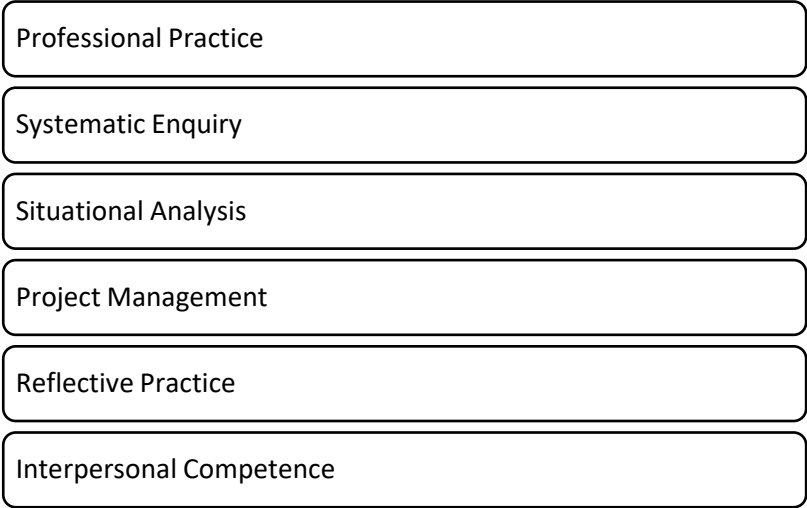
Figure 4-3 Cheung's Framework of Professional Competencies for external quality assurance practitioners

Competencies required for internal quality assurance are offered by Tongsamsi & Trichandhara (2014); Bollaert (2019 and Jingura & Kamusoko

(2019). Jingura and Kamusoko build on the work developed by Tongsami & Traichandhara by developing a competency development framework for internal quality practice.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Quality Knowledge                                           │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
    •Quality Assurance Knowledge
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Quality Mechanisms                                          │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
    •Communication Skills
    •Managerial & Leadership Skills
    •Digital Skills
    •Interpersonal Skills
    •Personal Skills
    •Attitude
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Quality Evaluation                                          │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
    •Analytical Skills
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Quality Research and Evaluation                             │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
    •Research Skills
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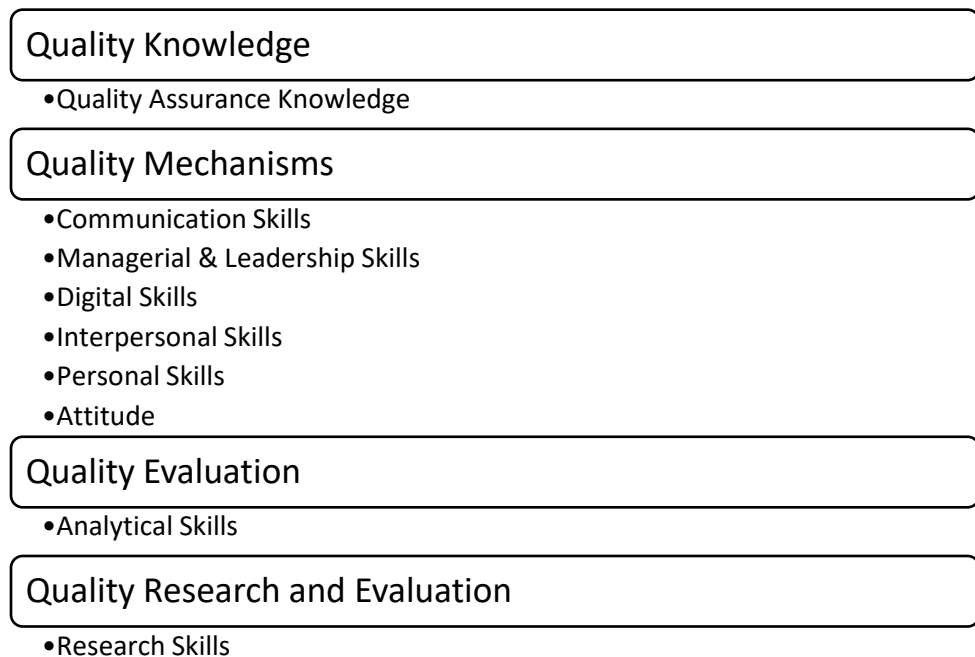
Figure 4-4: Competences for Internal Quality Practitioners. (Jingura & Kamasuko 2019)

It should be noted that Cheung's and Jingura & Kamasuko's work is framed in the development of specialised knowledge (Hodson & Sullivan, 2012) or a defined body of knowledge (Freidson, 1983) required to support the professionalisation of external and internal quality assurance.

This comparison shows a strong similarity across the competency frameworks that have been reviewed. All highlight the need for knowledge of core quality assurance concepts, interpersonal skills, and other technical skills such as data analysis and project management. Of interest is the strong comparability between the competency profile (Martin et al, 2021) of quality professionals in quality roles outside of higher education and those developed specifically for the higher education sector. Martin et al's (2021) framework adds a conceptual dimension that includes strategic understanding and a customer perspective that is missing from the education frameworks. Recognising the problematic nature of describing the student as customer (Houston, 2008), the intent of this perspective can be found in institutionally in Irish higher education through student engagement activities.

Each of these frameworks highlight the importance of interpersonal and communication skills which are necessary for successful boundary spanning. Despite being from different contexts such as quality management external to higher education, or for external or internal quality assurance purposes, each of the frameworks demonstrate a high degree of commonality to contribute to a common occupational profile.

4.9 Emerging identities

As new jobs and tasks are created as a result of new technologies, new structures and vacuums created where work is not assigned to specific roles, fledgling occupations have been shown to go through similar phases of development (Fayard, Stigliani, & Bechky, 2017). Communities of practice are created, an occupational mandate (Nelsen & Barley, 1997) is sought and their jurisdiction over the occupation is legitimised. As QA within the Irish education context is now defined by a common set of standards, those working in the area could now be seen to have a mandate. However, it is not yet clear if that mandate is accepted within their organisations, or whether the space for the overall responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement is still contested by those that believe that it is at worst an unnecessary and unwelcome imposition by a neoliberal state or at best that the QA role is imposing on the identity or jurisdiction of the academic subculture.

4.10 Summary

This chapter considers the literature on professions, professional identity and boundary spanning. The chapter discusses the literature on the changing nature of professions, what it means to be professional and professionalism. Different forms of professionals are described in the literature ; traditional professionals, those that belong to an organised membership which is controlled by formal entry requirements , organisational professionals (Noordegraaf, 2015) where expertise is in their organisation, elite professionals (Freidson, 2001), connected professionals (Noordegraaf 2020) where professionals gain power not through their subject expertise but in how they navigate relationships and gain respect within their organisations. These different forms of professionals can be associated with different perspectives on the professions literature; functionalist, power and institutional (Muzio, 2019).

According to Anteby et al (2016), professions are a specific type of occupation. As new work is created, new occupations are developed. These occupations may or may not take on the attributes of a profession as traditionally understood; however the literature demonstrates attributes relating to becoming – how people are socialised into the occupation; doing – the tasks related to the occupation; and relating: how relationships are built within an organisation by those in an occupation.

In looking at how relationships are built, and new work is carried out, the concept of the boundary spanner is introduced. The boundary spanner works across the organisation and brings a flexibility and expertise to different forms of work. The boundary spanner occupies a space that crosses over traditional occupational lines and this role can be ascribed to those working across the administrative and academic cultures within higher education (Whitchurch (2018), Kallenberg (2016b))

The role of professional identity is also considered where those working in boundary spaces can experience different forms of professional identity development where old and new professional identities co-exist, or where old identities dissipate with the development of the newer identity.

The chapter concludes by considering literature from the perspective of quality professionals and on competency frameworks developed for quality roles. Noting the gap in the quality assurance literature from the perspective of the quality professional, there has been a very recent emergence of literature on the experiences of quality professionals in higher education in other jurisdictions. This literature points to an ill-defined role where formal training is limited and where there are challenges due to increasing complexity, lack of funding and where quality professionals use soft skills such as bargaining and balancing to overcome internal resistance. In terms of role definition a number of authors have developed competency frameworks for quality professionals both in the wide quality management literature and in the higher education literature specifically. A comparison of these frameworks highlight the need for core quality assurance concepts, interpersonal skills, project management and data analysis.

5   Methodology

Arising from the literature on quality in higher education, professional identity and the emergence of new professions discussed in Chapters 3 to 4, this chapter outlines the four major research questions of the study. These focus on the professional identity of those working as quality practitioners within the Irish higher education sector, their perception of their status and influence in their institution and whether, as the concept of quality matures within the sector, a new profession is emerging.

In addressing these questions, the theoretical perspective from which this research is being carried out is outlined, as is the rationale for the choice of the case study as a research approach and the methods used to attempt to answer the research questions.

In approaching this research, I have used and adapted Crotty's (1998) framework of research design to summarise the research process.   This approach and how it is applied in this study is described in figure 5-1.

Epistemology	Theoretical Perspective	Methodology	Methods
Constructionist	Interpretive/ pragmatic	Case Study	Mixed Method •Questionnaire •Semi Structured Interview

Ethical Considerations
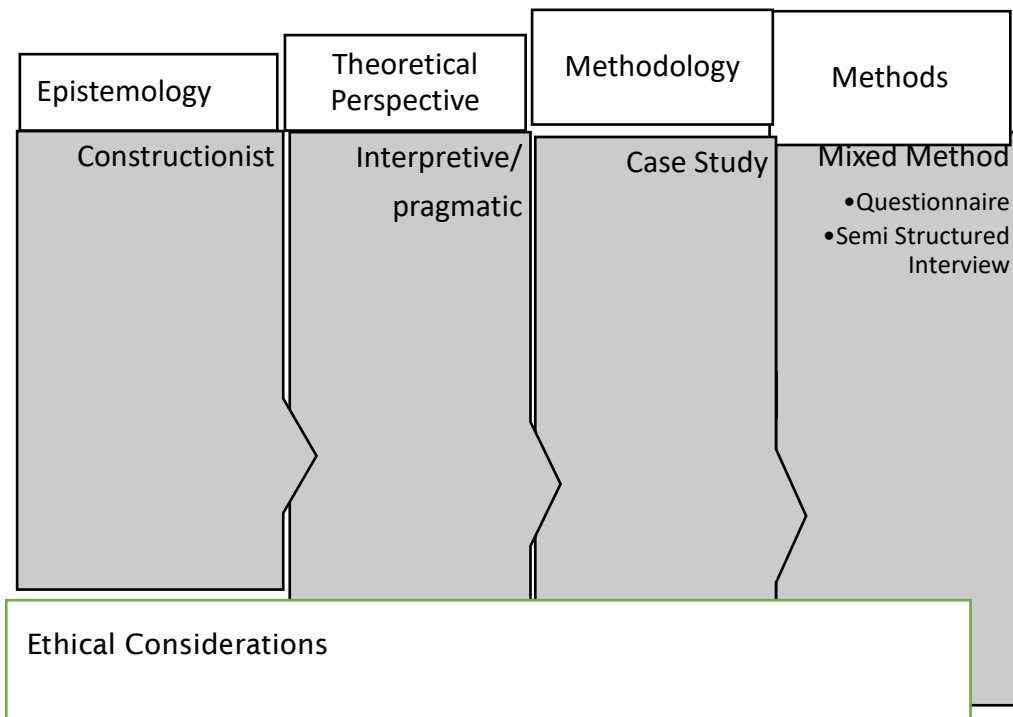
Figure 5-1: Approach to Research Design adapted from Crotty (1998)

Each of these is considered in the following sections of this chapter.

5.1 Research Questions

This research stems from personal reflection on my professional career and identity. I commenced my working life in the public library system as a library assistant and very early on in my career, I became aware of the concept of the 'professional librarian'. This term was used in the library services that I worked in to demarcate those who had undertaken a formal academic programme from those who had not, to counter the public perception that everyone working in a library was 'a librarian'. I became a 'professional librarian' and worked as one for eight years. Although I have not worked as a librarian for over twenty years, I describe myself as 'a librarian by profession'. I have worked in quality assurance and enhancement in higher education for fifteen years and when I am asked 'what do you do?', my experience is that a long explanation inevitably ensues as there isn't an instantaneous recognition of my role or how quality assurance 'fits' in an academic environment.

I have undertaken postgraduate research on the determination of quality work as a knowledge management practice which contributed to organisational innovation. When I commenced this work, my initial focus was to pursue the contribution of quality professionals to organisational innovation. As I read through the literature on innovation and on quality in higher education, I became aware that the perspective of the quality professional in education was not evident and while there was emerging literature on other roles within education   for example,(Kallenberg, (2016b);Schneijderberg & Merkator, (2013) ,Lock (2017); Karlsson and Ryttberg (2016)) , there was none on those working in quality roles. This gap has begun to be addressed as described in section 4.8 p. 87 above.

In parallel, in my professional life I was working on the creation of quality assurance procedures for the new professional apprenticeships[6] which had been introduced into the Irish HE system in 2016. As part of that process, I was introduced to the concept of occupational and professional formation.

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[6] See www.apprenticeshipcouncil.ie f

This questioning of my own professional identity led me to question if colleagues had similar experiences. I recognised the practices of the boundary spanner in my own practice, and I was curious to see if these practices were used by colleagues in the sector. Through an iterative process, I finalised my research questions as below.

1. What professional identities do QA practitioners align with and has that changed since taking on the role?

2. How do QA practitioners negotiate the cultures that operate within their institutions and within Irish Higher Education?

3. How do they perceive their status, role, and influence within their institution?

4. Is QA practice in Irish higher education emerging as a profession due to the influence of national and/or European policy on the creation of a common occupational profile?

5.2 Epistemological & Theoretical Perspective

Research is more than 'a technical exercise and is concerned with our understanding of the world' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Assumptions are made regarding the nature of reality, *ontology*; the nature of knowledge and how it is formed, *epistemology*. Both the ontological and epistemological perspective of the researcher will inform the theoretical perspective and subsequent strategies for design and methods for data collection and reporting. Parallel to ontological, epistemological and methodological concerns, the value of the research and ethical stance of the researcher, its *axiology* must also be considered (Heron & Reason, 1997; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).

The so-called 'paradigm wars' are well documented within the literature and the expansion of the nature of inquiry beyond the objectivist/constructionist divide to include critical theorists, and participatory /co-operative inquirers (Heron & Reason, 1997). This expansion has led to a fluidity and blurring of genres. (Lincoln et al., 2011)

I found considering my own ontological and epistemological stance a challenging process as I had an affinity with a number of philosophical

perspectives. During this work, I found myself reflecting that my previous research training assumed a positivist perspective. In the course of my professional life, my perspective has been practicing or problem oriented. Where there is a problem to be solved or practice to be changed, I aim to resolve the matter using the means available to me. I would have described myself as a pragmatist, without fully appreciating its meaning within the philosophical context.

I also have an affinity with the constructionist approach where I believe that there are many realities or truths, which are dependent on the experiences and perspectives of individuals. The constructionist view of knowledge is that meaning comes into being and is therefore constructed through our engagement with our world (Crotty, 1998). While there are what are considered objectivist outcomes for example, facts that are not constructed or subjective such as tasks undertaken by quality practitioners, this research is exploratory in nature and deals primarily with the experiences and perceptions of individuals. By further taking a *social* constructionist stance, the cultural aspects of our world, the symbols, behaviours and traditions used, our 'figured world' (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) are acknowledged.

As the subject of the research is the perception of a specific group of their professional identity and how they make sense of the environment in which they work, the epistemological and theoretical perspective chosen is within the social constructionist and interpretive/pragmatic tradition.

5.3   Conceptual Framework

In order to address the research questions outlined above, I have situated this study in the theories of occupations and professions with reference to boundary spanning theory and institutional work.

Summarised in Table 5-1, an adaptation of Anteby et al's (2016) framework of occupational analysis using 'becoming', 'doing' and 'relating' lenses provides a useful structure on which to reflect on the findings and answer the research questions posed by this study. In presenting the framework, Anteby et al propose that the lenses are not mutually exclusive and that they can be combined. (Anteby et al, 2016 p.189)

5.3.1 On Being

Anteby et al (2016) acknowledge that the framework as they define it can be used to analyse identity work and propose that this could be examined using the 'relating' lens. I have chosen however to separate identity and create a new lens as 'being'. The introduction of the 'being' lens is informed by the work of Wilcock (1999) and Hitch, Pépin & Stagnitti (2014) in the occupational therapy literature where the core concepts of occupation are defined as doing, being, becoming and belonging. In this literature, 'being' is used from a philosophical standpoint in terms of how people feel about what they do and who we understand ourselves to be. Drawing on professional identity literature, this lens of the framework will examine the findings with respect to the perceived professional identity of quality professionals and how this relates to the other lenses.

5.3.2 On Becoming

How quality professionals have entered the occupation ('*becoming*') is examined using the sub-filters identified in the framework of socialisation, control, and inequality. This lens of the framework reflects early literature on occupations and the occupational closure of professions where access is limited by a professional or regulatory body. Socialisation into the occupation is managed through cultural norms as well as through formal accreditation mechanisms.

The creation of organisational subcultures can also be examined using the 'becoming' lens. With a focus on the concept of control, some occupations can be viewed as the voice of management as the individual may experience a loss of autonomy. Control can be exercised within the organisation or through external controls such as regulatory or other factors. Kunda and Van Maanen (1999) discuss forms of emotional control that can be exerted where those in occupations engage in emotional labour in order to fulfil role obligations while also preserving their sense of self.

The framework uses the sub-lens of 'becoming unequal' to examine how occupations can be segregated through gender or ethnicity. Occupational 'fit' through similarity of demographic, socio-economic or educational background can be used to determine access to professions and occupations.

Anteby et al (2016) argue that the use of the 'becoming' lens allows exploration of the 'nuances that characterise members worldviews in a given occupation' and an understanding of why occupational groups are distinct. Using this lens, I seek to explore the distinctness of the quality professional from other roles in higher education.

	Being	**Becoming**	**Doing**	**Relating**
Definition	The ways in which occupational members view their occupational identity	The ways in which occupational members are socialised into the cultural values, norms, and worldviews of their occupational community	The ways in which occupational members perform occupational tasks or practices and enact claims about their scope of expertise	The ways in which occupational members build collaborative relations with others including intra-, inter-, and extra-occupational relations
Theoretical Foci	Being conflicted Being a professional Being professional	Becoming socialised Becoming controlled Becoming unequal	Doing tasks Doing jurisdiction Doing emergence	Relating as collaborating Relating as co-producing Relating as brokering
Key Concepts	Professional identity Professionalism	Socialisation Occupational culture Control	Tasks and Practices Jurisdiction Conflict	Coproduction Occupational fields Collaboration
Assumptions about actors	Agentic	Little agency	Agentic and competitive	Agentic and collaborative

Table 5-1: Framework of Occupational Analysis (adapted from Anteby et al,2016)

A recognised limitation of the becoming lens is that by focusing on socialisation processes of occupations and specific professions the tensions between occupational groups are not fully addressed. A second limitation is that these socialisation processes are usually focused on new entrants to an occupation and not on how more senior members sustain their membership or affiliation with a particular occupation. The 'being' lens also assumes that an occupation has been formed and doesn't address the cause of the creation of new occupations or professions. These limitations are addressed by examining experiences using the 'doing' lens.

5.3.3 On doing

Through the 'doing' lens of the framework the work undertaken by quality professionals is examined. The framework situates this lens using the literature developed in the late 20th century and focuses on the tasks and practices of the occupation and how occupational conflict and jurisdiction plays out. Using this lens, the agency of occupational members and groups is emphasised. The environment is seen to be competitive where different occupations 'jockey for position' over existing or new tasks. (Abbott, 1988) This focus on new tasks can also address whether the tasks and roles[i] undertaken by quality professionals indicate the creation of a new occupation or profession, which is a question within this research study.

Three sub-lenses of the 'doing' lens are proposed within the framework – 'doing tasks', 'doing jurisdiction' and 'doing emergence'. The 'doing tasks' sub-lens focuses on the distinct practices and tasks associated with an occupation and how these have implications for individual and group outcomes such as work meaningfulness and identity. Going beyond the required task or practices of the job are seen to enact practices and meanings of occupational identity. Practices seen as socially or morally 'tainted' are reframed or re-calibrated through distancing. Other practices considered as 'necessary evils' in order to achieve the greater good invoke responses by members of occupational groups to mitigate against emotional dissonance.

To address the assumed stability of an occupation or profession using the 'being' lens, the framework uses the 'doing jurisdictions' lens to address what happens when tasks change or when new tasks are introduced. Influenced by Abbot's (1988) *'The system of professions',* the jurisdictional

sub-lens asserts that occupations have jurisdiction or control over tasks, and it is that jurisdiction that provides an occupation or profession with the right to assert expertise over unique tasks. As societal, cultural, technological, or institutional changes produce new opportunities or reduce the importance or assumed expertise of tasks, the status of an occupation can be impacted. Using the jurisdictional lens, the tasks at the boundary are contested rather than collaborated on.

The 'doing emergence' sub filter looks at how new occupations are created through the 'hiving off' of tasks and practices, by doing what is not done already or by doing things differently. The creation of new paid occupations can arise from work that was previously unpaid for example, caring roles which would previously have been managed within families prior to societal change or created through increasing regulation.

As with the 'being' lens, Anteby et al highlight the limitations of the 'doing' lens which they identify as a failure to address how members of occupations relate to those outside of the workplace such as clients or other external stakeholders. Another limitation identified is that the doing lens assumes a competitive and adversarial approach to relationships where interests are approached in a combative rather than collaborative environment.

5.3.4 On relating

Addressing these limitations and using the *relating* lens, attention is focused on when and how occupational groups collaborate to perform interdependent work or expand their social influence. Using the relating lens, the roles and relationships of occupations are considered within their ecosystem rather than as bounded entities. As before, three filters are proposed within the framework – 'relating as collaborating', 'relating as co-producing', 'relating as brokering'.

The '*relating as collaborating*' filter looks at how inter- and intra-occupational groups collaborate to achieve a common goal. Such collaboration takes place through rules and routines and the creation of boundary objects like project plans or policies in order to create common meanings. The creation of boundary objects can enhance intergroup coordination and create a collaborative rather than adversarial relationship. The '*relating as co-producing* lens', extends the collaborative model where

occupational groups can create new expertise by joining forces. The expertise of each group is acknowledged using this lens using 'boundary discourse' and 'boundary practice' (Hawkins, 2012). Expertise alone, however, is not considered sufficient to exercise authority. Occupational groups who were seen to maintain distance from their client group and who were not prepared to undertake work that was considered to be 'low status' work were less likely to achieve compliance where this was needed (Huising, 2015). Organisational reach and the achievement of voluntary compliance is dependent on achieving relational success.

The third filter in the 'relating lens' is described as the '*relating as brokering*' perspective. The brokering perspective on occupational emergence suggests that new occupations emerge to fill gaps connecting, mediating, and buffering across occupational and organisational boundaries. (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Fayard et al., 2017; N. Levina & Vaast, 2005; Whitchurch, 2018) These brokering occupations are described as 'sociological citizens' (Canales, 2011), those who understand the organisational context and interdependencies and who often work behind the scenes.

The relating lens and its filters provide a useful framework to examine this study's findings on how quality professionals relate to each other, their colleagues within their institutions and stakeholders external to the institution. In doing so, this study will also address a limitation of the relating lens identified by Anteby et al where it may be methodologically difficult to analyse an occupation's relationships from multiple perspectives. This study explores the relationships of quality professions from their own perspective, their management perspective, and the perspective of some sectoral external stakeholders.

5.4 Alternative Approaches

The process of developing this approach has been an iterative one, which considered other theoretical and conceptual approaches. Starting from my personal stance that quality assurance and enhancement activities contribute to organisational innovation and learning, I considered theories of organisational learning and practice. The communities of practice (COP) literature discusses 'canonical' and 'non-canonical' communities of practice where organisational learning and innovation take place informally (non-

canonical) or through more organised and established processes such as the creation of R&D departments or quality processes. (Fox & Vickers, 2014). Wenger's work on communities of practice addresses the issues of identity and boundary relations (Wenger, 1998) which are the focus of part of this study. Networks of practice have been used to describe professions that provide a role which facilitates knowledge sharing or knowledge leaking through conferences (Brown & Duguid, 2001). Fox & Vickers' (2014) criticism of the communities of practice and networks of practice approach is that they do not address how members of a COP change their practice or innovate. Their answer to this gap is the use of Actor Network Theory (ANT) envisaging a process of translation where parties negotiate and process knowledge using four strands – problematisation, 'interessement', enrolment and mobilisation. Problematisation is used to describe a joint problem or a problem that is recognised by two communities of practice. The 'interessement' process involves one party suggesting a set of goals to solve the problem. The 'enrolment' phase involves a process where all parties play their part in reaching the goals. Mobilization is the process where one party co-ordinates the other during the period of time that the problem is being solved. In this scenario power is embodied within the network of the parties or 'actors' which work together to pursue a common interest.

Though using knowledge management theories of learning and actor network theory are attractive and could be useful in interpreting the behaviour of quality professional, the specific focus of this study is not on organisational learning. Using the sociology of professions literature supported by boundary spanning theories, this study seeks to answer Anteby et al's call for scholars to use the framework as an 'analytical tool to deepen and enrich their occupational inquiries'.

5.5 Ethical and Data Protection Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the School of Education's ethical guidelines[7] and approval was provided by the School of Education Ethics Committee in March 2019.

5.5.1 Informed Consent & Confidentiality

Survey participants were invited to participate via personalised email which provided information about me and the study. A participant information sheet accompanied the email. (Appendix 2)

Informed consent was obtained from survey respondents through the survey instrument. This survey included questions at the beginning which allowed them to confirm their understanding of the research, how confidentiality would be assured, how their data would be managed and that they could withdraw at any time without prejudice. The survey also asked respondents if they could be contacted again to take part in a follow up semi-structured interview. (Appendix 1)

Informed consent was obtained for interview participants prior to each interview taking place. Participants were provided with an information sheet (Appendix 2) setting out the purpose of the research, how their data would be managed and stored and how confidentiality would be assured. Due to the small population of quality professionals in Ireland, anonymity cannot be guaranteed but participants names will not be revealed. They are identified using pseudonyms which identify them only as quality professionals (QP) and senior leaders (SL) within their sector and sectoral representatives (SEC)

The participant information section of the consent form was amended for each group as the interview schedule changed. For interviews that took place after March 2020, the location of the interview was changed from 'a mutually agreed location, most likely your workplace', to the MS Teams platform.

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[7] See Research Ethics - School of Education - Trinity College Dublin (tcd.ie)

At the commencement of each interview, participants were advised that they could decline to answer any question and could withdraw at any point.

A copy of the transcript of each interview was returned to each participant, inviting them to clarify or correct the content. They were also invited to withdraw any element of the interview that they were not comfortable with including in the findings.

5.5.2 Data Storage and Protection

Data is held in accordance with current data protection legislation and the record retention policies of Trinity College Dublin. The personal data collected during this study is stored on a secure encrypted and password protected personally owned device and backed up to a cloud based storage system, which is based in the EEA. Personal data will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

Recordings were made using two devices in case of recording failure. Once the recording was transferred from the data collection device to the device, it was deleted from both devices so that only one version of the recording existed.

5.5.3 Researcher as insider

In approaching this study, I am conscious that I am a member of the research population. I bring with me my values, biases, and experiences. As an 'insider' researcher, I have a greater understanding of the world being researched, (Unluer, 2012) and a greater likelihood of acceptance (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). However, being an insider also brings with it disadvantages such as lack of objectivity and reflexivity. Insiders are perceived to be prone to charges of being too close, and thereby, not attaining the distance and objectivity deemed to be necessary for valid research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

Since I began this research, I have changed my job from a small organisation in the private/independent sector to a large public sector university. This move has challenged my own perception and assumptions of quality work. Although I retain the same role title, the nature and expectations of my role require a different perspective in this new environment.

Brannick & Coghlan describe the challenges facing those undertaking insider research within their organisation in the context of access, preunderstanding, role duality and politics. Those participating in the research are peers and colleagues within the sector, some of whom I have a strong professional relationship with. This had a positive impact in that primary access to participants was facilitated by direct contact. It also required a great deal of trust as I have asked peers to divulge personal or organisational views that may be sensitive.

This need for trust was two-way as I found myself feeling somewhat vulnerable, particularly when I sent out the initial invitation to participate in the survey. This vulnerability stemmed from a concern that my peers would not be interested in taking part in the research and a fear of an impact on my professional reputation within the sector.

Another consideration regarding trust is that due to the peer-review and benchmarking nature of quality work, either I or a participant in the study may find ourselves at either side of a professional evaluative process. In itself this is not problematic, but it may give rise to perceived conflicts of interest.

Throughout the period of time that this study took place, I took care not to raise it in conversation with colleagues in the sector, but I did answer any questions that they asked of me. Usually, these related to how the study was progressing rather than questions about its findings. In most cases, any correspondence regarding the study was done through personal rather than professional email accounts, thus separating my professional identity from my personal or student identity. Where correspondence was from my professional email account, it related to setting up meetings using MS Teams which became the method of interview for those that took place after March 2020 due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the discussion of the findings of this study, I have taken care to ensure that the discussion is led by the findings and not my personal views or that I have sought out validation for my personal views through the literature or through the findings.

The reflexivity required is therefore to reflect on my own positionality and to take multiple perspectives and demonstrate a high level of methodological transparency (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017).

5.6   Research Methodology

Considering the research questions and the epistemological stance that I have outlined above; I chose to take a qualitative research approach to research design. The aim of this research is exploratory in nature as a study of the role of the quality professional in all sectors of Irish HE had not been undertaken previously.

5.6.1 Case Study Approach

Hammersley (1992) describes the research process as a complex and badly kept maze in which researchers need a methodological language which gives better direction to which routes can be chosen. He argues that cases can be selected using one of three methods – the experiment, the survey, or the case study. The experiment is the context in which the researcher controls the case using variables and theories i.e., the cases are created. The survey allows the selection of a large number of simultaneously naturally occurring cases. In Hammersley's view, the case study combines some of the features of both for a smaller number of naturally occurring cases. The choice between each involves a trade-off depending on the nature of the research and the resources available.

Another set of guidance on the use of the case study is provided by Yin (2014). Yin looks the nature of questions being asked, whether behavioural controls are required and whether the study focuses on contemporary events. Due to the nature of the research questions being asked and the finite nature of the population, which is relatively small, the research methodology used for this study is the case study.

5.6.2 Definition of Case Study as a Research Methodology

One of the issues affecting the case study within social science research has been a lack of definition and confusion as to whether the case is a methodology or method and a sense that anything could be described as a case study (Tight, 2010). Yin (2014) defines the case study as 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth …. within

its real world context'. He describes this as the 'scope' of the case study. This is elaborated with a description of the features of the case study which

- 'cope with technically distinctive situations in which there will be more variables of interest than data points and as one result

- Relies on multiple sources of evidence with data needed to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result

- Benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis' (Yin,2014 p.17)

Other characteristics include the existence of single or multiple case studies. Yin also points out that case study research is not the preserve of qualitative research and can exist in the quantitative research domain.

Hitchcock & Hughes (1995) cited in Cohen (2011 p.290) suggest that the case study is particularly useful when the researcher has little control over events and that the case study has additional characteristics such as 'a rich and vivid description of events… and where the researcher is integrally involved in the case'.

The method has its detractors as outlined by Tight (2010). Many concerns in particular regarding the rigour and ability to generalise have traditionally been raised against case studies. These mirrors the concerns often raised about qualitative research in general. How these are addressed for this study are discussed in the section on Validity & Reliability. (5.7 below).

5.6.3 Case Design

According to Yin (2014), a primary distinction in designing case studies is between single and multiple cases study designs. He outlines five major rationales for using a single case study – critical case, extreme case, common case, revelatory case, or the longitudinal case.

Case Type	Rationale
Critical	To test a theory of interest to the researcher
Extreme or Unusual	Studying unusual cases to yield insights where the case does not conform to theoretical norms

Case Type	Rationale
Common	Studying common everyday things to yield insights into how things work and what lessons can be learned
Revelatory	Access to areas of study previously inaccessible to researchers
Longitudinal	Studying the same case over time to understand how certain conditions or processes might change

Table 5-2: Major rationales for use of single case study ~ (Yin, 2014)

For the purposes of this research, the rationale for choosing a single case study is the revelatory rationale. While the area of research could not be described as being inaccessible to researchers, there has not been any study of this group within higher education in any literature. Therefore, any research in this field will be of a revelatory nature.

A variation on the single case design, is the single embedded case design where multiple units of analysis can be examined. Using the embedded case design allows comparative analysis between each of the units of analysis as well as the overall level of the case itself. Figure 5-2 below outlines how the single embedded case design is used for this research. The case context is Irish higher education with the multiple units of analysis being quality professionals in each of the sub-sectors, degree awarding bodies, institutes of technology[8], linked providers and the private/independent sector (QQI awarded).

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[8] As described earlier, (p.38) although IoTs became degree awarding bodies in 2020, they are not included in this category or the purposes of this research.
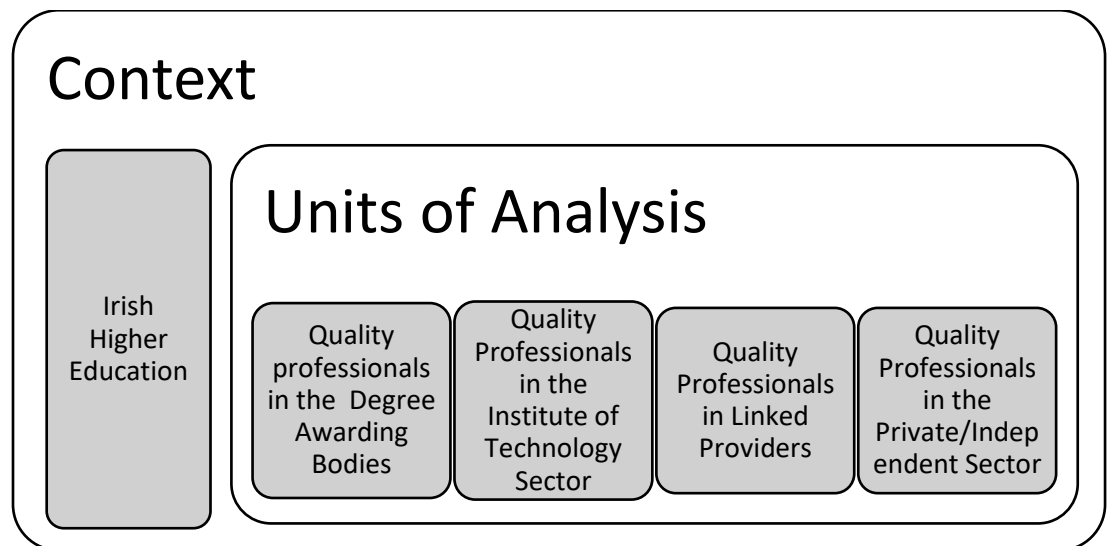
Figure 5-2: Single Case Design with embedded units of analysis

5.6.4 *Alternative Inquiry Approaches*

As this study is focussed on the experience of quality professionals, alternative approaches to the case study were considered. An ethnographic approach to this study could have been taken where the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2007). As this approach involves immersion in the day-to-day lives of the people and observes and interviews the group participants, it was discounted for two reasons; the time that would have been required to spend in observation as well expected difficulties in gaining sufficient access to the working environment of individual quality professionals other than myself. An assumption that quality professionals share a common culture or beliefs is also problematic given the exploratory nature of this study.

A phenomenological approach could have been taken to focus on the common experiences of those working in the quality area. As this approach requires the researcher to 'bracket' (Creswell, 2007 p.57) their own assumptions and consider the phenomenon being researched objectively, I did not think that I would be able to do this as an active member of the population being researched. In taking an interpretive approach to do this would be 'signalled as an impossibility' (Van Manen, (1990) cited in Creswell, 2007 p.57)

5.7 Validity & Reliability

The concepts of validity and reliability are critical to any research. In qualitative research, validity may be demonstrated through a richness of content, the appropriateness of the sample chosen, and the extent of triangulation used. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2011) describe several kinds of validity, each more relevant to the research traditions being used. Much cited in the literature are the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba – credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Riege, 2003). Creswell & Miller (2000) develop these further by showing how these tests can be used for different theoretical perspectives and from the perspective of the researcher, study participant and external audience.

In order to demonstrate the robustness and trustworthiness of the research design, the commonly accepted tests for validity and reliability in case studies (Yin, 2014) are applied to this study. These tests refer to

(1)Construct validity: Identifying operational measures for the concepts.

Two sources of data have been used as sources of evidence for this work. This mixed method approach to data collection also provides triangulation according to Flick's (2018) definition. A case has been created for each participant which matches survey responses with interviewees where relevant. A chain of evidence for the research can be found through electronic diaries and a journal of thoughts and progress that was kept throughout the study. The survey and interview schedule were piloted to enhance their application in the field.

(2)Internal Validity or Credibility (Lincoln & Guba 1985): Ensuring that spurious inferences are not made, and that causal relationships are not incorrectly attributed

Recognising the subjective nature of thematic analysis, I have acknowledged my epistemological stance and position as insider researcher to aid transparency to the reader. Additional credibility is provided to the study as it is from the perspective of the insider researcher who works within the sector and has had prolonged engagement with the data over a period of two years.

(3)External Validity: The ability to generalise findings

The findings of the study can be generalised by linking the findings to the conceptual framework used and to other literature.

(4)Reliability: The ability to replicate the results using the same case study.

Reliability is achieved through the availability of the data which has been computerised to aid record management. This available subject to data protection legislation and record retention policies.

To support confidence in qualitative research, there has been practice using multiple methods to overcome any perceived weakness in a qualitative study through triangulation. Creswell (2009) describes triangulation as a validity strategy where different data sources can be used to 'build a coherent justification for themes' (p.191). Flick (2018) defines triangulation as researchers taking different perspectives on an issue which are substantiated by using several methods and/or theoretical approaches. Different forms of triangulation have been identified within the literature – data, investigator, theory, and methods. The need to provide triangulation at all within a study has been criticised as taking a positivist approach to qualitative research and other critics question the reliability of the replication of outcomes through the use of multiple investigators or theories. (Cohen et al, 2011). Despite these critiques in order to provide additional robustness to this study, I have chosen to approach methodological triangulation through the use of quantitative and qualitative methods and data triangulation through the use of data collected for specific interview questions from different persons and collectives such as quality professionals and senior leaders.   The use of investigator triangulation was not possible in this study as an individual PhD researcher.

5.7.1 Documentary Evidence

Documents relating to quality assurance in Irish and European higher education were examined in order to investigate the documented context and role of quality assurance and enhancement professionals within Irish Higher Education. The sources identified included.

- Websites of institutions

- the Annual Institutional Quality Review (AIQR) reports submitted to QQI,
- synthesis of annual quality reports published by QQI
- institutional review reports published by QQI,
- policy documents from ENQA

This review of documentary evidence had initially been chosen as a complementary source of data and to achieve further triangulation. The findings from this review were limited in the context of the research questions and have been included in the literature review in Chapter 3 above. The documentary evidence is useful in providing additional data triangulation (Flick, 2018 p. 12) by supporting findings from the survey and interview process on how quality is structured within the sector and the official environment in which quality professionals work.

5.8   Data Collection

Figure 5-3 outlines the sub phases of the data collection phase of the study. The data collection was carried out from April 2019 to October 2020. Data collection was divided into 2 phases, a survey of quality professionals which was followed by a series of semi structured interviews.

Phase 1
- May-July 2019
- Survey of quality professionals to ascertain background information and tasks undertaken in order to address research question 4 – the emergence of a common occupational profile

Phase 2
- July 2019-October 2020
- Semi Structured Interviews to provide in-depth understanding of perceived professional identity and negotiation of cultures within Irish HE

Figure 5-3: Phases of Data Collection and Methods Used

5.8.1 Methods for Data Collection

Data collection was achieved using a mixed methods approach using an online survey and semi structured interview. In selecting this mixed

approach, the justification for doing so within the pragmatic philosophical stance taken is related to the research question being addressed and the aim of the inquiry. As posed by Brannen (2005), there can be a justification for mixing field methods that are normally aligned to one philosophical stance or another using inquiry justification or contextual justification. In doing so, it also supports the validity and reliability of the outcomes through triangulation, However, overall, this research is considered to be qualitative.

5.8.1.1 Survey

In the initial phase of the research design 55 identifiable quality practitioners within the Irish HE sector were surveyed. Survey participants were identified through the websites of higher education institutions and through personal contact networks. This approach has three aims.

Aim 1: To elicit and corroborate background information on the titles of roles, placement in the organisational structure and professional background of the quality practitioners

Aim 2: To provide initial information on where tasks that are considered to be quality related are undertaken within their organisation and by whom.

Aim 3: To ascertain willingness of individual quality practitioners to engage in phase 2 of the study.

Each of these aims provide contextual justification for the use of mixed methods. Phase 2 of the research, the interview was dependent upon the outcomes of phase 1.

Data was collected using an online questionnaire which was created using Microsoft Forms. Use of online surveys have the advantage of speed of delivery, are cost effective and have sophisticated follow up and reporting mechanisms. They can, however, suffer from lower response rates than traditional survey methods.

A pilot of the questionnaire was undertaken in October 2018 to assure validity and usability of the instrument.

5.8.1.2 Interviews

The interview is one of the mainstays of qualitative and case study research (Yin, 2014). It has often been categorised as part of a broader methodology such as a survey, case study or ethnography (Platt, 2012). Some consider that there is an overreliance in social research on the interview (Atkinson as cited in Hammersley, (2017) and that only by direct observation can social forms be documented. Denzin (2001) describes the interview as 'interpretive practice' as it functions as a narrative device which allows participants to tell stories about themselves. According to Hammersley (2012), interviews are used as a source of witness testimony, participant analysis, and as an indirect source of participants' attitudes or perspectives. Interviews are no longer viewed as a guided means of 'information excavation' but rather as a method of 'learning from strangers' where the full range of individuals' experiences are accessible (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012). Interviewees may refer the interviewer to further sources of information and other participants, thus building the richness of description to support the validity of the study.

The type of the interview employed will depend on how comparable across people or sites the unit of analysis is required to be. Standardisation leads to and requires more structure within the interview. Leaving the interview unstructured allows for greater relevance of the questions to the context of the interview but may lead to different information being collected from different participants, thus reducing the comparability and generalisability of the data. Important topics may be inadvertently omitted from the discussion.

In this study, the interviews were designed as semi structured interviews. The semi structured interview allows for sufficient structure to ensure a consistency of themes addressed and increase the potential for comparability across participants. Acknowledging the need to be continually reflexive and to take the outsider perspective, the approach allows for a more fluid dynamic within the interview itself so that themes not known to the researcher may emerge.

The interview question set was designed to answer the research questions identified. Three interview schedules (Appendix 3) were developed, one for each of the three population groups; quality professionals, senior leaders,

and sectoral representatives. There were common questions in each of the schedules so that the different perspectives of each of the groups could be ascertained for those questions.

The interview questions for the quality professionals' group was piloted using a quality professional from a different sector to the one that I worked in. This allowed me to consider and take into account assumptions that I may have made with respect to their work and experiences. Additional supplementary questions were added as a result of the pilot.

I completed the majority of the quality professionals' interviews prior to embarking on the senior leader or sectoral representative interviews. This was a deliberate strategy as I wanted to inform the questions for those groups based on the initial findings from the quality professional groups.

Interview Process

Face to face interviews were undertaken at the participant's place of work or mutually agreed location. Interviews that took place after March 2020 were undertaken using the Microsoft Teams platform. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed at a later date.

Not only am I an insider researcher, but a number of the participants were also known to me both professionally and personally. For in person interviews, the participant signed the consent form prior to the commencement of the interview. Where the interview took place online, the consent form was returned to me by email prior to the interview. In all cases, I advised the participant that they could decline to answer any question and that they could halt the interview at any time. Participants were interested in the area under research and engaged well with the structured and follow up questions, but I was also conscious of some guarded replies where the discussion may have been more fulsome when the recording device was switched off.

Where the participant had participated in the survey, the interview was used to get further insights into individuals' responses to the survey questions and validate any assumptions made by me.

5.8.2 Transcription Techniques Used

The interview process resulted in 35.5 hours of recordings to be transcribed and analysed. The duration of each interview is outlined in the scheduled in Appendix 4. The audio recording of the first set of interviews (n=13) that I undertook was processed via automated voice transcription platform in the first instance (Otter.ai). By using this approach, I understood that each recording would need to be checked against the automated transcription and that some editing would be required. The quality of the initial set of transcripts arising from the automated transcription service was not sufficient and, in the interests of my time as a part-time student, transcription was outsourced to a professional transcription service.

The remaining interviews (n=26) were submitted to the voice transcription service. The quality of auto transcription had improved, and I chose to edit each transcription individually.

As part of the process of data analysis I compared all transcripts with the audio recordings and edited further where the professional transcriber made a typographical error or misunderstood the context.

The quotations used to illustrate findings have been edited where appropriate to contribute to the sense of the sentence for example where words are repeated or thought processes interrupted.

5.8.3 Population Selection

In choosing the participants for this study, the issue of representation and sample size is addressed. Samples are often divided between probability based and purposively based procedures. Teddlie & Yu (2007) add convenience based and mixed methods sampling. Probability based sampling is used to select participants on a random basis typically from a large group to achieve a representative sample of the population, which is the measure of accuracy. This is used primarily in quantitative research. Convenience sampling chooses from a willing or volunteer population. According to Teddlie & Yu (2007), purposeful sampling may be 'defined as selecting units (e.g., individuals, groups of individuals, institutions) based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study's questions. Purposive sampling leads to greater depth of information from a smaller number of carefully selected cases. In purposive sampling, the

number of cases is selected according to the judgement of the researcher and numbers approximately a maximum of30 cases whereas probability based sampling required a bigger number c. minimum 50 cases. In addition, participants in a purposively based sample can be chosen at the beginning or during the study.

In keeping with the aims of the survey outlined in section 5.8.1.1. p.130, the survey population was purposively chosen as those working in Irish higher education who have the word 'quality' in their job title or have operational responsibility for quality or enhancement in their job description. In the initial phase of the study, the questionnaire was sent to all identified practitioners in the University, Institute of Technology, linked provider, and private/independent higher education sectors. Participants from the private/independent higher education sector were selected on the basis of their institution being a member of the Higher Education College's Association (HECA). The rationale for this distinction is that the institutions were had a relationship with QQI as their awarding body and offered programmes above level 6 on the NFQ. Initial Identification of individuals was made through website enquiry and through personal networks.

The selection of twenty-two interviewees from survey respondents was made on the basis of ensuring appropriate representation across institutions and by the availability of interviewees. The opportunity also arose to interview four quality professionals (QP) who had not had an opportunity to respond to the survey through subsequent professional contact. In addition, ten senior leaders (SL) from across the sector were interviewed. In nine cases, at least one quality practitioner from their institution was also interviewed. The addition of the senior leaders provides another perspective and also assists in triangulating perspectives of the quality professionals.

Representatives from the statutory quality assurance agency, QQI were also approached for interview. They have a unique perspective in that not only do they interact with the quality professionals who are the subject of this research, but they also are quality professionals in their own right, albeit with a different focus. The perspective of the representative bodies of the university sector, the IUA and Institute of Technology/Technological University sectors, THEA was also sought. Representation from the Higher

Education College's association was not sought as its officers are not independent of their institutions.

Requests for interview were sent to the Higher Education Authority and Department of Education and Science, however they declined to be interviewed.

Data Collection	Degree Awarding Body		Institute of Technology		Private/Ind Provider		Linked Provider		Sectoral	Total
	QP	SL	QP	SL	QP	SL	QP	SL		
Survey Respondents	15		7		10		2			33
Interviewees	13	2	6	3	4	4	2	1	4	39

Table 5-3: Profile of Research Participants

Table 5-5- shows that a high degree of representation across the sector has been achieved. Responses to the survey were received from 33 participants and 39 interviews were held.

Twenty eight higher education institutions were represented in the survey response. Of those twenty-eight institutions, ten were degree awarding bodies[9], six were institutes of technology, three were linked providers and eight private/independent providers

Twenty-one higher education institutions are represented in the interviewee data with representation also from three sectoral bodies.

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[9] Institutes of Technology are recognised as degree awarding bodies from January 2020. For the purposes of this research, they are separated from those that were DABs at the commencement of the research

Data Collection	Degree Awarding Body	IoT	Private/Ind Provider	Linked Provider	Sectoral	Total
Survey	11	6	9	2		28
Interviews	8	5	4	1	3	21

Table 5-4: Number of Institutions Represented in the Study

In total thirty distinct higher education institutions are represented in the combined datasets.

5.9 Data Analysis

Analysis of the survey data was undertaken in Microsoft Excel. Although this data is not statistically significant due to the sample size, the findings from this data are used to provide context and essential information on the roles, functions and titles of quality professionals.

Analysis of the interview data was carried out using Braun & Clarke's method of reflexive thematic analysis of the transcripts of the interviews ((Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, & Rance, 2014). Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data. These themes which are built from codes are used to organise the data and assist in identifying and interpreting key elements of the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Table 5-7 describes Braun & Clarke's approach to the process of thematic analysis. In a recent paper, they respond to criticisms that they have proceduralised TA and created concrete rules for carrying out TA by explaining that their process is a guideline and a starting point for researchers. (Braun & Clarke, 2020)

Phase	Description of the Process
Familiarization with data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas
Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code

Phase	Description of the Process
Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis
Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme
Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Table 5-5: Process of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006)

In emphasising 'reflexive' thematic analysis Braun & Clarke eschew their earlier view that themes 'emerge' from the data. Researchers bring their biases and meanings to the data and therefore analysis is subjective and interpretive. Other forms of thematic analysis include co-coding to provide validity. According to Braun & Clarke attempting to demonstrate 'coding reliability and the avoidance of bias is illogical, incoherent and ultimately meaningless in a qualitative paradigm and in reflexive TA' as meaning is understood and created by the subjectivity of the researcher. As this research is a solo endeavour, co-coding is not possible and by describing the methodology I have used throughout I endeavour to demonstrate the rigour of my approach.

In undertaking thematic analysis, Braun & Clarke warn against common pitfalls such as failure to analyse the data, linking themes solely to the interview questions, weak or unconvincing definition and demarcation of themes and mismatches between the data, analytical claims, and theoretical claims.

5.9.1 Coding Process

I had used the qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) NVivo previously on a smaller scale research study and was aware of its usefulness and

limitations as a tool. I had an opportunity to undertake a two-day training course in the summer of 2019 just as I began the interview phase of data collection and use that training to set up the parameters of the study. This allowed me to connect survey data responses and transcript data as individual cases which aided cross institutional and sectoral comparison within the case study.

Using Braun & Clarke's process, I used NVivo to iteratively code and re-code the data. Being mindful of their warning not to use the research questions as themes, I did however, use the import capabilities of NVivo to create the first phase of coding using the research questions and the questions used in the interview schedules. This allowed the creation of a set of codes under headings related to the research questions. Figure 5.4 provides an example of how the responses to the question on the knowledge, skills and competences required for quality work were initially coded.
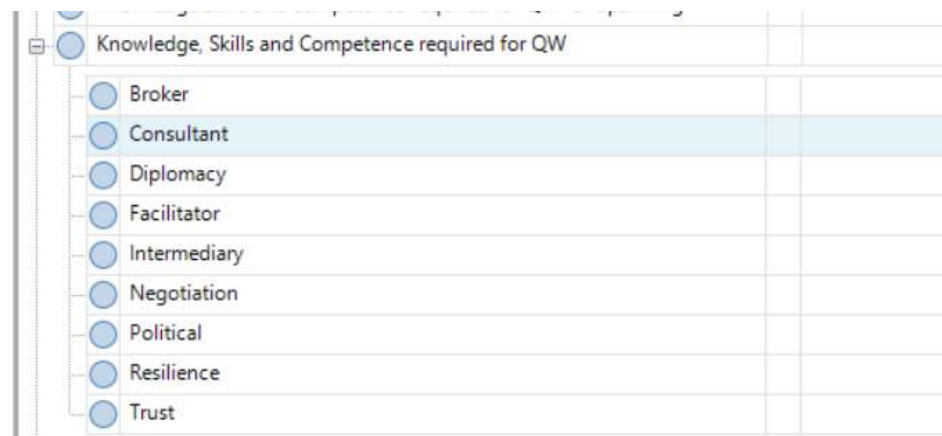
Figure 5-4: Example of Coding Structure Related to Interview Schedule

Additional codes were then created based on my reading of the the text in the transcripts and using the query tools available to do high level coding based on individual phrases and synonyms.

Following this initial round of codifying the data, I began to categorise the data into themes, with some themes being thicker than others. My first and second rounds of data coding and analysis were undertaken based on my interpretation of the data. By searching the text for phrases and synonyms I drew on initial connections that I made in the data with the conceptual framework.

At the end of the second round of coding, my main themes had been categorised as

- Quality Roles within Higher Education
- What is quality work?
- An emerging profession?
- Knowledge, skills, and competences required for quality work
- Quality professional behaviours
- Resistance experienced by quality professionals
- Perception of quality professionals by others
- Institutional and sectoral challenges
- Support for quality professionals
- Strategic links and contested spaces

I had encountered Anteby et al's framework of occupational analysis initially when doing a review of the literature on professions. (See 4.2) It had value as a source of synthesis of the literature, but I found that it also afforded a useful model on which to 'map' (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and review the themes that I had categorised the data into. I chose to use the framework to inform the final presentation of the findings at the end of the second round of coding.

Acknowledging the reflexive nature of TA, viewing the findings through the lens of the framework informed further re-consideration and refinement of some themes e.g. considering funding of quality as a control mechanism. Discussions with my supervisor assisted in checking whether use of the conceptual framework was appropriate throughout the final analysis. There were additional findings which as presented above (5.3, table 5.1) informed my proposal to extend the framework to include an additional lens of 'being' which examines professional identity, being professional and being 'a' professional. Further findings relating to sectoral and other structural issues have been presented outside of the conceptual framework.

Throughout application of the framework to my findings I was conscious to ensure that these findings could be concluded from the survey and interview transcripts rather than projection of my own experience and practice.

5.10 Summary

This chapter has addressed the philosophical stance on which the research is based. Using a social constructionist approach which is also influenced by cultural studies and the participative paradigms, the single embedded case study research approach is adopted to address the research questions. A mixed method approach, including documentary analysis, an online survey, and semi-structured interviews, is used to collect the data required to answer the research questions. This research received ethical approval from the School of Education Research Ethics Committee and is being carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the School of Education at TCD. Data is analysed using thematic analysis which uses individual codes to create themes. The research is designed to mitigate against the criticisms of the case study approach and issues of validity and reliability are addressed.

Chapters 6-9 present the findings of the survey and interview data analysis under the following headings, '*Quality Roles & Work*', '*An Emerging Profession?*', '*Behaviours of Quality Professionals*' and '*Institutional and Sectoral Challenges*'

6   Quality Roles and Quality Work

6.1   Introduction

Arising from the methodological approach outlined in Chapter 5, the findings from this research are presented in the following chapters 6 to 9 based on the themes that were constructed from the analysis of the data. In presenting the findings from this research, the findings from the survey of quality professionals and semi structured interviews have been interwoven where the data from the interviews complements and further illustrates the data gathered from the survey. These themes are presented as

- Quality Roles within Higher Education

- What is quality work?

- An emerging profession?

- Knowledge, skills, and competences required for quality work

- Quality professional behaviours

- Resistance experienced by quality professionals

- Perception of quality professionals by others

- Institutional and sectoral challenges

- Support for quality professionals

- Strategic links and contested spaces

Unless stated otherwise, findings from the survey are presented in tabular or graphical form before findings from the interview process and is characterised by quotation.

6.2   Quality Roles within the Higher Education Institution

Understanding the size and organisational placement of the quality function in an institution gives context to the importance that the institution places to the quality function, the roles within it and how they might be perceived within the organisation. In this section, findings are presented on role definition and categorisation and where quality function sits in HEIs.

As described by a sectoral representative, the genesis of the quality function within the DAB institutions is linked to the introduction of quality assurance requirements of the 1997 Universities Act where the Universities were funded to create quality offices to carry out those requirements.

> "€50000 per institution. [was given]. to the universities in response a targeted funding initiative from the HEA to help the institutes with the 1997 act, the QA responsibilities there. So, at that stage, the universities were using this as seed funding to establish their first quality office like DCU or various others in the other universities. At that stage, the institute of technology didn't have any" (SEC1)

Posts were created at professorial level in some institutions and the function was situated within the President's Office. This situation of the post within the President's Office was seen to provide an apolitical context to the quality function (IUQB, 2008,). Roles were taken on a secondment basis where a senior academic with an "interest in quality" took on the post for a period of time and then reverted to their academic role.   As observed by this sectoral representative, there has been a change in the profile of those fulfilling quality roles over the last fifteen years.

"people who are now fulfilling those roles are very different from the ones who were when they were first put in place. They tended to be, and I don't mean this in any disparaging way, but they tended to be the interested academic 15 years ago, who saw the benefits of a quality assurance system," (SEC3)

This view is supported by a senior leader in a degree awarding body who describes the need to have a director with sole responsibility for the role.

"we went down the road, oh, that must be 10/12 years ago now of in essence, going for a professional director of quality, somebody whose job it was to be the director of quality as opposed to what have been the case before that which would have been essentially an academic who stepped into the role" (SL1_DAB)

A parallel role within the IoT sector did not develop in the same fifteen year period. According to this sectoral representative, this lack of development was influenced by a lack of funding and the impact of the recession in the early 2010s and to a lesser degree the impact of COVID_19.

if you look at the universities, they got directors of quality, often a professorial level in the late 90s, early 2000s. Whereas, in the Institutes of Technology, they have had to scramble a little bit to get an assistant registrar role........., the time when it might have might have happened, we've had shocks to the system. You know, obviously, what last recession and now this... [COVID-19]. which might slow down that development to some degree. (SEC4)

Within the IoT sector, a number of assistant registrar posts have been created between 2018 and 2020. A reason cited by a quality professional and supported by a senior leader within the IoT sector for this renewed emphasis for the creation of a designated quality related role been influenced by the increasing workload of the Registrar role.

I would have taken over things that the registrar would have done which frees him up to do kind of more strategic things (QP12_IT)

the workload that was hitting my desk, that I just couldn't keep up with it. The workload is phenomenal.... that was really the stimulus for me, I said, I can't do this, you know, I need somebody to work with me at that level. So that was this in a nutshell, the reason for and all other bits as well, I mean, that person does assist with some policy development and works with me very closely in that area. But she pretty much manages all of the programme validation piece, which has moved off my desk, which is a huge help (SL2_IT)

The designation of institutes of technology as degree awarding bodies is provided as a reason for the recent development of a distinct role by this sectoral representative. With this designation, the responsibility for awards is separated from QQI. While the relationship with QQI had changed with the delegation of authority to make awards the move to being a degree awarding body brings with it the need to develop capacity within the IoT sector.

And I don't think people appreciate that the intimacy, you know, particularly the HETAC, IoT intimacy, which is lessened, you know, to a large degree, since QQI. have come on the scene, but every now and again, I see it flare up, you know....... And there is that parent child relationship. ......it's time you know, for the kids to leave home you know,

Some participants think that this new found responsibility is not fully realised within the sector.

it's gone from very much being minded by HETAC and using HETAC in subsequently QQI as that crutch that we lent upon and used them as this compliance exercise as regulatory exercise, and we basically need to comply with that one. It's something that have to own and something that we have to do, people realise we have to do it. I still think there is a way to go, I don't think it's pervasive yet. (SL4_IT)

Although the development of the quality role in the IoT sector has been impacted by funding, the merger of institutions as part of the Technological

University developments is viewed by this sectoral representative as having the potential to provide a mechanism for a speedy development of capacity through the redeployment of senior and middle management roles.

> there may be some scope for rejigging roles there because obviously, there will be some duplication of roles. You know, no one likes to admit it, but that is the reality. So, I would see that is an opportunity, you know, for, for beefing up quality, you know, because if you've got multiple registrars or multiple assistant registrars in a merged institution, there could be some scope for some clever rearrangement. So, we'll see how that goes... That might happen (SEC4)

The development of the quality function within the private/independent sector is a function of its relationship with QQI as an awarding body as well as with a wider quality assurance agenda. The association of the quality role with programme accreditation is particularly pronounced in the private/independent sector as it is linked to their ability to enrol students and run their programmes.

As only one linked provider is included in the sample of institutions interviewed, it is not possible to generalise as to the development of the quality function within that grouping. Similar experiences to the private/independent sector are reported where there is an importance placed on quality associated with programme accreditation. A quality function was set up by the linked provider as a result of a cyclical review recommendation in order to support and resource the requirements of the awarding body and the 2012 Act.

Institutional size also plays a part in the role of the quality function. In smaller institutions, the quality role is part of another function, usually closely aligned to the registry or academic affairs function.

6.2.1 Role Definition

In examining the role titles that survey respondents have, there is a wide variety of titles used. Even within sub-sectors, there is an inconsistent use of role title. Of the 33 respondents to the survey, 24 had distinct role

descriptions (Table 6-1). In order to preserve the anonymity of respondents, some roles have been categorised as follows.

Director of Quality: the person who has specific institutional operational responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement.

Dean/Registrar: this role has specific responsibility for quality in addition to other roles. A Director of Quality Role does not exist within their institution

Quality Officer: The holders of these roles, typically report to either the Director of Quality or Dean/Registrar role

	Organisation Type				
	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind	Total
Role Categorisation					
Academic Quality		1		1	2
Dean/Registrar			1	3	4
Director of Quality	5	4	1	4	14
Institutional Research	2				2
Quality Officer	7	1	1	2	11
Grand Total	14	6	3	10	33

Table 6-1: Categorisation of Role Descriptions of Respondents

The matter of role title and description was raised by a number of participants (n=9). According to participants, there are blurred lines of understanding in the sector relating to responsibilities that are assigned or assumed to be assigned to quality related roles. As illustrated by the quotations below from quality professionals and a senior leader, this view is held across all sub-sectors.

> "one of the big differences is that we all don't do the same thing and the same focus. So as I mentioned, we have quite a big strong

role in relation to curriculum management which isn't necessarily part of the quality remit in other organisations" (QP1_DAB)

"the biggest challenge is that it. [the role]. is ill defined. It can vary from one place to another" (QP19_IT)

"is that lack of definition and whether that's at a sectoral level or at an institution level……. there is this perception that if you are the quality person, you are the registrar, so people attach the title registrar, but then they also have these other roles that as I say, you might have QA office…. or you know whatever title makes sense to them, but it's got no real meaning," (SL10_PI)

As discussed later, this lack of role definition has an impact on the influence of the quality professional, inter-organisational communication, and professional identity.

6.2.2 Organisational Placement of the Quality Function

According to survey respondents, 25% of the higher education institutions represented in the sample do not have a dedicated quality office. As outlined in Figure 6-1, most institutions without a dedicated quality office are found in private/independent institutions. Although five of the six IoTs that are represented in the survey have a quality office, a desk review of institutions' websites, found that a number of institutes of technology do not have dedicated quality functions. Almost all o of degree awarding institutions have a dedicated quality office. The reasons for this and the evolution of the development of the quality functions have been described above.

Percentage of Institutions with a Dedicated Quality Office

	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
Yes	10	5	1	5
No		1	1	4
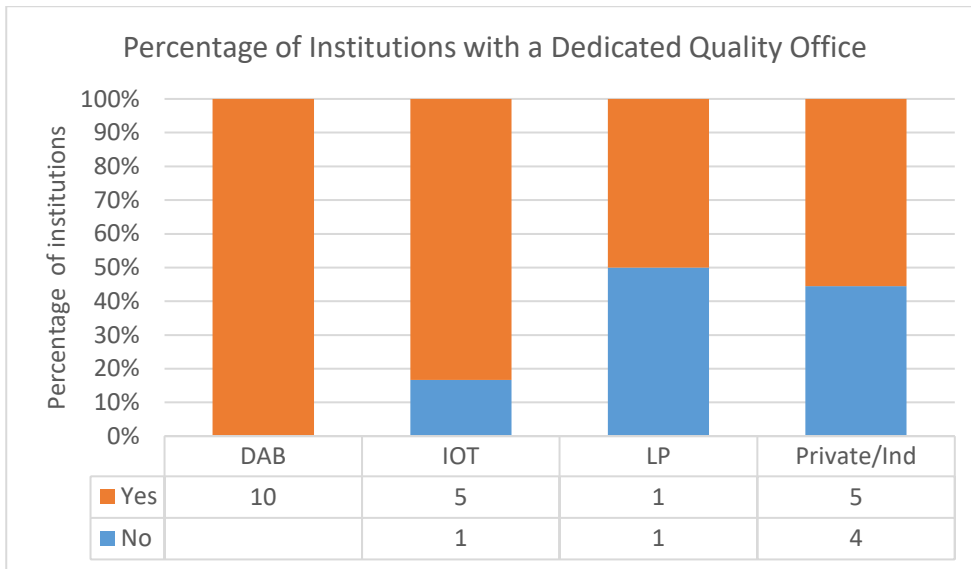
Figure 6-1: Percentage of Represented Institutions with a Dedicated Quality Office

Where a dedicated quality function exists, it is predominantly placed as reporting to a Vice Presidential or the Registrar role within the higher education institution. In the case of one institution, the role is placed as reporting directly to the most senior role within the institution. In HEIs where a dedicated quality function does not exist, quality activities are reported as being managed within the Registrar's Office in all cases.

Organisational Placement of Quality Function

	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
Vice President's Office	3			1
Teaching & Learning	1			
Registrar's Office	5	5	1	4
President's Office	1			
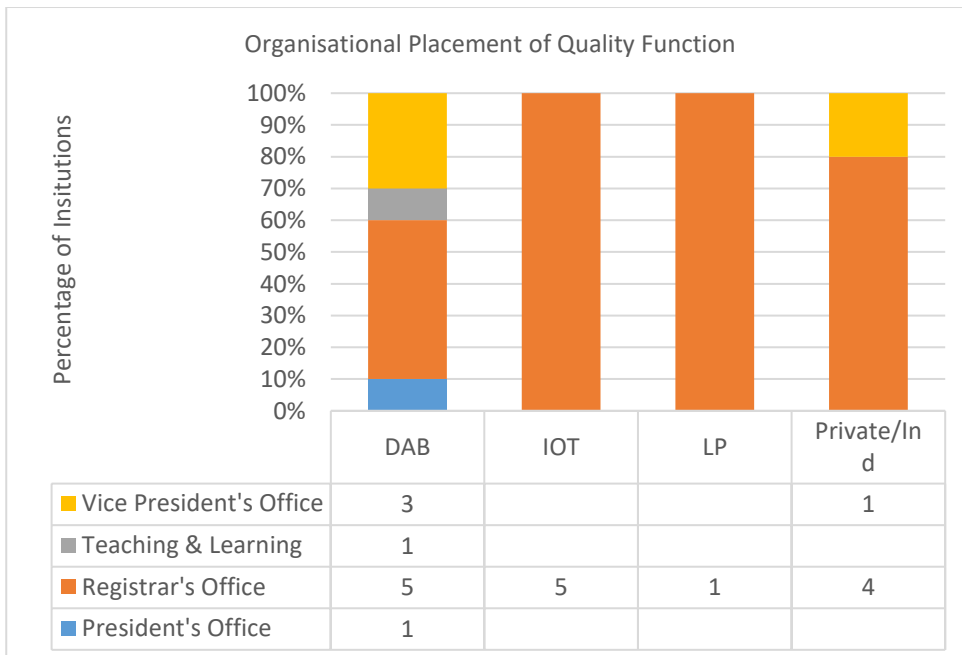
Figure 6-2: Organisational Placement of the Quality Function

It is interesting to note that within the DAB sector, where the quality offices had initially been seen to be best placed in the President's Office, (IUQB, 2008) in order to be apolitical that this is now true in only one of the represented institutions.

This neutral or impartial aspect of the quality role is important to quality professionals and forms part of the trust that they build with stakeholders. QP17_DAB illustrates how maintaining confidentiality within a quality process shows this impartiality.

> We had one review, it was at the very beginning, one of the first few over the first years. And the department really weren't engaging. But I had a sense of why they weren't. And I went and spoke to the head of department, and I said look I think the problem is X and the person said yes that's correct, we are concerned. Because of something else that had happened. And then I kind of built a relationship with that person and reassured them actually that is not the purpose of these reviews. And we have successfully refused, I'd say senior management would love to see this self-assessment report. And we successfully refused that. We didn't give it to them. (QP17_DAB)

A sectoral representative highlights the importance of the independent of assistant registrars with responsibility for quality within in the Institutes of Technology where the assistant registrar roles report to the Registrar. They believe that this independent is not yet achieved.

> an assistant registrar would still be under the registrar. So, it hasn't yet got that clout where it could be. It could be reviewing the Registrar and his unit. And I think it has to get to that point. (SEC4)

Where there is a dedicated quality function, quality offices range in size. Figure 6-3 shows that 58% of survey respondents work in a function staffed by 4 or more people.
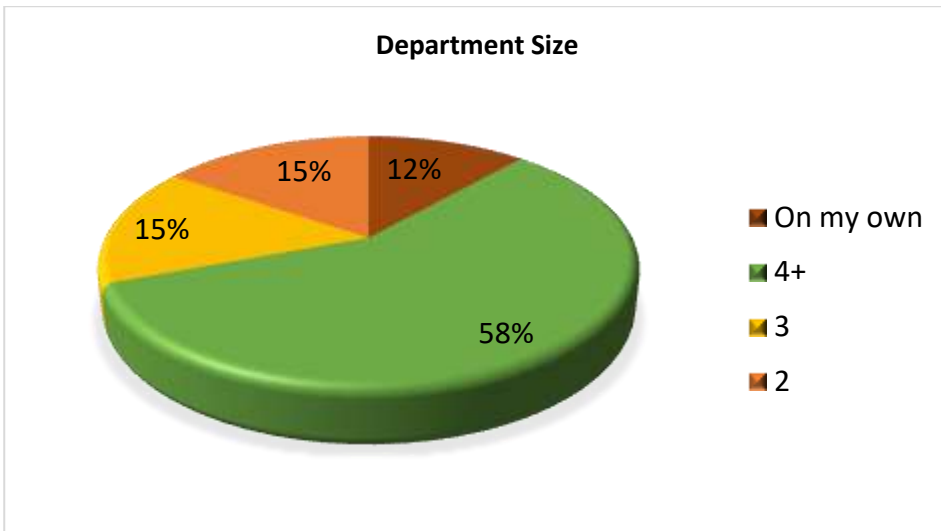
Figure 6-3: Size of the Quality Department

Examining this data by institution type shows that the DAB institutions tend to have the larger quality offices, which is unsurprising due to the size of the institutions (Figure 6.4).

	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
On my own	1	1		1
4+	11	2		2
3	1	1	1	1
2	1	1		2
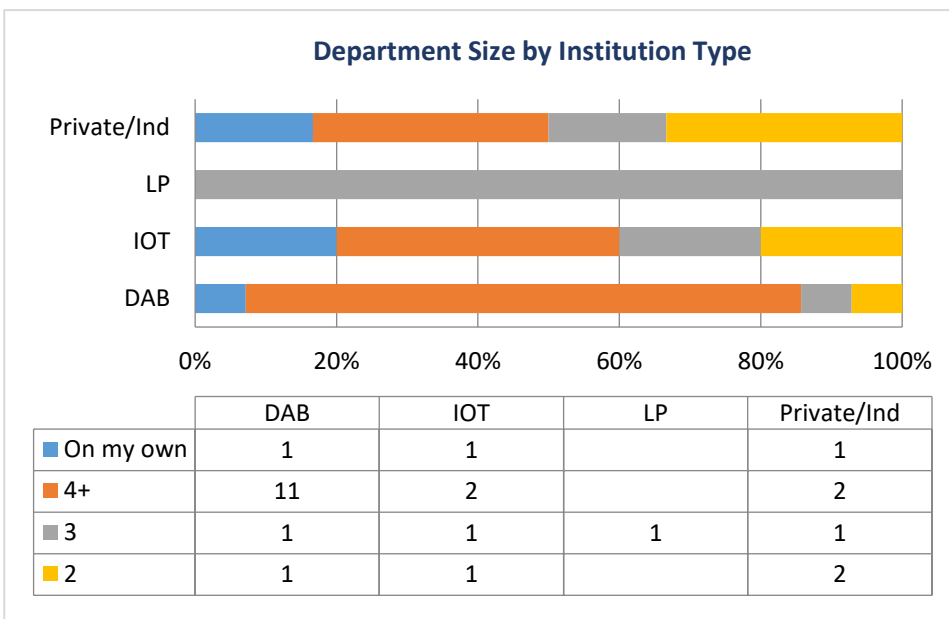
Figure 6-4: Quality Department Size by Institution Type

This finding shows that in the main, participants work as part of a team, however there are institutions where the quality professional works on their own or in smaller teams of 2-3 people. Within the IoT sector, the quality office is seen as a function of the Registrar's Office, so while the quality professional is part of a wider team, they tend to have individual responsibility for the specific quality related tasks.

The staffing and resourcing of quality functions has an impact on the kind of quality work that the quality professional can be involved with and their capacity to be involved in activities other than meeting the basic requirements of the statutory function.

6.2.3 Role Categorisation

Survey participants were asked how their organisation categorised their role within the roles traditionally assigned within academic institutions. The options provided were 'Academic', 'Administrative' or 'Professional Services'. A category of 'other' was provided to allow participants provide their own categorisation. Table 6-4 shows that quality roles are categorised across all categories with the term 'hybrid' introduced by 4 respondents to the survey.

Role Categorisation	No. of Participants
Academic	11
Administrative	11
Hybrid	4
Professional Services	7
Total	33

Table 6-2: How quality roles are institutionally reported/categorised

6.2.4 Maturity of the System

Survey respondents were asked to identify how long their post existed within their institution's quality architecture. As can be seen from Figure 6-5, over 50% of respondents' roles have been created within the past 10 years. This illustrates the relatively recent development of the quality role across much of the higher education system.

Duration of Post Existence

	Total
■ 1 year	3
■ 10+ years	13
■ 2-4 years	7
■ 5-7 years	5
■ 8-9 years	3
■ Don't know	2
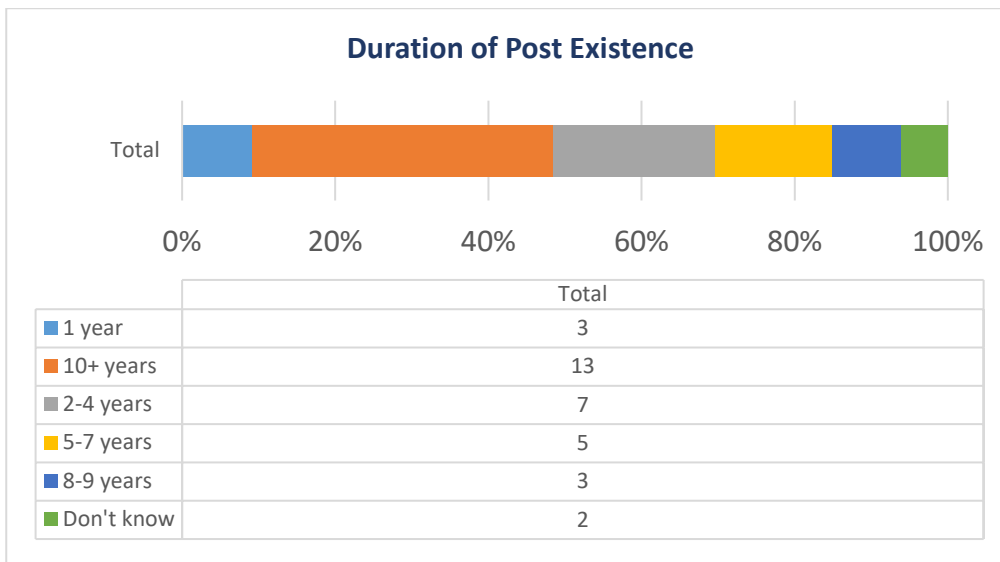
Figure 6-5: Duration of Post Existence - All respondents

When broken down by organisation type, table 6-5 shows that the DAB sector has added six posts in recent years. 1 post has been created within the IoT sector and 3 in the private/independent sector.

Duration	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind	Total
1 year		1		2	3
2-4 years	6			1	7
5-7 years	1	1	1	2	5
8-9 years	1	1		1	3
10+years	5	3	2	3	13
Don't know	1			1	2
Total	14	6	3	10	33

Table 6-3:: Duration of Post Existence by Organisation Type

Although the quality structures are somewhat mature particularly in the DAB sector, respondents' experience in post demonstrates that a significant number of respondents are new to their current role, with 61% of respondents having four or less years of experience in their current post (Figure 6.6).

114
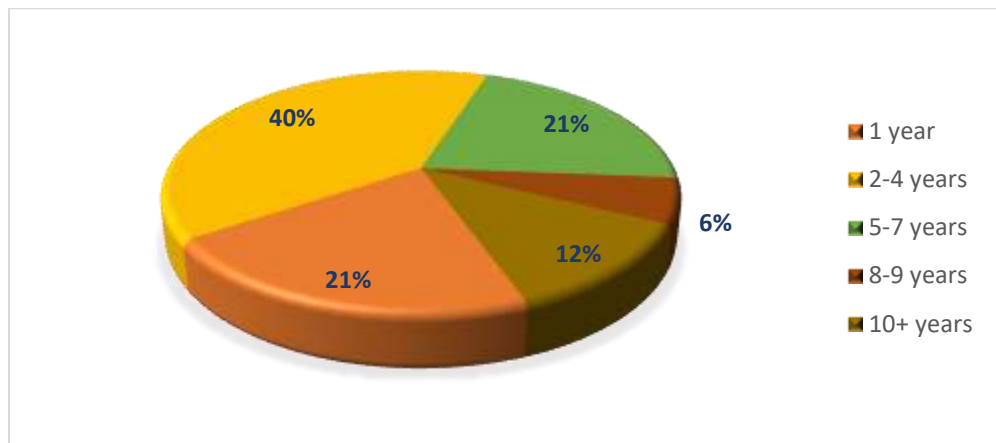
Figure 6-6: QA professionals experience in current post

Lack of experience in role was referred to by a number of participants during interview. This senior leader highlighted a lack of experience at senior management level within the IoT sector. This points to a need for training or mentorship for new incumbents.

> And we're beginning to see that now in the IOT sector, which, in the last few years in particular, (sic) a huge amount of change in the registrars and the and the level of inexperience is actually a worry (SL2_IT)

6.2.5 Professional Profile of Quality Professionals

As can be seen from Figure 6.7, 91% of survey respondents are educated to postgraduate level, with 42% holding a level 10 qualification on the national framework of qualifications across a range of subject disciplines. 3 of 33 survey respondents have a specific qualification in the quality field with 4 respondents citing qualifications in change management, teaching, and learning and project management as relevant to the role.
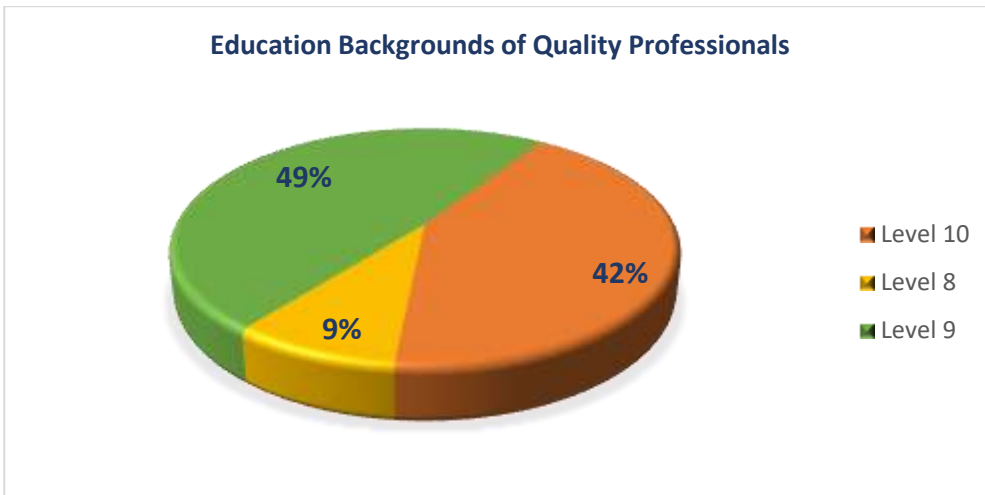
Figure 6-7: Education Background of Quality Professionals

Figure 6-7 shows the range of roles that respondents had prior to taking up their current role. These mainly come from a variety of roles within the higher education sector with three respondents taking up their role from outside higher education, two of which were in a quality role.
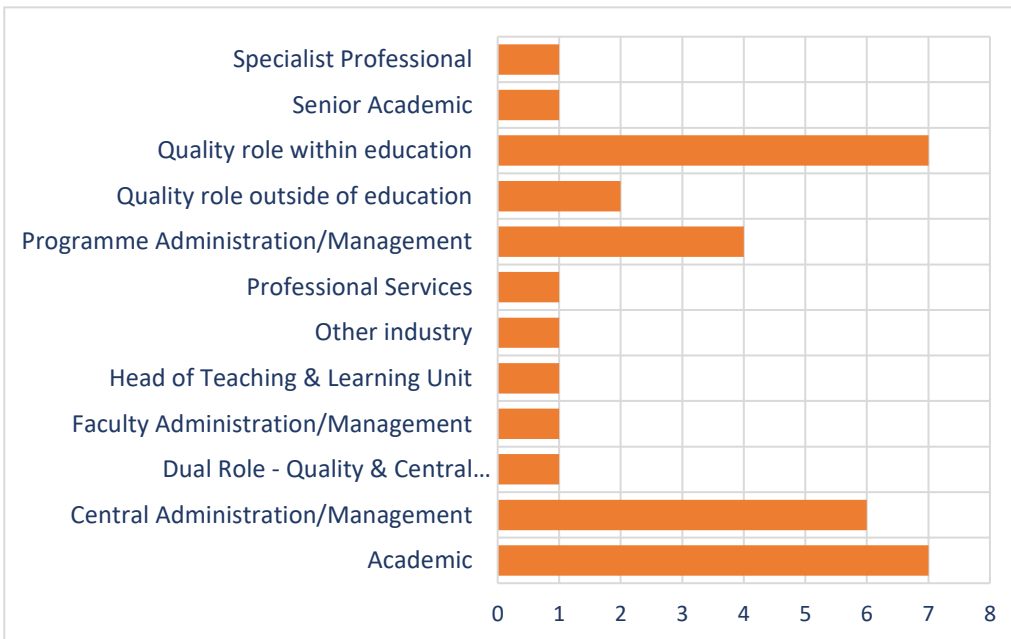
Figure 6-8: Role prior to taking up current role

Seven respondents demonstrate previous experience in quality roles within education with eight others coming from an academic background. The remaining respondents come from a range of central administration,

programme administration and other professional services roles. Looking more closely at the previous experience of those holding day to day operational responsibility for quality (Directors of Quality and Deans/Registrars), Table 6-4 shows that that only 25% of those holding the senior quality role have experience in a quality role within education prior to taking up their role.

Previous Experience Prior to Taking Current Role	Number Respondents with Senior Quality Role
Academic	6
Central Administration/Management	4
Faculty Administration/Management	1
Head of Teaching & Learning Unit	1
Professional Services	1
Programme Administration/Management	1
Quality role within education	5
Specialist Professional	1
Total	**20**

Table 6-4: Prior Roles of those with Responsibility for Quality

When the institutional type is taken into consideration, the holders of the role with operational responsibility for quality in the private/independent sector are most likely to have held quality roles within education prior to taking on their current role as shown in Figure 6.9. This is possibly explained by more movement within these roles in the private/independent sector.

.

Senior Quality Professional Role Prior to Taking on Current Role

	DAB	IOT	LP		Private/Ind	
	Director of Quality	Director of Quality	Dean/Registrar	Director of Quality	Dean/Registrar	Director of Quality
Academic	1	2			1	
Central Administration/Management	3		1			
Faculty Administration/Management		1				
Head of Teaching & Learning Unit		1				
Professional Services						1
Programme Administration/Management				1		
Quality role within education	1				1	3
Specialist Professional					1	

Figure 6-9: Roles held by Senior Quality Professional Prior to taking Current Role

The professional background of participants was explored further during the interview phase. For most participants, their arrival into their current role was seen as a natural career progression from previous roles. Of the 23 participants interviewed only two indicated that entering a quality related role was a deliberate career choice. For all others, the common denominator was firstly that they had worked in higher education in a range of roles and the quality related role was seen as an area to move into.

A common trajectory for participants is a move from programme administration and management (n=4) and central administration (n=5) into quality related roles. A background in the administrative running of programmes was perceived by participants to provide a strong foundation in understanding the requirements for quality work as explained by these quality professionals from the private/independent and DAB sectors.

> "I worked in a department that focussed on teaching enhancement and teaching support and got very interested in the area of kind of programme development and everything that informed, kind of assessment strategy design and how the world of education programmes came together and from that did a course in, an SPA in, it was programme development as assessment essentially. And that got me really interested in quality and I ended moving into a quality role from there.". (QP2_PI)

> "I was responsible for helping academic staff develop new program proposals and get them through the appropriate approval routes. So I did that for a long time, probably almost ten years and then in, I think it was January 2016, I moved across to quality. I really kind of came into it, I was almost kind of reassigned to quality and mainly because, I think, because of my background in program development and I think quality assurance program review, all of that and collaborative programs". (QP10_DAB)

Interest in quality roles from those who came from an academic background (n=12) came as a result of exposure to and interest in programme and curriculum development and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

So I suppose there had been a natural graduation towards it when I started out as lecturer and moving up to principal lecturer and one of my principal lecturer positions gave me some head of department responsibility. So there was a lot of QA around programmes in that role and then that extended into QA of programmes with collaborative providers if you like (SL10_PI)

Moving into a quality related role also provided a progression opportunity for those in academic roles within their institutions.

"I was I should say a lecturer in the department of applied sciences here in [institution] for 20 years. And always had an interest in programme development. There was I suppose a significant aspect of quality assurance always associated with that in terms of the whole processing of it. So in that, and I suppose after 20 years of working became very familiar with institute regulations. It seemed a natural progression when the position arose in the area of quality". (QP20_IT)

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6.3 What is Quality Work?

In order to understand the categories of work (Anteby et al ,2016) undertaken by quality professionals, survey respondents were asked to select the frequency with which they undertook activities that are recognised as 'quality work' within the literature. These range from policy creation and guidance, peer review activities and institutional representation. Figure 6-10 shows that collectively, process reviews, proofing of programme specification documents, organisation of programme validation and quality review events, policy development and representation are considered as a 'core activity' by respondents.

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Range of Quality Work undertaken by Quality Professionals
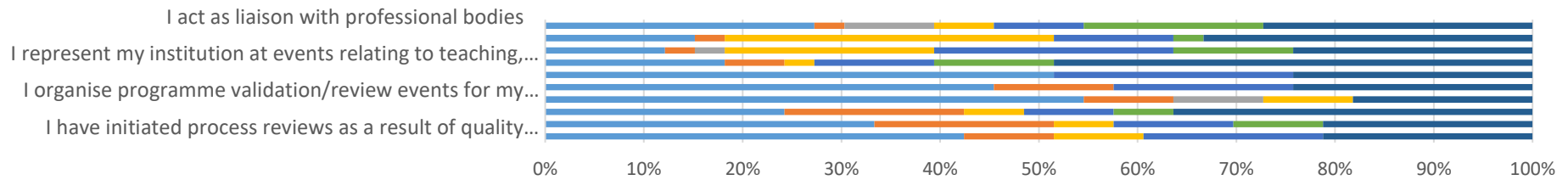
	I have initiated process reviews as a result of quality assurance or enhancement activities	I proof programme validation or specification documents on behalf of programme developers	I advise programme developers on the content of programmes and modules	I organise programme validation/review events for my institution	I research and develop policy for all parts of my institution	I represent my institution at events relating to quality assurance and enhancement	I represent my institution at events relating to teaching, learning and assessment	I act as a reviewer for other education institutions	I act as a reviewer within my own institution	I act as liaison with professional bodies
■ Core Activity	14	11	8	18	15	17	6	4	5	9
■ Done by Another role in Unit	3	6	6	3	4		2	1	1	1
■ Done by Another role in Organisation				3				1		3
■ Never	3	2	2	3			1	7	11	2
■ Often	6	4	3		6	8	4	8	4	3
■ Rarely		3	2				4	4	1	6
■ Sometimes	7	7	12	6	8	8	16	8	11	9

Figure 6-10: Quality Work undertaken by Quality Professionals

When examined by a sectoral lens, a divergence in the focus of activities can be observed.

This activity data is presented below and categorised as organisational quality activities and academic quality activities. A need to categorise and differentiate between institutional or organisational quality and academic quality activities became evident during discussions with quality professionals and with senior leaders in order to understand what are considered as the boundaries of the responsibilities of quality professionals.

> "I think it's an institution wide role, rather than necessarily being in no-man's-land, it doesn't necessarily sit in any one particular part of the institution. But I mean arguably neither does things like I suppose human resources or something that you could argue in that way as well. But I don't feel like it's left floating out in the ether, but nor is it sat in one particular area either. And maybe that's part of the shift about what quality is. Because before it used to just be about as I say the compliance that was about programmes and the students. Whereas now there is a better understanding that it's about the overall institution". (SL10_PI)

6.3.1 Institutional Quality Activities

Figure 6-11 demonstrates that survey respondents are frequent initiators of operational process reviews arising from quality assurance or enhancement activities with 60% of respondents undertaking this activity as a core activity or often. 9% of respondents did not initiate process reviews.

I have initiated process reviews as a result of QA/E activities

	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
■ Core Activity	5	4	2	3
■ Done by Another role in Unit	2			1
■ Never	1	1		1
■ Often	2		1	3
■ Sometimes	4	1		2
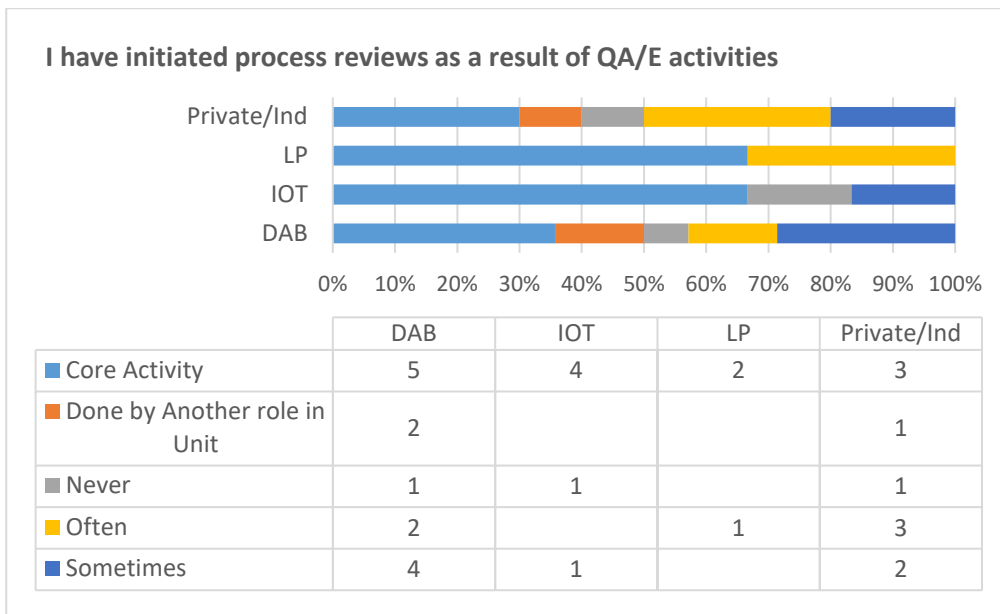
Figure 6-11: Frequency of Process Initiation by Organisation Type

Institution wide policy development is undertaken by quality professionals with two thirds of respondents stating that it is a core activity, or one often undertaken. Within the DAB and Linked Provider institutions, 4 respondents state that this role is undertaken by another role outside of the unit responsible for quality. (Figure 6-12).

I research and develop policy for all parts of my organisation

	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
■ Core Activity	5	4		6
■ Done by Another Role in Organisation	3		1	
■ Often	3		2	1
■ Sometimes	3	2		3
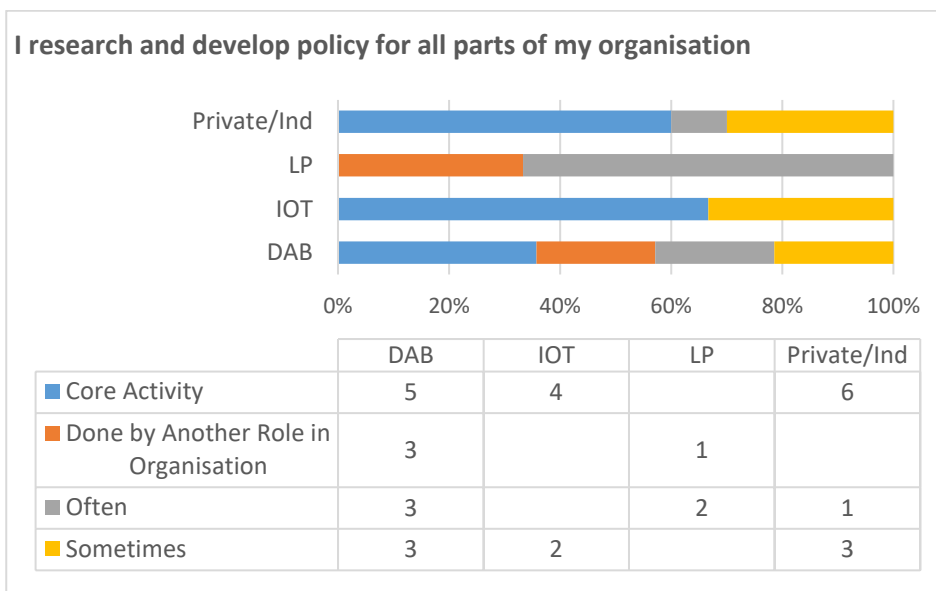
Figure 6-12: Frequency of policy development by organisation type

Quality professionals represent their institution through attendance at quality assurance and enhancement events and by acting as quality reviewers in other institutions. Figure 6-13 shows that 100% of respondents

124

have represented their institution with 75% of them considering it as a core or often activity.

	I represent my institution at events relating to QA/E			
	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
▇ Core Activity	7	3	1	6
▇ Often	4	1		3
▇ Sometimes	3	2	2	1
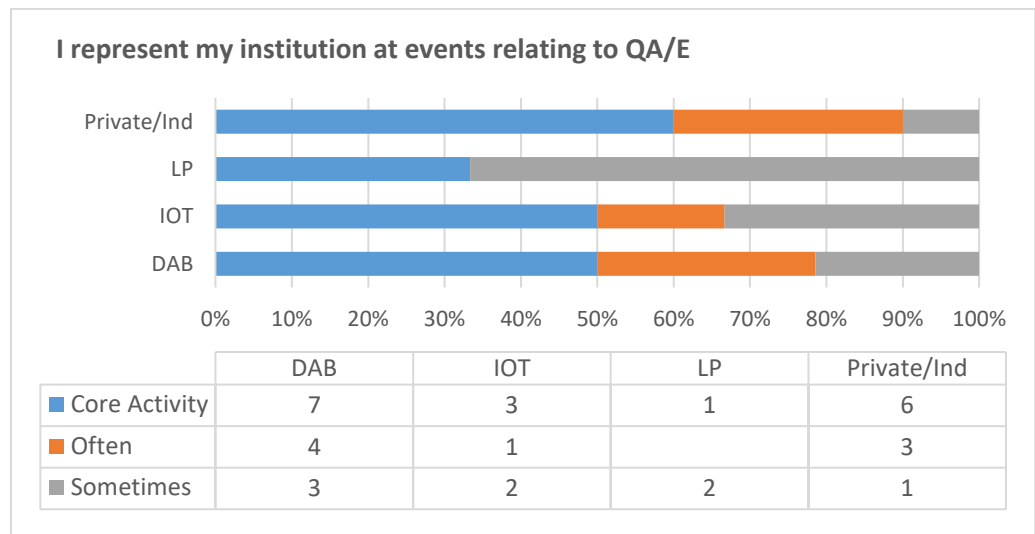
Figure 6-13: Frequency of institutional representation at QA/E events

Representation as a reviewer for other institutions is not considered a core activity and shows more mixed representation. Of those that responded to the survey, this activity is undertaken more frequently as a core or often activity by survey respondents in the private/independent sector than in the other sectors. 7 of 15 participants from the DAB sector have never or rarely undertaken external reviewer roles (Figure 6.14),

I act as a reviewer for other education institutions

	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
■ Core Activity	1	1		2
■ Done by Another Role in Organisation				1
■ Done by Another role in Unit	1			
■ Never	5		1	1
■ Often	2	1	1	4
■ Rarely	2	1		1
■ Sometimes	3	3	1	1
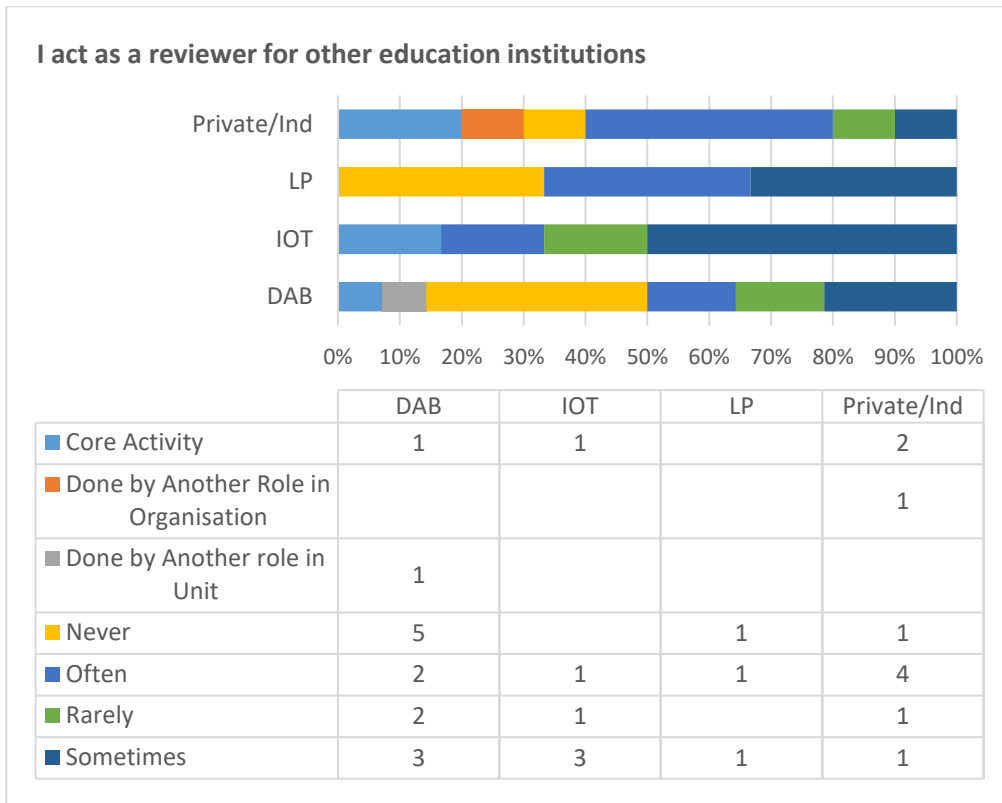
Figure 6-14: Frequency of participation as reviewer for other institutions

Acting as a reviewer within their own institution is an activity that is carried out less frequently in all sectors than being a reviewer for another institution as demonstrated by Figure 6-15. It is more common within the IoT sector than in the DAB and private/independent sector. Not acting as an internal reviewer is often dictated by institutional policy which precludes quality professionals from taking part in reviews as reviewer or where reviewer externality is a matter of policy. In some institutions, quality professionals take a role in internal review processes or 'mock' reviews in advance of external quality assurance processes.

I act as a reviewer in my own institution

	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
■ Core Activity	2	2		1
■ Done by Another role in Unit	1			
■ Never	7		1	3
■ Often	1		1	2
■ Rarely		1		
■ Sometimes	3	3	1	4
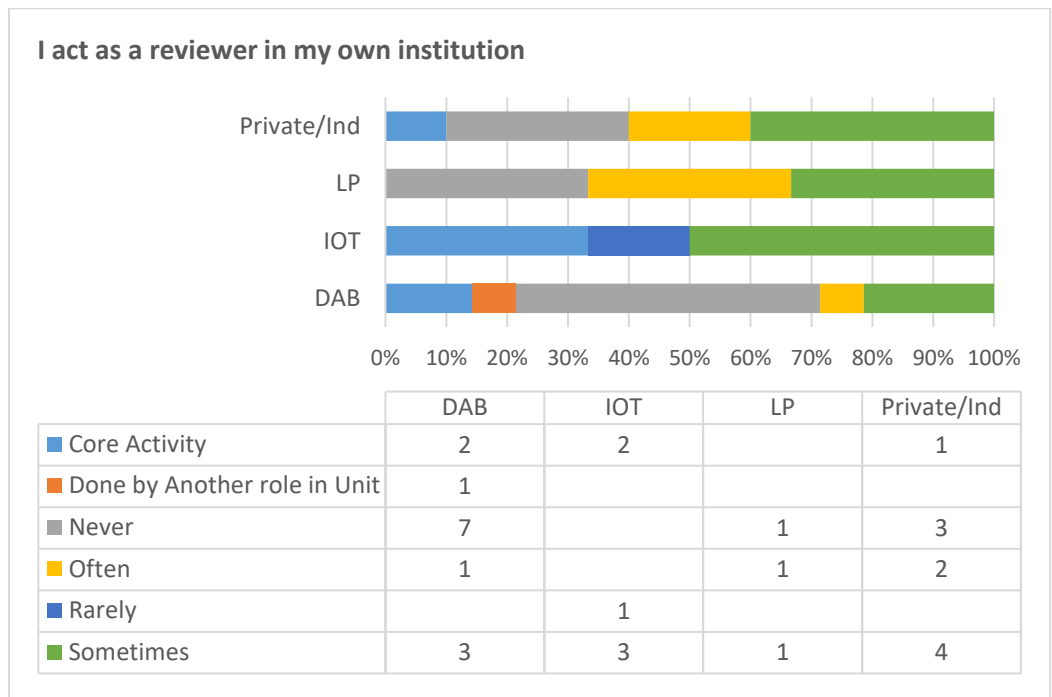
Figure 6-15: Frequency of Acting as a Reviewer

6.3.2 Collaborative Provision

Participants were asked at interview if there were activities that they undertook that were not presented as options within the survey. An area identified by some participants was the quality assurance activity required to support collaborative provision of programmes. These activities can be seen as very burdensome and bring increased risk to institutions.

With regard to institutional quality matters, the findings suggest that the activities and tasks that quality professionals undertake are similar across all sectors with some variations which are institutionally rather than sectorally related.

6.3.3 Academic Quality Activities

Figures 6-16 to 6.19-demonstrate a greater involvement by quality professionals in programmatic activities in the IoT and Private/Independent sectors than in the DABs, particularly in the University sector.

Looking at activities that can be described as 'academic' quality, the difference in focus in the role of quality professionals in different sectors can be observed. Figure 6-16 shows that within the private/independent

sector, quality professionals play a significant role in document preparation in advance of programme validation. 90% of participants from the private/independent sector proof read documentation on behalf of programme developers as a core or often activity. This activity is also prominent within the IoT sector where 83% of respondents undertake the activity as a core activity or sometimes. Within the DAB sector, 36% of respondents considered this activity to be the role of another part of the institution. 14% of DAB respondents have never carried out this activity.

I proof read programme validation or specification documents on behalf of programme developers

	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
■ Core Activity	2	1	1	7
■ Done by Another Role in Organisation	5		1	
■ Never	2			
■ Often	1		1	2
■ Rarely	2	1		
■ Sometimes	2	4		1
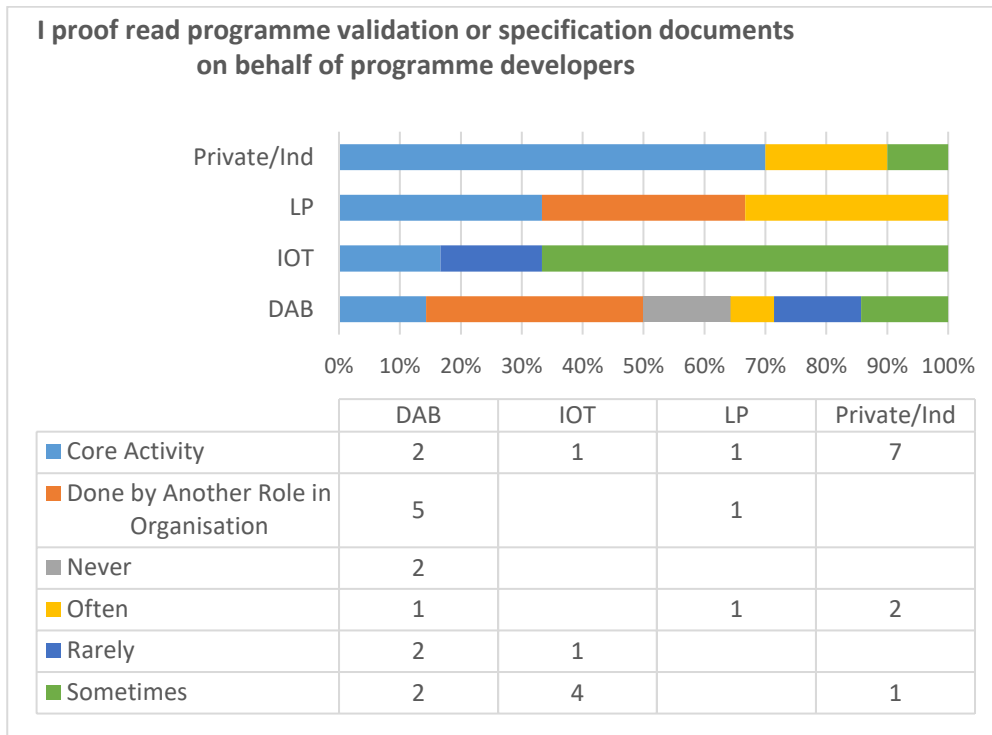
Figure 6-16: Frequency of programme document proofing by organisation type

The provision of advice on module and programme content is more likely to be provided by quality professionals in the private/independent sector and IoT sector than by those in the DAB sector. Figure 6.17 shows that 70% of quality professionals in the private/independent sector consider this a core activity whereas only 14% of respondents in the DAB sector do. This activity is carried out by other roles within the institution and is not a core activity for quality practitioners in these HEIs

I advise programme developers on the content of programmes and modules

	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
■ Core Activity	1	3		4
■ Done by Another Role in Organisation	5		1	
■ Never	2			
■ Often	1		1	1
■ Rarely	2			
■ Sometimes	3	3	1	5
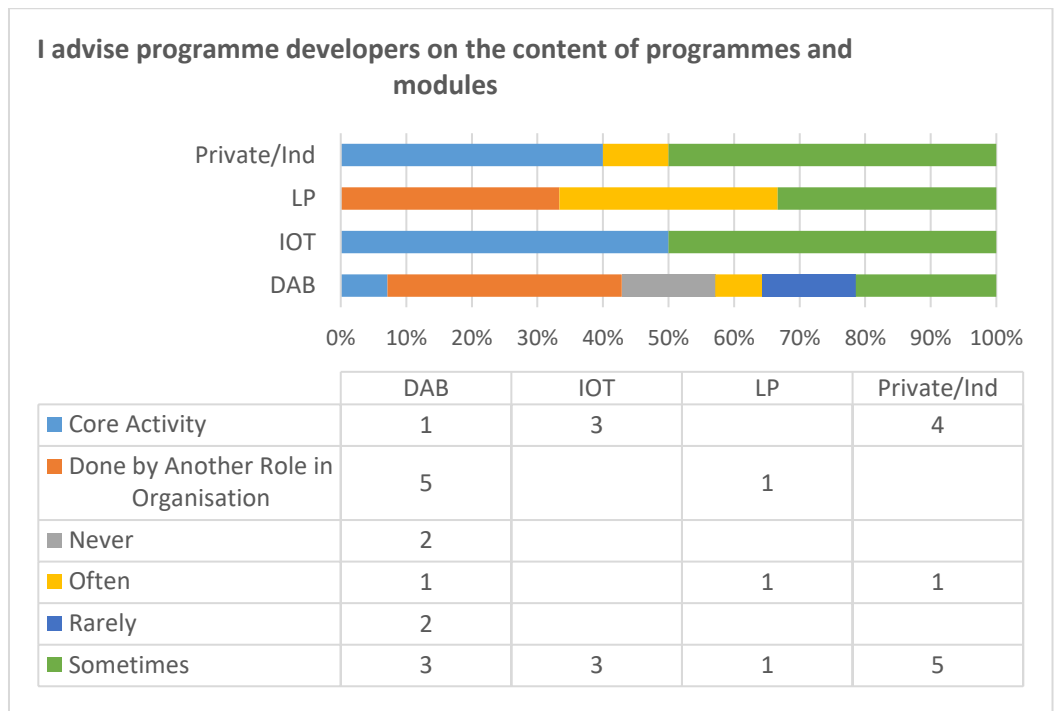
Figure 6-17: Frequency of advisement on programme and module content

Quality assurance professionals across all sectors are likely to be involved in the organisation of programme related quality assurance events, with 54% of participants considering this activity as core. However, within the DAB sector, only 5 respondents consider this a core activity with of these events are likely to be organised outside of the unit responsible for quality. This was further explored at interview and confirmed that within the Universities, programme based validation or reviews are organised locally by academic units. (Figure 6-18)

I organise programme validation/review events for my institution

	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
Core Activity	5	4	1	8
Done by Another Role in Organisation	3			
Done by Another role in Unit	2		1	
Never	2			1
Sometimes	2	2	1	1
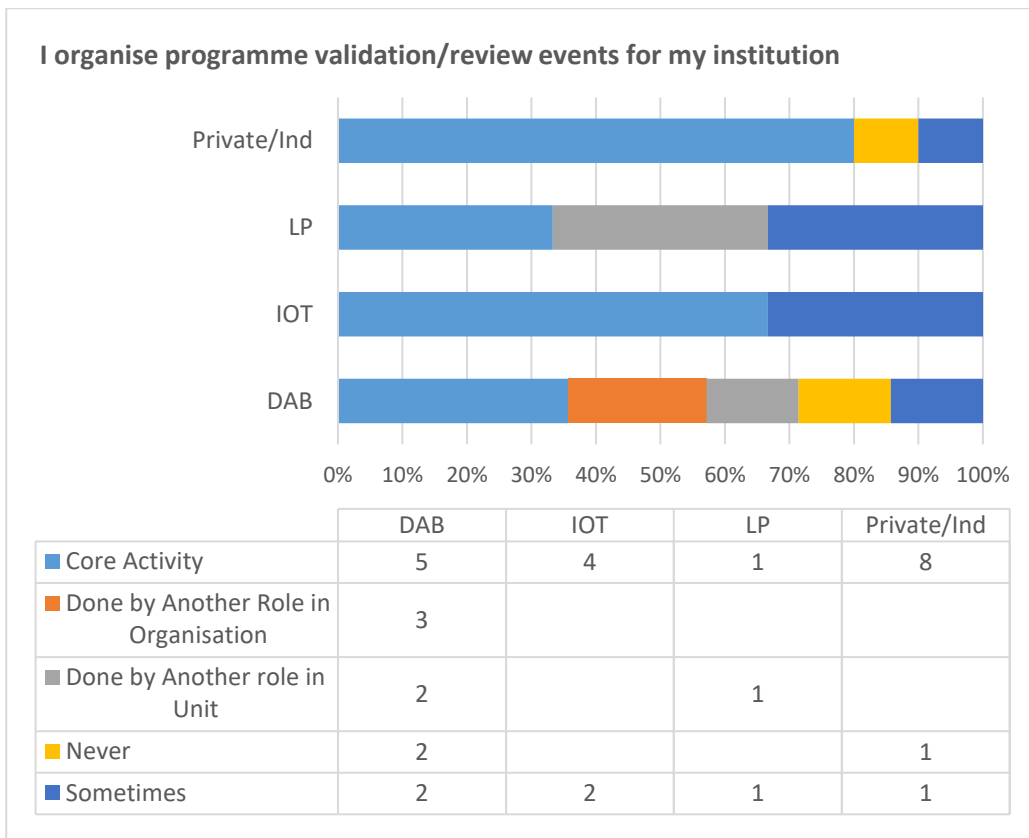
Figure 6-18: Frequency of organisation of review events by organisation type

This divergence of emphasis on institutional versus academic quality activity is further demonstrated in Figure 6-19 where representation by quality professionals at events relating to teaching, learning and assessment is considered a core activity by six respondents in the private/independent and institute of technology sectors. It is not considered a core activity by any of the DAB respondents or Linked Provider respondents. For those in the DAB sector, nine of fifteen respondents classify this activity as one that they undertake 'sometimes' or 'rarely'.

I represent my institution at events relating to teaching, learning and assessment

	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
Core Activity		3		3
Done by Another Role in Organisation	1		1	
Never	1			
Often	3			1
Rarely	3	1		
Sometimes	6	2	2	6
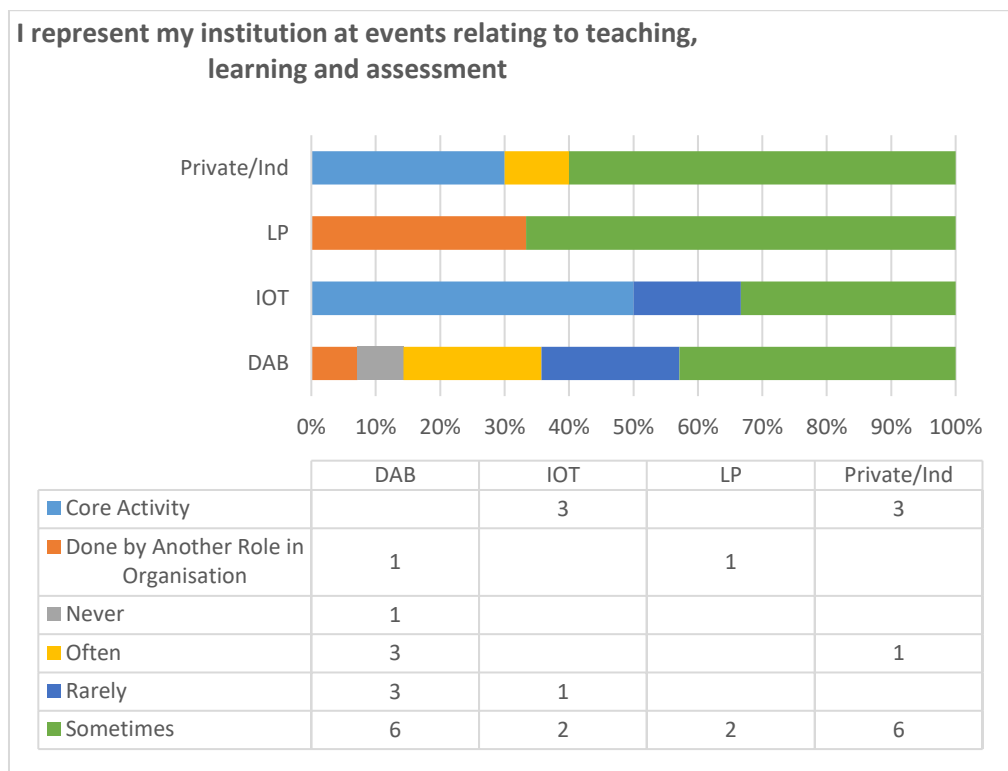
Figure 6-19: Frequency of representation at teaching, learning and assessment events

This divergence of emphasis on academic quality between the DABs and other sectors was further explored through the interview process. Interview participants noted that the genesis of the establishment of quality roles within each of the sectors provided some explanation for this. As described earlier, quality roles were created within the university sector to meet the specific requirements of the 1997 Universities Act which introduced cyclical review of university departments. These reviews include both academic and support departments. Quality assurance activities within the institute of technology sector and private/independent sector tended to be and still is, inextricably linked with the validation and re-validation of programmes by QQI and its predecessors HETAC and NCEA, whether qualifications are awarded directly or through delegated authority. This sectoral representative believes that this focus has begun to converge due to the requirements of the 2012 Act which requires all higher education institutions to engage in cyclical reviews of their departments:

> "what has been going on for a long period now is a sort of a meeting in the middle, I think between QA effectively centred

around programme validation, which I think is the HETAC, NCEA/HETAC tradition. And QQI in a sense, has brought under its wings, those two traditions, you know, and in a sense, I think my reading of it is in what they've been trying to do over a period of time is get the programme review providers to sort of move more towards unit review type activities. And then the universities on the other hand then to get them to do more on programme approval. (SEC4)

6.3.3.1 Professional Body Accreditation

Twelve of thirty-three survey respondents consider liaison with professional bodies as an activity that they undertake as a core or often activity. A further three respondents indicated that this activity is undertaken within the unit responsible for quality.

I act as liaison with professional bodies

	DAB	IOT	LP	Private/Ind
▰ Core Activity	3	2		4
▰ Done by Another Role in Organisation			1	
▰ Done by Another role in Unit	2			1
▰ Never	1	1		
▰ Often	2			1
▰ Rarely	3	2		1
▰ Sometimes	3	1	2	3
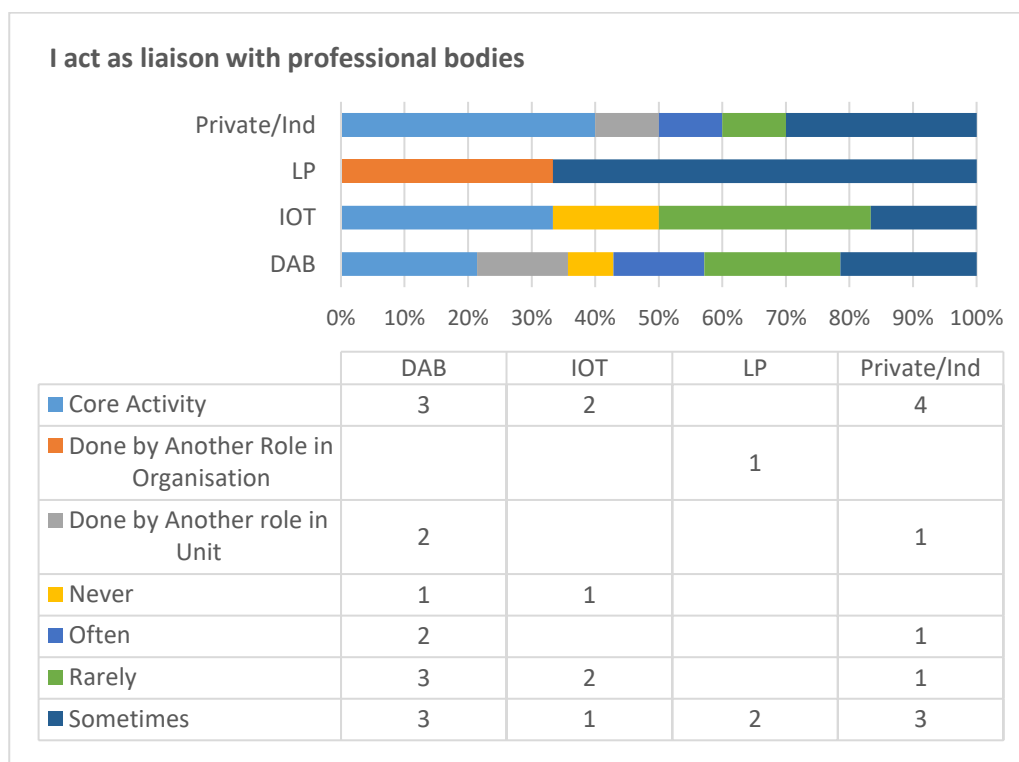
Figure 6-20: Frequency of liaison with professional bodies

During interview the role of professional body accreditation as an external quality assurance process and its impact on institutions was raised by participants within the context of the workload of quality assurance and enhancement experienced in institutions. Institutions experience a sense of overlap of function between internal quality assurance processes of

academic programme accreditation and the requirements of the external professional accreditation body

These requirements may conflict, and the schedules of review processes can lead to cycles of perennial review which adds to negative perceptions of the quality agenda.

> I suppose the idea there of the professional body and the regulatory body is well working out of sync with each other. But in order to be part of one you have to have approval from the other first. In other instances, that seems to happen the other way around, where you have to have the professional before you can get the regulatory. So it would be really helpful for providers, yes, if there could be some streamlining there. Some agreement on when and what has to be done. (QP21_PI)

This observation from a participant in the private sector highlights the lack of control that the private providers have over the programme validation cycle with an external awarding body, where DABs are perceived to have more flexibility to manage review fatigue.

> the accreditation processes don't always align and that's something that the private sector can suffer from a bit more than other providers. If your academic validation doesn't align with your professional accreditation, you can just be in a cycle of perpetual review. If you're looking at programmes being reviewed every five years and then, professional bodies you know, with accounting there's multiple bodies if you want to offer multiple accreditation, that's multiple events, multiple standards (QP22_PI)

These frustrations are not exclusive to the private/independent providers. The interplay and power struggles between the awarding body and professional body over a programme can produce poor quality outcomes and add to a negative view of 'quality in the HEI according to a participant from a degree awarding body:

My own experience with them has been limited and for the limited experience, profoundly frustrating. The determination to look after their professional code is really good and really important but their belief that that determination has to be manifested by ignoring their interception with the academic approver/regulator/body whatever way you want to express it is completely exaggerated. And it is causing lack of quality. I have seen umpteen examples of really bad programme design driven by a professional body accreditation. Appalling stuff and including things that were referred back to the national regulator who basically said yeah, it is crazy, but we have to live with it. And that is very disappointing. And that is far too Irish. That is, you know, again a feature of our smallness. (QP16_DAB)

This experience of tension between primacy the academic accreditation and professional accreditation is also felt within the IoT sector as illustrated by this quality professional.

'in terms of the accounting and engineering, often times they deal directly with the departments and so on and there is always some tension there between, which is the more important one to do their validation with us or their accreditation with the professional body and we point out that the accreditation only sits on top of a validated programme. It doesn't come first; it's the validation comes first (QP15_IT)

QP15_IT also observes that the role of the quality office in professional accreditation is often overlooked as the professional relationships between academic departments and the professional body are based on communications regarding professional accreditation. While the academic quality activity is being managed, the requirements of institutional quality and institutional oversight can be overlooked in this arrangement.

I think professional bodies by and large tend to go to the discipline first and deal with their head of faculty. We generally are asked to come to meetings when the panel are here and explain the quality systems that we have an external examining of course, managing reports and stuff like that. But they tend to

deal directly... [with the department] ..., except CORU. CORU come directly to us.' (QP15_IT)

One senior leader however makes the point that it is appropriate for professional accreditation to be managed within the local academic environment, but that collaboration is key to ensuring that the process is managed appropriately.

"but again, I suppose that comes back to relationships and collaboration, and, you know, I suppose, trying as much as possible to, to, I suppose, really make sure that everybody understands that a collaborative approach is taken to the .... accreditation process.... Because again, I suppose the emphasis of .... the professional body accreditation is often a little bit different. You know, so, so, therefore, the, I suppose the ownership of it, you know, rightly sits in a slightly different place" (SL3_PI)

As this study was being completed, QQI has proposed a set of principles which providers and professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) can endorse and use a framework to discuss how internal quality assurance activities and those of PSRBs based in Ireland can be streamlined.

6.3.4 Frequency of Activities

Survey respondents were asked to undertake a simple ranking the activities that they undertake by order of frequency, with 1 being most frequent and 8 being least frequent. Figure 6.21 illustrates that across the four sectors, the most frequently undertaken task is to provide advice and guidance on the interpretation of policy or regulation. This is followed in second place by the organisation of quality reviews. The least frequently performed tasks are devising or revising institution wide policy and writing self-evaluation reports.

When this data is analysed by sector, the organisation of reviews is considered by participants in DABs to be the activity that they carry out most, followed by advice and guidance on policy interpretation (Figure 6.22). Within the private/independent sector, (Figure 6.25) the advice and guidance on policy interpretation is weighted far more heavily, followed by

the revision of process and the management of validation events. Within the Institute of Technology sector, (Figure 6.23) advice and guidance, management of quality reviews and management of validation events are given equal weighting by participants.

Ranking of Tasks Undertaken

	Advice and guidance on interpretation of policy or regulation	Organistion of institutional reviews	Devising institutional policy	Managing validation events	Advice on teaching, learning and assessment matters	Devising or revising business processes/proced ures within my own department	Devising or Revising institution wide business processes/proced ures	Writing self evaluation reports
1	24.2	18.2	15.2	12.1	12.1	12.1	6.1	
2	30.3	9.1	15.2	15.2	3	15.2	6.1	6.1
3	18.2	6.1	6.1	9.1	3	18.2	30.3	9.1
4	12.1	6.1	27.3	3	15.2	12.1	12.1	12.1
5	6.1	12.1	12.1	9.1	6.1	12.1	18.2	24.2
6	6.1	18.2	9.1	9.1	21.2	6.1	12.1	18.2
7	3	12.1	6.1	21.2	15.2	12.1	9.1	21.2
8	0	18.2	9.1	21.2	24.2	12.1	6.1	9.1

Figure 6-21: Quality professionals ranking of the frequency with which they undertake particular tasks

Task Frequency Ranking - DAB

	Advice and guidance on interpretation of policy or regulation	Organistion of institutional reviews	Devising institutional policy	Managing validation events	Advice on teaching, learning and assessment matters	Devising or revising business processes /procedures within my own department	Devising or Revising institution wide business processes /procedures	Writing self evaluation reports
1	7.1%	35.7%	21.4%	7.1%	7.1%	14.3%	10.0%	0.0%
2	42.9%	7.1%	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	20.0%	7.1%
3	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%	21.4%	0.0%	28.6%	40.0%	7.1%
4	14.3%	7.1%	21.4%	7.1%	21.4%	14.3%	20.0%	0.0%
5	0.0%	28.6%	14.3%	0.0%	7.1%	7.1%	20.0%	28.6%
6	14.3%	14.3%	7.1%	7.1%	21.4%	0.0%	10.0%	28.6%
7	7.1%	7.1%	7.1%	21.4%	14.3%	7.1%	20.0%	21.4%
8	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	35.7%	28.6%	14.3%	0.0%	7.1%

Figure 6-22: Degree Awarding Body Quality professionals ranking of the frequency with which they undertake particular tasks

Task Frequency Ranking - IoT

Writing self evaluation reports
Devising or Revising institution wide…
Devising or revising business…
Advice on teaching, learning and…
Managing validation events
Devising institutional policy
Organistion of institutional reviews
Advice and guidance on interpretation…

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

	Advice and guidance on interpretation of policy or regulation	Organistion of institutional reviews	Devising institutional policy	Managing validation events	Advice on teaching, learning and assessment matters	Devising or revising business processes /procedures within my own department	Devising or Revising institution wide business processes /procedures	Writing self evaluation reports
1	33.3%	16.7%	16.7%	16.7%	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
2	16.7%	16.7%	33.3%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
3	16.7%	16.7%	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	33.3%	0.0%
4	16.7%	16.7%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	16.7%
5	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	16.7%	16.7%	16.7%	33.3%
6	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	16.7%	0.0%	16.7%	16.7%	0.0%
7	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%	0.0%	33.3%
8		0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	33.3%	16.7%	16.7%	16.7%

Figure 6-23:Institute of Technology Quality professionals ranking of the frequency with which they undertake particular tasks

Task Frequency Ranking - Linked Providers

	Advice and guidance on interpretation of policy or regulation	Organistion of institutional reviews	Devising institutional policy	Managing validation events	Advice on teaching, learning and assessment matters	Devising or revising business processes /procedures within my own department	Devising or Revising institution wide business processes /procedures	Writing self evaluation reports
1	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
2	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
3	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%
4	0.0%	0.0%	66.7%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
5	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	66.7%	33.3%
6	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
7	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%
8		33.3%	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Figure 6-24: Linked Provider Quality professionals ranking of the frequency with which they undertake particular tasks

Task Frequency Ranking - Private/Independent Providers

Bars (top to bottom):
- Writing self evaluation reports
- Devising or Revising institution wide…
- Devising or revising business…
- Advice on teaching, learning and…
- Managing validation events
- Devising institutional policy
- Organistion of institutional reviews
- Advice and guidance on interpretation…

Axis: 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
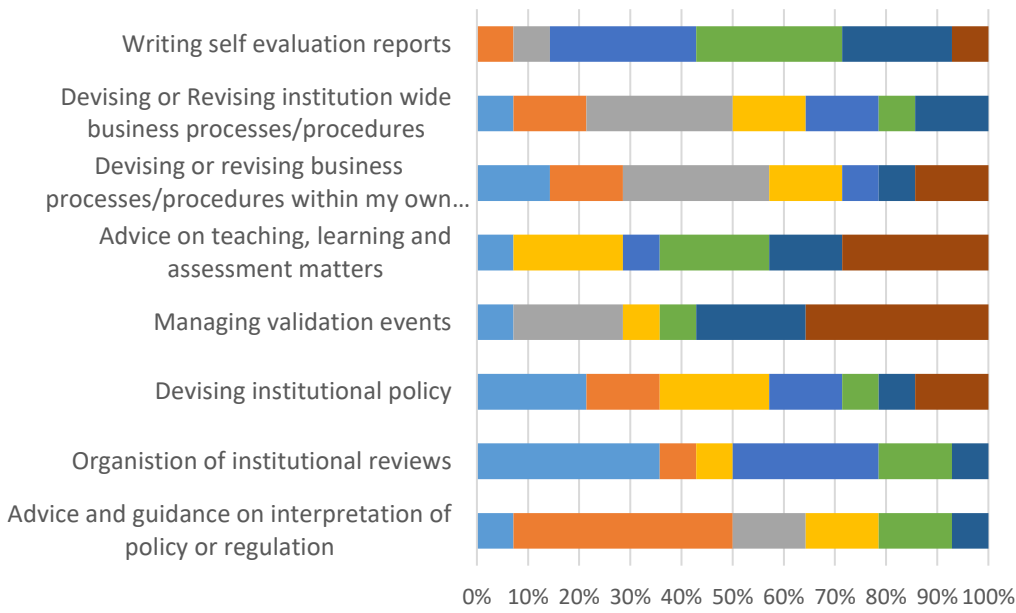
	Advice and guidance on interpretation of policy or regulation	Organistion of institutional reviews	Devising institutional policy	Managing validation events	Advice on teaching, learning and assessment matters	Devising or revising business processes /procedures within my own department	Devising or Revising institution wide business processes /procedures	Writing self evaluation reports
1	30.0%	0.0%	10.0%	20.0%	20.0%	10.0%	10.0%	0.0%
2	20.0%	10.0%	10.0%	20.0%	10.0%	20.0%	0.0%	10.0%
3	30.0%	10.0%	10.0%	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%	30.0%	10.0%
4	10.0%	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	10.0%	20.0%	10.0%	30.0%
5	10.0%	0.0%	20.0%	20.0%	10.0%	20.0%	10.0%	10.0%
6	0.0%	10.0%	10.0%	10.0%	20.0%	10.0%	20.0%	20.0%
7	0.0%	20.0%	10.0%	30.0%	10.0%	10.0%	10.0%	10.0%
8		50.0%	10.0%	0.0%	10.0%	10.0%	10.0%	10.0%

Figure 6-25: Private/Independent Provider Quality professionals ranking of the frequency with which they undertake particular tasks

In considering quality work as experienced by quality professionals, while there is divergence on the emphasis and frequency of the categories of work that undertaken, the findings suggest there is sufficient commonality of tasks and activities undertaken by respondents to create an occupational profile for a quality professional in Irish higher education. The reasons for divergence can be explained by the history of the development of the role in the various sectors and if as suggested by one of the participants that a convergence of these legacies is taking place as a result of the legislation

and the continued development of quality roles particularly in the IoT sector, it is likely that this divergence will close over a period of time.

6.4   Summary

This chapter has presented the findings of the survey of those working in quality roles and semi structured interviews of a selection of those who participated in the survey as well as sectoral representatives and senior leaders in representative institutions. The findings present a picture of what is perceived as 'quality work' and the roles that undertake such work within the Irish higher education system. Quality roles are perceived to be ill defined and there is a commonality of purpose across the sector which is beginning to align. Those inhabiting quality roles come from a varied set of professional backgrounds but have a common history of working in the higher education sector.

A distinction in the maturity of roles and the emphasis of the nature of quality work can be seen between the traditional university sector and those institutions where programmes have a legacy of being previously or currently awarded by QQI or its predecessors. Defined quality roles have been in existence in the university sector for a longer period of time than the institute of technology sector. This is attributed to support for creation of the roles in the university sector through the 1997 Universities Act and a lack of funding available to institutes of technology to fund such posts. The size of institutions in both the public and private sector institutions also impacts on the ability of the institution to justify and fund a specific post. Quality work within the university sector is based on institutional quality whereas for the former institutes of technology, quality work primarily focuses on programme level quality work.

The next chapter discusses findings relating to the professional identity of those engaged in quality work and the knowledge, skills and competence used and required to fulfil their roles within their institutions.

7   An Emerging Profession?

This chapter addresses research question four '*Is QA practice in Irish higher education emerging as a profession due to the influence of national and/or European policy on the creation of a common occupational profile?*'

The previous chapter has set the context of where quality roles are institutionally situated and the nature of the work that they undertake. This chapter presents findings on how quality professionals perceive their professional identities and how these impacts on their perception of being a professional.

7.1   Professional Identity of Quality Professionals

When survey respondents were asked to describe their professional identity, they responded using open text descriptions, aligning to administrative roles, subject discipline areas, professional discipline areas or as not aligning to any professional identity. In order to preserve the anonymity of participants, the category 'discipline expert' is used where a respondent aligned themselves to a particular subject discipline. Less than a quarter of respondents identified with a 'quality' related identity.

Professional Identity	No. Respondents
Academic	3
Discipline Expert	7
Education	3
Researcher	1
University/HE Administrator	7
Quality Role	7
Support Profession Expert	1
None	4
Total	33

Table 7-1: Participants self-declaration of professional identity

Table 7-1 shows that a quality role, university/HE administrator, and discipline expert are the most common descriptors used in this self-declaration of professional identity. This identity was further explored during the interview process where participants were asked to reflect on

this and how this professional alignment manifested itself when carrying out their current role.

For those who did not perceive their professional identity as aligned to a quality role, they viewed their identity in terms of being able by being to describe what they do and their previous career role. QP10_DAB views academic quality as being a subset of a broader quality subject area which is a critical element of their original subject discipline.

> "It's not that I don't see myself as a quality assurance person. I very much am. But I see it as being broader than just academic quality assurance because there's a whole world of quality assurance in. [subject discipline]." (QP10_DAB)

An academic professional identity is the primary identity that this quality professional from the IoT sector aligns with. This quotation illustrates the consideration of how their identity might change when moving from an academic to a quality role.

> "I think it's because I've been, I started as a lecturer and then I became a head of department. It's something that just when you've been doing it so long, it just becomes part of your identity. And it's funny. When I took up this role, my grading is still the academic grading, but I now have regular holidays which I wouldn't have had in the past. I would have never taken my academic holidays, but I always had them. I actually did struggle with the change going am I still an academic? Even when I came to things, am I still eligible to vote for academic council and so on? It became quite important to me. I found it difficult to explain but it's just because I'm so long associated in myself with the role of academic and being an educator and I think that's so important" (QP12_IT)

For others, being asked the question forced them to think about their professional identity. In the quotation below, QP14_DAB was responding to an observation by the researcher during interview that when completing the survey question on alignment with professional identity they had replied 'none'.

"it was a good question. I probably haven't been asked that question. Last time I probably would have been able to confidently say I was a [subject discipline expert] because my degree and my PhD are in [subject] and maybe that would be my kneejerk reaction when I'm asked because I still think with my degree but when was the last time I was in a [subject] lab or taught a [subject] course, 2003, 2004. So, you're talking about whatever number of years ago. So, I definitely can't describe myself as that. Then I would describe myself as an education developer because I worked in a teaching centre for a while. But again, most of what I do now is quality assurance and I'm not sure what title you have if you work in quality assurance. I'm not sure how you'd, you know, what do you describe yourself as when you're a quality assurer? (QP14_DAB)

QP16_DAB has considered how their role fits within an academic and administrative descriptor. They perceive themselves as having an academic mindset in how they approach their professional life but are clear that their role does not fulfil the traditional academic activities of teaching, assessment, and research. Their view is that the quality role is there to support and protect those activities.

"I'm probably a bit ambiguous in how I experience my identity. I'm quite clear that I'm not the academic. Having said that, I academically incline and approach everything I do in what people probably perceive as a very academic way. The reason I say I'm not an academic is that I have not particularly published, and I have not particularly taught or assessed learners. So, and those are core at your academic coal face. Having said that, so my leaning is that that is central and that must be protected, and I would feel very strongly about that. So, I see my role as a support role. Yes, I struggle with identity" (QP16_DAB)

For others while not aligning to a quality related professional identity they see their associated professional identity as contributing to the quality role where analytical, problem solving, and research skills are used. Both

QP11_IT and QP19_DAB illustrate how skills acquired through prior learning or experience in other subject disciplines.

> "it means I'm an analyst. If there's two flies going up the wall, I'm going to analyse who's going to get there first. It doesn't matter what the thing is, whether it's two rockets in space or whatever it is. I will analyse it and come out with a best practice from it. And being a [discipline expert], I suppose, means that I'm always questioning everything. So, you question practice. you question it all the time and you question everything basically". (QP11_IT)

> "I think it puts me more in that technical space of problem solving than the compliance element. So I suppose it's a little bit more about blue sky thinking and then having the skills to implement whatever changes we need. Definitely working in the evidence-based space and in terms of research and autonomous learning that's what I bring to the table in terms of the quality element of it." (QP19_DAB)

QP20_IT sees the quality role as an extension of their identity where the quality assurance and enhancement role is an extension of their academic identity.

> "So I mean in the teaching and learning remit its even programme development around staff development, special purpose awards for example. So I am doing many of the same things I was doing as an academic. Except now instead of bringing your perspective etc to a class, I am influencing the organisation. Or at least there is the potential to influence the organisation in terms of our own approach in the teaching and learning and what we need to do. And I think this is particularly important in our educational institutes in the context of basic change "(QP20_IT).

Table 7-2 shows respondents' professional identities mapped to their organisational categorisation. Of those that identify with a quality professional identity, one is categorised organisationally with an academic role. The remaining ten academically categorised roles are dispersed among the other identities declared by survey participants.

Organizational Categorisation					
	Academic	Administrative	Hybrid	Professional Services	Total
Professional Identity					
Academic	2			1	3
Discipline Expert	3		3	1	7
Education	1	1		1	3
Researcher		1			1
University/HE Administrator	1	5		1	7
Quality Role	1	3		3	7
Support Profession Expert			1		1
None	3	1			4
Total	**11**	**11**	**4**	**7**	**33**

Table 7-2: Respondent personal professional identity mapped to organisational categorisation

The mix of organisational categorisation suggests that the quality role in the sector is in a 'third space' between academic and administrative categorisations. These finding suggest that such a majority of respondents' professional identity doesn't align with their role is linked to the length of time that they have been in the role so that a new or other identity has not yet developed. Most of those who express a quality professional identity have five or more years' experience in their role, while those with other identities have fewer years' experience. (Table 7-3).

Experience in Post						
Professional Identity	1 year	2-4 years	5-7 years	8-9 years	10+ years	Grand Total
Academic		2		1		3
Discipline Expert	1	3	2	1		7
Education	1	1			1	3
Quality Role	1		4		2	7
Researcher		1				1

Support Profession Expert	1					1
University/HE Administrator	2	4	1			7
None	1	2			1	4
Grand Total	7	13	7	2	4	33

Table 7-3: Professional Identity mapped to Experience in Post

For those academics and discipline experts that have longer term experience in their role, an explanation may be the strong link that academics have to their discipline and 'tribe' (Becher & Trowler, 2001). This quotation from QP15_IT illustrates the importance of their academic identity.

> "Yeah, so I think it's important like you know, the fact that you know I'm on academic council, I'm seen to be an academic I think is important for me personally". (QP15_IT)

The retention of an academic identity other than quality or of multiple identities is also a choice that quality professionals use to maintain their legitimacy and to persuade academics in particular, as they move through different cultures within their institutions. QP11_IT highlights how that academic identity is used both to see the perspective of colleagues and also to persuade and influence.

> As well as that, I see their perspective because I've been there. I've been the heathen. So, I know where the questions are going to be or what the comments are going to be or what the inertia is going to be. So, essentially, I would have been one of those soldiers. So, I know how to mitigate if you like and how to get people on board from that point of view. (QP11_IT)

The findings do not suggest that a quality related professional identity is more prevalent in one sector over another. Of the 7 survey respondents who aligned with a quality related professional identity, 3 were from a DAB, 1 from an IoT, 2 from the private/independent sector and 1 from a linked provider.

7.2   A quality professional?

The topic of being a professional was explored through the interview process. Although the finding of the survey found that most quality professionals did not consider themselves to have a quality related professional identity, when asked whether they thought of themselves as quality professionals or quality practitioners, most (n=13) participants thought of themselves as quality professionals, with five (n=5) participants describing themselves as quality practitioners. One participant did not identify with the term at all, considering it as limiting. Three participants considered themselves as both.   This view gathered from interview responses was representative across the sectors as shown in Table 7-4.

	DAB	IoT	Private/Ind	Linked Provider	Total
Professional	6	2	1	1	10
Practitioner	3	1	1		5
Both		1	1	1	3
Neither			1		1

Table 7-4: Quality Role as Professional or Practitioner

The rationale for considering themselves as 'practitioners' over 'professionals' was that these participants did not see themselves as academically or professionally qualified in the area of quality and therefore could not describe themselves as 'professionals', although QP4_DAB who identified themselves as a practitioner did have academic qualifications in the quality area.

> "I have never thought about it, but I suppose practitioner would probably be more, I mean I know I'm professional, I have a professional you know, the master's in it but I practice what I

preach. I mean, and I'm very many hands on, a doer, so I would very much say practitioner". (QP4_DAB)

QP22_PI from the private/independent sector thought that a lack of definition of the role and a determination of the skills and competences required for the role did not allow them to use the term professional.

"I think it's too undefined to say I'm a QA professional and I think quality assurance itself is too undefined. There's definitely an increased professionalisation of quality assurance, 100%, much needed. There's a lot more certainty around what's expected of the role. But in terms of how you go about realising those expectations, around the kind of prior knowledge that you need, the skills that you need to have, I don't think it's determinatively enough to warrant a professional status if that makes sense. But every single quality assurance person that I've met with has been highly professional at the same time. But I don't know, I think practitioner is just a term that I prefer using" (QP22_PI)

QP22_PI does highlight that those working in the quality are work in a professional way. This view was also shared with QP17_DAB who highlighted that quality professionals act professionally in relation to their colleagues and wider institution. Delivering a good service means that they are acting in a professional way.

"suppose maybe quality assurance professional ......in terms of delivering service and how you are and even you know when we are conducting our quality reviews it's not about us asking a unit or department to say are we meeting quality assurance standards or whatever, it's also about the level of service that we are giving to them to help them to kind of get to do what they need to do". (QP17_DAB)

For those who identified with the term quality professional, their reasons were identified as being based in their role and their institutional responsibility. QP12_IT links their academic identity with being professional. Being viewed as a professional is seen as being important aspect of the role that they are expected to carry out.

so as an academic you'd like to be professionals rather than practitioners …. But I think it's maybe important for the role as well that it's seen as an academic role not purely as an administrative role (QP12_IT)

QP14_DAB takes the view that the quality role should be considered as directing the professional direction of quality within the institution and that all members of the university community should be considered quality practitioners.

> I'd probably choose professional, but I wouldn't like you to think that's more of an ego thing. It's more I think everybody in an institute should be a quality assurance practitioner, in my view of what a practitioner is. It's that everyone, everything that you do should be about quality assurance and quality enhancement you know. From the lecturer just teaching their course they should be engaging in it. So, they're the practitioners. We're all the practitioners. So, I suppose it's not that I think the professional word is better, I wouldn't like to think that only the quality assurance practitioners practice quality assurance or enhancement. So, I think I prefer the other word but I'm still not certain that word explains what I am but, you know. (QP14_DAB)

Some participants also raised the different facets of how quality as a function can be perceived. QP22_PI called out what they called 'real quality' (QP22_PI) as meaning quality assurance practices that exist outside of, HE and within sectors such as engineering, pharmaceuticals, and other sectors. Too much of an alignment to this type of quality and in particular to quality control was seen as a negative thing and participants believed that quality within higher education should focus on quality enhancement.

> "the quality control element is something that I would not like to be associated with, the type of quality activities that we would have in higher education, there is a lot of autonomy definitely down the academic streams. So I think applying quality control performance measurement very rigid controlled parameters. I would think have a negative impact on what we are trying to achieve as quality professionals. Can I see our role as absolute

support and putting systems in place to make quality enhancements easier, and more embeddable in our systems, but I certainly don't see our role as quality control" (QP19_DAB)?

QP26_LP and QP7_DAB, however, hold a different view. While acknowledging that quality in HE is different, the addition of someone from an industry background is seen a good addition to a quality function in HE. As QP26_LP points out, transferable analytical skills are required for quality work.

> I think it's good to actually have somebody who's from industry quality, because they do really have that kind of sort of analytical really nitty gritty that I certainly don't have…… but coming into a higher ed, you bring an awful lot of I think diverse skills to it would be how I would feel about it. No, I don't think pure quality alone would work in you know. QP26_LP

This need to expand quality teams to include a range of skills to facilitate change management and enhancement using skills from quality management is underscored by QP7_DAB.

> and I would love somebody else who has worked in quality. I don't mean worked in a quality office; I mean as a quality practitioner. You know, somebody who can bring forward and close off on ideas that you might have. Who can act in that kind of way, versus somebody who and can do the transactional stuff? But I really need, you know, I'd love somebody to brainstorm with. (QP7_DAB)

An interesting view from QP22_PI was the concern that by labelling the role as a professional role, it would be isolating and remove flexibility from the role in differing institutional contexts.

> And if you're to say that it's a profession I think it lends itself toward that isolation of that's what a quality assurance person does. That's it, you know. I think when you say that you're a quality assurance practitioner I think that's, you know, there's a lot more ability to conceptualise it according to institutions,

according to organisations, according to the individual who ends up inhabiting the role. (QP22_PI)

Another participant in a DAB expressed a view that if the term quality professional was ascribed to a particular group of staff within the institution, there would be a dilution of the concept where 'quality is everyone's businesses, and the quality culture of the organisation would be negatively impacted.

> "if you say it's a quality professional then you almost compartmentalise it into a set of professionals, you know. As opposed to trying to promote embeddedness of quality throughout the University" (QP8_DAB)

This view is an illustration of how the quality professional sees themselves as a driver of the quality culture within the organisation and that by creating an elitist view of quality work, it can be detrimental to that culture.

The findings above suggest that quality professionals' views on whether they are professionals or practitioners is not influenced by their sector. For those that do not consider themselves as a 'quality professional', their reasons are rooted in a lack of definition of the role and a reluctance to be seen to distance the role from the rest of institution.

7.3 Need for Network

A characteristic of the traditional profession is the presence of an organised association or grouping that may control access to the profession and provides education, support, and mentorship.
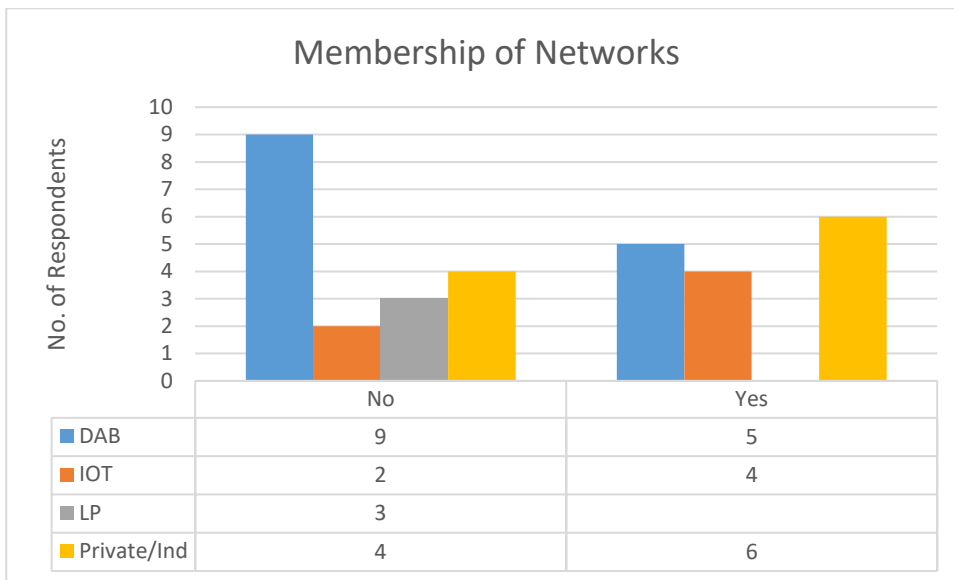
Figure 7-1: Quality Professionals Membership of Networks

Figure 7-1 shows that 18 of 33 survey respondents were not a member of a formal or informal network or professional body relating to quality assurance or enhancement. Of those that were a member of a network, none was a member of a specialist quality professional body.

The importance of a network to connect and share experiences was supported by all participants as a source of good practice and information sharing, professional development, and support. Quality professionals referred to the importance of being able to connect with colleagues in other institutions and the value of having other perspectives.

> "We're all subject to QQI but everyone has different perspectives, and you can learn from everybody across different [sic]. You could have working groups, okay we don't all have linked providers, you could have a working group on something specific to that. The other areas, I actually think by having a wider network you could actually learn more" (QP1_DAB)

While there are some networks or groupings that exist such as the IUA quality officers' group and the Higher Education Colleges Association Academic and Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF), there is no sector wide network of quality professionals, formal or informal. Even within subsectors, these groups are representative and are not open to all

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members of staff working within the quality assurance and enhancement area.

Within the IoT sector, the Council of Registrars is considered to be the grouping that discusses quality matters, however assistant registrars and quality officers with responsibility for quality, do not regularly meet as a distinct group to discuss 'quality', although they may meet at conferences or discuss matters by email as described by QP3_it.

> That informal network of assistant registrars. That's typically just an email going how do ye or have ye? (QP3_IT)

QP12_IT describes how there had been some historical resistance to setting up a network but that the group had proceeded to do so anyway

> I believe there was in the past resistance towards the group meeting. That it was kind of 'the registrars meet, why would … they can tell you whatever there is to be told'. A little bit of that. We haven't experienced it, but we haven't asked. We didn't ask permission. We've met in THEA's offices. So, it's not like it's hidden or anything (QP12_IT)

A senior leader within the IoT sector provided a reason why the Council of Registrars maintains control over quality related discussions. This stems from the current lack of consistency in quality related roles within the IoT sector. Due to the different levels of responsibility and focus of the quality related role in institutions. discussions are kept at Registrar level. SL5_IT believes that if the role became more consistent within the IoT sector, a distinct quality officers' network within the sector would be viable.

> if you got that consistency at the quality officer level then some of that stuff could be cascaded down from the Registrar (SL5_IT)

This exchange illustrates how the role of quality professional within the IoT sector is becoming more formalised and that there is a recognition within the sector for the need to have a role definition that is consistent.

The Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) existed for a time and was considered to have value by some participants. QP10_DAB illustrates the value of the network as a learning mechanism.

> A great thing I thought about the IHEQN was the guidelines documents. I was lucky enough to be involved as part of the team that produced the transnational guidelines. That was a wonderful process for me. It was a huge learning experience (QP10_DAB)

The IHEQN was however a representative body rather than being open to anyone with an interest in or more specifically working in, the area of quality assurance and enhancement. The perceived exclusivity of some networks is highlighted by QP2_PI as a barrier to knowledge sharing and to self-identification of interest in a subject.

> "I think there's huge value in having somewhere that people can come, they don't need a special invitation, but they can identify themselves as being relevant and then share experience." (QP2_PI)

Quality professionals in linked providers and those not affiliated to the IUA, THEA or HECA find themselves disconnected from the national quality assurance discourse as they are not considered in communications from QQI.

> "One of the things that I regret very much is that the fact that we are, I suppose for want of a better term, non-aligned……. So, I will often find myself in a situation where the phone will ring and it's somebody from QQI saying oh my god, I'm really sorry, we forgot to talk to you about X". (QP10_DAB)

> "I just have no idea how you break into anything do you know I find QQI to be just very non communicative I unless I'm missing something, but I can't find you know, you've one conference a year. And like if I don't trawl their websites a lot of the time or if I don't speak to [*name*], like I wouldn't really know what's happening with them". (QP26_LP)

When discussing networks of professional groupings with participants, it became clear that the creation of a sector wide network was considered a worthy endeavour but with caution expressed by participants regarding ownership of the network, the agenda set and the need to respect sectoral diversity.

> "More networking would be helpful because often you just come up with something and wonder how will I get around that. Having someone else maybe having that challenge. I found that good to have somebody to call and I think more of that would be helpful" (QP6_LP)

This observation by QP20_IT on the purpose of the Annual Quality Report Synthesis[10] report is interesting where practice sharing is seen to be a paper based exercise rather than giving life to a community of practice.

> "One thing to that to put, the whole purpose of the AIQR which published nationally, but if you read the documentation on their purposes for sharing good practice, and particularly that is reflected again in the case studies and all the examples that are given in the AIQR synthesis report. But it's no good on paper alone. The sharing of good practice becomes real when you have, so why are we doing it on paper and we are not doing it in communities, when the whole area should be around community practice". (QP20_IT)

The diversity of institution across sectors and within sectors was highlighted as a potential barrier to an effective network by QP5_DAB.

> "even though there are similarities there are huge differences between even universities and IT's in terms of quality. And even more with private sector. Not at least the immaturity and resourcing of QI. So and there are very different priorities and agendas that it becomes quite problematic. So I would hesitate to

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[10] The Annual Quality Report Synthesis Report is published by QQI and is a synthesis of all annual quality reports submitted to QQI

say yeah it would be real benefit. But I suppose the QQI is very useful because it brings together all the stakeholders. It really depends on purpose, focus, function, objectives behind it." (QP5_DAB)

There are different opinions among participants about the ownership and management of a sector wide network. While the examples above provide an indicator that there is some expectation that QQI might take this role, QP24_DAB has a different view

> It strikes me that everything that's happening is...., it's QQI driven, but really, as a group, you know, we should be identifying kind of areas that we feel maybe they need work and, or that are important to us. And, and that is as a kind of a National Forum. There would be kind of an opportunity to do that. But I think people are so embedded into QQI that I just wonder would QQI just take it over and use it as another means to get things done for them? (QP24_DAB)

This opinion that quality professional should be identifying areas that are important to them as a group is supported by SEC 4 on the need for greater 'thought leadership' among quality professionals. While acknowledging that the principal focus of quality professionals is to 'get through a lot of process' due to statutory obligations.

> I would like to see the quality community be a little bit more of a thinking sort of community....... some level of thought leadership in it, you know. .... saying things around quality and courageously too, where issues around funding and other supports from the state are inadequate. there's a natural tendency and everyone has it and I would include myself that, you know, quality is often the best foot forward sort of activity. And essentially you want to get through it unscathed. But sometimes I think that can be a disservice, ultimately to an institution and ultimately to the system as a whole. (SEC4)

While acknowledging these differences of perspective, an observation from a senior leader in a linked provider indicates the value of a network as providing a personal support role for those in quality roles.

> one of the things I feel about quality is quality officers… are quite isolated in some ways. Within…. they're kind of the enemy you know, they're not really professional services at some level. They're not really academic. They're a bit like the internal auditor you know, therefore, I think you need a space where you can kind of retreat to and share information and I feel that's something that could develop more in the Irish context." (SL9_LP)

This need for a safe space to discuss experiences and share practices is echoed by quality professionals themselves.

> "you need to have a community of practice where you can share those experiences in a safe space with people that understand them.". (QP2_PI)

> we sit down and chat about things and sometimes it's just easing pressure on ourselves and bring able to cope better with things that are happening (QP3_IT)

This potential for isolation, particularly for those working in smaller organisations that are currently unaffiliated to a membership body can be challenging and can impact quality professionals' sense of belonging, both in their organisation and in the sector.

7.4   A profession?

When asked if there is a specific role or new profession emerging within higher education, the predominant view of all participants (n=38) is that a distinct role with a definable expertise has developed within the sector over the past twenty years. QP5-DAB held the view that the role is that of an educational administrator with a specific remit in the support of the primary objectives of the institutions.

> I don't think there is a quality affiliation per se. There may be in industry. They're so different. I wouldn't subscribe to that.

Primarily yeah, education and quality, to me, we're here for student experience, research, teaching and learning education. Quality assurance is an underpinning process within those objectives but those are the primary objectives and that's why I think if the review teams brings to its review focus, primarily and only on the effectiveness of the QI processes, I think it's a distraction from what we're primarily here to do. (QP5_DAB)

The emergence of a specific 'niche' role or occupation is attributed by QP21_PT and QP23_DAB to the increasing demands on higher education institutions and the specific skills required to undertake quality work.

"people have worked within the system and then have found a position or a niche within that system and as the demand upon institutions has grown to have more control over quality... the role has become more specified and singled out as a role in itself" (QP21_PI)

"I think that there is a very clear function, and for quality within our higher education setting, and I think there's an absolutely clear role for quality professionals as, as key strategic resources within our institutions are both to maintain and preserve and help uphold the autonomy and academic values, and ..., the mission of our institutions,". (QP23_DAB)

SL8_DAB compares the emergence of this role with the creation of similar roles in higher education such as directors of teaching and learning.

I do think there's an analogy with the directors of centres for teaching and learning, who are living in that space where they don't fit in university administration, and they're not in the conventional academic role. And yet they were trying to transform academic practice. And they see themselves as distinct from both the academics and the administrators. And quite rightly and ...it has become a niche area with its own distinct professional identity. And I think quality officers are the same. (SL8_DAB)

As described section 6.2, page 146 above, quality roles have been created in all sectors to meet statutory requirements and to assist with the increasing workload of other roles.

The range of expertise required to underpin the creation of a distinct role is highlighted and discussed in section 7.5 p.219 below, however a sectoral representative made the following observation.

> "What we now see, in almost all cases is, is a highly trained, experienced professional, often with an academic background, but not necessarily who is comfortable working across a number of areas in legislative statutory, functional data, high level management, decentralised management, with students, with academics, with senior managers, with employers with a range of external stakeholders, including professional bodies". (SEC3)

The findings suggest that the development of the quality role in Irish HE is consistent with the experience of other nascent occupations where an occupational mandate is created as new roles are carved out or hived off (Fayard et al., 2017; Nelsen & Barley, 1997).

7.4.1 Expertise

In considering the question of whether quality professionals had or required specific or niche knowledge and skills, some participants (n=6) expressed the view that a tension exists between the understanding of what is described as 'QA expert' in the sector and with having an expertise in quality assurance or quality management. This is manifested in the context of roles undertaken in peer review panels and the assigning a role of 'Quality Assurance Expert' to a panel member. Participants point out that the QA experts should be considered as those working in quality roles, developing, and implementing quality assurance and enhancement systems rather than an assumed expertise that comes with the title of 'Registrar' or other senior academic roles. These roles are considered to have a limited knowledge or experience of quality work which is often in relation to their experience in programme accreditation or validation.

> if you go to…Heads of School or whatever, oh yeah, I understand quality assurance or quality enhancement and they understand

one aspect of it. The aspect where they've seen it from the other side and it's not quite that simple. (QP1_DAB)

"So, we for instance have brought in, which we didn't have before, that to chair a school review or unit review you have to be an external quality assurance expert. Now that was quite fun just saying okay what's an expert? Well, it's someone who has shown a track record within quality assurance. It's not just simply someone who has a registrar position. Someone who really knows what quality assurance is and what it's meant to focus on and what it's meant to be about". (QP14_DAB)

All of the senior leaders interviewed were of the view that quality work is not just another form of administration, and that particular expertise, skills and mindsets are required.

I think a quality person is a particular expert in that area, a particular kind of person in a way. And I have worked with quality officers who have been audit driven who have been…you know, and I have been dealing with others who are enhancement driven and others who will probably come back to compliance and back to again heading towards audit. And I'm kind of going well there is a particular …skill set that a quality person has to have that separates them from your standard administrator, or indeed your standard academic. (SL4_IT)

The need to have expertise in quality assurance is also acknowledged at a sectoral level when quality experts are being recruited for external quality assurance agency work.

Most of the QA practitioner colleagues …. have such a depth of knowledge and experience. I think that a lot of the knowledge and expertise, they have developed over time and it's contextual. I would look at them as specifically a QA expert…. Even when we are establishing evaluation panels, we look specifically for our QA expert, [it is] is someone that is very familiar with QQI policies and criteria and that's a discrete skill set and area of knowledge and expertise. (SEC2)

The qualification that the expertise required is with QQI policy rather than quality assurance or quality management shows that the definition of what QQI considers as a QA expert is different to the expectation of quality professionals who are looking for members of peer review panels with quality assurance and quality management expertise.

In considering what expertise is required to carry out the role of a quality professional or to have an effective quality function, the range of skills and competences used and required were discussed with participants. These are presented below.

7.5 Knowledge, skills, and competencies required for quality work

> "Quality qualifications, project management qualifications, risk management qualifications, change management qualifications. You know, process management, design, business analyst skills. You know, if I could have my magic team, I would have… that's what I would be working on perfect complimentary of all of those skills. Everybody in the office essentially, you know, having some element of all of those skills". (QP7_DAB)

This quotation from a quality professional in a DAB illustrates the breadth and range of knowledge, skills and competence required for quality work within a quality function.

These participants from DABs believe that technical knowledge of the national framework of qualifications and national and international quality assurance and enhancement structures are essential to the role

> "there's guidelines out there everywhere., you know, there's European guidelines, there's Irish guidelines, there's University policies and all this "(QP8_DAB)

> "I mean on a technical basis you would like somebody to have a knowledge base around higher, you know, systems, frameworks, what is quality assurance, tools, peer review, you know, student feedback, triangulation, all those sorts of things" (QP16_DAB).

Within the private/independent sectors this senior leader highlights that additional knowledge of specific QQI policy and procedures is required, where QQI is the awarding body.

> "good knowledge of I suppose the sector requirements is obviously very important. And then I suppose the knowledge of, you know, the framework in which we all are required to work" (SL3_PI)

Having a wide experiential base within higher education institutions as well as understanding how their own organisation works and where decisions are made, is also considered important by quality professionals in larger degree awarding institutions:

> I think you have to have probably experience of a broader range of, say high higher education, institutional experiences. So if you come from a very narrow background, you know, to me, I think you probably won't have the same understanding and insights of different areas or how institutions work as a whole as a collective. I think that's really, really important. (QP24_DAB)

> a sensibility towards the political context in which one is working, both at institutional level, and but also, you know, across different units., how decisions are transacted in the institution, who's transacting them, who's influential? And, you know, how do you get those people engaged, so as far as environmental awareness" (QP23_DAB)

Although these observations were made by quality professionals in larger institutions where access to people and information may be more challenging than in a smaller organisation, having this political skill was seen as important for quality professionals in general by a sectoral representative.

> "I think it also have a good political sense as well. You also need to know when to lay off as well, and what battles to fight, in the present, what battles to fight in the future, and then how to build up things in a staged way" (SEC4)

As the national quality assurance and enhancement system has matured and in order to keep up with the reporting requirements of national agencies, participants also cite the ability to use data for quality assurance and enhancement activities as an area for development within quality work. This was identified by quality professionals and is supported by these senior leaders.

> "I think a QA team needs somebody with good data management skills, who can interrogate, interpret the data. Who knows where to go for the data, you can draw and take and make decisions on it? So I think there's a, there's a business analysis data analysis side, which is essential to an effective QA department. (SL7_PI)

> And again, it's something that's underestimated in so much of higher education, because so, many people going into various roles particularly in quality are coming from a kind of humanities, social sciences, non-stem backgrounds essentially. But I do think there is a need and will be in the future a greater need to be, have a mastery of data to know to mean and have comfort with data and be able to, to drill into data to know to mean rather than being sometimes we can all be a bit doe eyed about data. And I think, particularly again, one of the lessons we've learned from the banking crisis in particular is around, you know, …., you can get, for instance, a set of figures presented to you and they're very beautiful and they're very nice and they make everything look brilliant, but you know, to be able to drill down into those and drill down into data. That's a very particular skill set, but it's one that's very important to have as part of your quality function, I think. (SL9_LP)

This commentary from senior leaders indicates an expectation of quality professionals and quality functions beyond the transactional nature of managing quality reviews and that the skills of data management, critical thinking and business analysis are required. Even where the data or institutional research function may be structurally separate from the quality function, the relationship between good data and quality is recognised.

63% of survey respondents indicated that they developed policy as a core or often activity. This finding was supported by participants during the interview phase who highlighted the need for policy development skills as well as policy or standards and guidelines interpretation. SL10 provides the senior leader perspective.

> I believe that the policy development side of things is a key part of the role. It's a skill in itself to write a policy well. Policy and procedure that can be communicated to a broad range of stakeholders and for everybody to understand what's expected and what happens and what possible outcomes are and one thing and another…you would say they were essential to anybody in a QA role. (SL10_PI)

Understanding the process of policy development and implementation is also a core competence is highlighted by SL7_PI

> there is a requirement for people who are actually very good at managing process, ……. how a policy should properly be developed, implemented and stuff is audited, and audit trails are there's constant trails of evidence and how data is managed. (SL7_PI)

Excellent communications skills (n=17), both written and interpersonal are viewed by a substantial majority of quality professionals and senior leaders as essential to the role. This observation from QP16_DAB demonstrates the range of these skills including softer skills such as listening and influencing.

> your communication skills, your written and analytical and oral communication skills need to be very good. You need to be able to listen and nuance and you know, bring people with you (QP16_DAB)

Both senior leaders and quality professionals view writing skills as useful for aiding transmission of knowledge and interpretation as well giving a sense of competence. This senior leader in the private/independent sector describes how a document prepared for a programme validation event can communicate a sense of competence and confidence.

I would suggest definitely attention to detail. Absolute attention to detail. Good English, fussiness over commas, apostrophes, colons, tense, spacing, insane interest in stuff like that, you know, because I think that the confidence people get from a document that's well presented, or more particularly the lack of competence they get from a document that's poorly presented, destroys the person's reading. So I think it's really important that stuff that comes out of QE is clear". (SL6_PI)

QP5-DAB provides insight into how the use of appropriate language can be used as a tool to demonstrate sensitivity to different cultures and an awareness of political sensibilities referred to above.

"They also need good language, English language, because you can retain the veracity of a statement, but you can say it in a very different way that doesn't get everybody's backs up and that is really important. I've seen so much difficulty arise where someone hasn't had or hasn't applied that awareness and understanding and created mayhem for want of a couple of words." (QP5_DAB)

Communication is viewed as central to supporting the effectiveness of the quality system of the organisation as it is necessary to its implementation. QP16_DAB makes this point that having a quality assurance system is not sufficient, members of the organisation need to understand how the system works.

because it's not about the system, it is about communicating the system" (QP16DAB)

This is supported by this senior leader in a DAB.

"Right up there, I would put communication, I think, actually communication skills is one of the most important that somebody in that role will have, because they will have to be very persuasive in terms of supporting the processes that we want to put in place and are encouraging" (SL1_DAB)

General management skills in relation to projects, process and people is also identified as a core competence by quality professionals and senior leaders.

> "I think really you just need to be able to manage. Manage yourself, manage people and manage a very complex workload". (QP10_DAB)

For those in leadership positions, people management is seen as a distinct competence to ensure the effectiveness of the quality function. SL9_LP highlights that having a quality team working with the senior quality professional and following through on their vision for the quality function also contributes to the quality culture and effectiveness of the quality function.

> So often you find people who are very good outward communicators at a macro level but might not be necessarily that good at managing their own staff. And likewise, you know, and I think that's again, a piece that's underestimated is that within the quality function, not only do you have the director which you often have your, you know, your staff and the quality office who were again, the emissaries who go out to sell policy in some shape or form and, and they also need to be kind of on side, (SL9_LP)

Soft skills such as facilitation, listening and relationship building are considered by quality professionals and senior leaders across the sector as most essential for those engaging in quality work.

> "skills of negotiation, influencing collaboration, communication, all of those soft skills are actually probably the most important part of the role." (SL3_PI)

QP15_IT believes that skills to negotiate the power imbalance that can arise when quality professionals are required to engage with and influence colleagues who are more senior than they are required in the role. These soft skills are even more important as the quality professional does not have any line management authority, yet they are required to ensure that a process is completed.

They're dealing with people grades higher than they are, and they're trying to cajole them and encourage them to submit material and so on. ….and then they'll go out and talk to people and try and bring them along." (QP15_IT)

For all senior leaders, having an open mindset that works with rather than against colleagues is considered even more important that the technical knowledge of the quality professional.

To me, I think that the personality side of it is more important almost than the technical competence, the sympathy to understand that for the academics that you're dealing with, and its typically academic departments, but even if not for that for the person for whom you're doing the quality review, it is a nuisance and not part of their objective for the year. And at the same time that you can add value, but only by persuading them that it is a value. That's a key skill (SL8_DAB)

Having this open mindset is viewed by this senior leader in the private/independent sector as critical to achieving an environment that is constructive and where quality professionals are approachable.

the last thing you want is somebody in QE that's feared, because then it. [any issue requiring improvement] gets hidden, you know, that's really not a good place to be. So you want to enable capable, supportive, not entirely tolerant of everything, but, you know, a constructive enabler of best practice (SL6_PI)

This ability to be flexible and to deal with the situation that presents itself is recognised by the quality professionals themselves as important to personal effectiveness.

by its very nature, and the connotations of quality are very much criterion and standards based. And I think that's human interactions in the business, that we're in the business of education, and much messier, and they're much less easy to put into boxes…… it's having an adaptive and responsive disposition rather than a regulatory mindset." (QP23_DAB)

Notwithstanding a need for a 'flexible and responsive disposition' the ability of the quality professional to be able to stand their ground where compliance with statutory or institutional obligations require is also noted by a participant from an IOT:

> So, you do need to be confident in yourself... a strong sense of personal competence (QP2_IP).

As observed by a senior leader in a DAB, while compliance must be achieved the quality professional needs to challenge the compliance mindset and push the organisation to use the system required by external bodies for the benefit of the organisation.

> They obviously do need to have a certain mindset that in terms of understanding the legislation, understanding what the actual requirement for compliance is. But I think what we need are people who are challenging in a sense around what that actually means, and not so much what we can get away with in meeting their compliance, but how we can best deliver compliance for Quality Enhancement, as opposed to but the processes that are externally put onto us to have to achieve. (SL1_DAB)

Figure 7-2 summarises the knowledge skills and competence required to for quality work as identified in interviews with quality professionals and senior leaders.

Figure 7-2: Knowledge Skills and Competence Required for Quality Work

7.5.1 Continuing Professional Development of Quality Professionals

A characteristic of a profession is the manner in which members maintain their currency of knowledge and skills. Continuing professional development is used as a threshold for entry and continued membership. In seeking to understand how quality professionals in Irish higher education manage and maintain their knowledge and skills, participants were asked at interview how they go about maintaining currency of their knowledge and skills. Using the national professional development framework of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education (NFETL, 2016), Figure 7-3 summarises type and sources of development activities that quality professionals undertake. There was a high level of agreement among participants that most professional development undertaken by quality professionals is through unstructured and non-formal means. Quality professionals are primarily self-directed learners and use social media, academic papers, conferences, and seminars as sources of information and guidance.

> It's really …. keeping an eye to what's going on, looking at the QQI, everything that comes out, reading that, looking at the European standards and guidelines. So, it's keeping an eye all the

time of what's coming, what's changing, looking at what other institutions are doing is very good too. (QP6_LP)

Sourcing professional development activities is driven by individual initiative rather than as the result of a structured professional requirement as illustrated by QP2_PI and SL10_PI.

I do find that is a result of me being proactive rather than information being readily available because there is certainly no structured avenue for CPD for QA professionals at all (QP2_PI)

it does come down to my own initiative to be honest, the significant majority of it. I mean you will see the odd thing that might be sent through to you from maybe QQI for example. But it would be largely through things I identify for myself (SL10_PI)
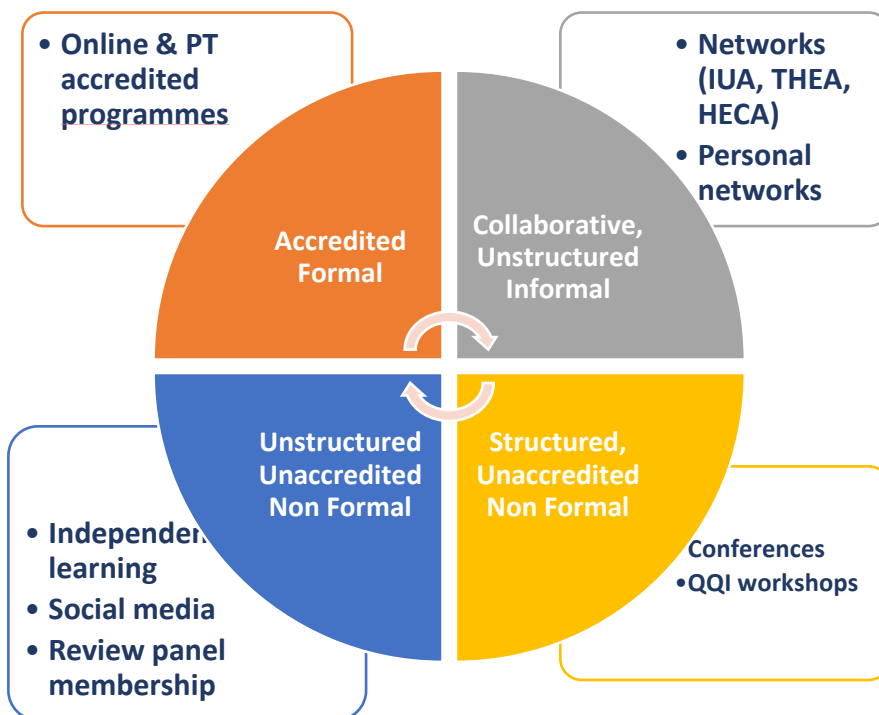

Figure 7-3: Professional Development Behaviours of Quality Professionals

Engaging with professional networks through social media is used as a professional development mechanism to keep up to date with information

and sharing practice. Participants specifically cited LinkedIn and Twitter as key sources of information:

> following all the relevant bodies on LinkedIn and Twitter, joining professional groups where I can find them. Twitter is a great source of information actually. It's fantastic, yeah. But I do find that is a result of me being proactive rather than information being readily available because there is certainly no structured avenue for CPD for QA professionals at all. (QP2_PI)

Attendance at conferences is used by quality professionals to network and to monitor how others are interpreting or implementing policy or guidelines.

> And I'd go to conferences, or I'd go to any of the QQI events… just to keep abreast of what's going on because things change, you know, and even though standards might stay the same, what people do about them or how people react to them or adhere to them is different and you can learn so much by talking to others. That networking is very important. (QP4_DAB)

According to all participants, the most significant contribution to the professional development of quality professionals is made through acting as peer reviewer or chair of review panels for other institutions and in other jurisdictions.

> I'm a reviewer and chair of quite a few reviews, external usually; Scotland, UK, and then internally which is a useful benchmarking exercise …just general experience of other institutions which in my view is absolutely key in terms of doing a good job. You need external reference points. I'm not saying you couldn't do the job if you were wholly within one institution but it's of benefit to have experience of other types of institution (QP5_DAB)

Particular emphasis was placed on observing practice among peers and in peer institutions. The importance of participating in the review activities of other institution is considered as essential to the role by QP4_DAB.

"I participate in reviews for other universities as well both here and abroad and they have given me both context and the knowledge of the systems that are there "(QP4_DAB)

Different benefits of participating in review panels are described by quality professionals such as expanding experience beyond a narrow focus of the sector that the quality professional is working in.

"Participation in various panels in Ireland and abroad and outside of the private sector as well, so you are not just getting a narrow look on things. I think you can learn a lot from that and bring an awful lot back." (SL10_PI)

Another benefit is that the nature of the documentation for review panels references other work in the sector so this type of CPD activity is seen to be an effective use of time by these participants in degree awarding bodies.

"sitting on QQI panels, sitting as an external chairing panel to other universities is a great way of keeping yourself up to date as well because you have to read all these documents and they're always informed themselves by other quality assurance documents." (QP14_DAB)

"I would say an accidental CPD for me would be working on panels in whether in a foreign institution, for a national body, for an international body it doesn't matter. They are hugely educational. Whether you're learning from the people you're meeting in the particular college or learning from your peers on the panel or learning through the briefings that you might by whoever asked you to act on the panel. I would say you know; three quarters of my professional knowledge/education has come from those sort of engagements". (QP16_DAB)

The level of commitment required to take part in these review events is also acknowledged but the benefit is seen to outweigh the time away from the office by a quality professional from a private/independent provider

when other quality assurance offices ring and ask can you become involved, will you become involved, and the answer should always be yes. There's numerous reasons why we want to say no; workload etc. etc but in terms of staying up to date with what's happening it's by involving yourself in quality activities. …. I think when you're involved in the kind of looking at how these things practically implement or are practically implemented by institutions at a programme level, at an institutional level if you're looking at quality assurance systems and not just programmes that have been validated or revalidated through QQI. It gives you an opportunity to really, really engage with and understand and kind of pick apart the intricacies and the nuances of all these different policies and procedures and things like that. And to take one of the major benefits I find is that you take so much back then to your own institution. Like you take a huge amount of just exposure to different ideas and different ways of doing things, you know. (QP22_PI)

One participant from a DAB noted that invitations to be a member of review panels tend to be extended to the director or equivalent role rather than to roles at other levels who might well have greater specialised expertise:

"And I think really, I think it would be useful if other quality officers were invited, members of staff, not just the directors again to actually because even though if you don't have a title, you actually probably have more experience than a lot of the people around the reviews. And to actually be invited to be on a panel I think would be helpful." (QP17_DAB)

This points to an avenue of CPD that may be closed to some quality professionals which can impact on their ability to be effective in their own role.

For this quality professional in the IoT sector, being able to find time or release staff for professional development activities is a challenge due to the breadth of the role.

it is a challenge just to be out of the office for any period of time because there are lots of things happening here in terms of that. And so, it predominantly is around going to things like QQI events, going to teaching and learning conferences or something like that when you're trying to keep up to date as best you can with it. But no, it is a challenge keeping the breadth of responsibility that you're having and the amount of stuff that's coming through to try and say I can go away for two days, it's a challenge doing that. (QP15_IT)

Another participant raised the matter of parity of esteem between academic and administrative staff where it is expected that academic staff will be encouraged to develop scholarship in their area. This is not an expectation for administrative staff and this lack of expectation was regarded by this participant in a DAB to be an underestimation of the complexity of the role and requirements of quality professional roles.

it's still seen that academics, and I was an academic and technically I still am, you know, they're saying it's important for them to engage in staff development in terms of conferences, writing papers, scholarship. Where it's often not seen for quality assurance because many of them have administrative type contracts. It might not be pure administration, I'm conscious about that side. Whereas I think people just say if you're engaged in quality assurance it's such a complex area, I think it should be a requirement you engage in scholarship and then that should be reflected in time and support and so on. (QP14_DAB)

Parity around the progression paths for quality professionals with administrative contracts was raised by QP10_DAB. Administrative staff can only be regraded via a job evaluation where academic staff have a defined promotion or progression route. If the post is not regraded, administrative staff are less likely to stay which means that the quality function loses a key skillset.

"one area which would please me very much if it were to change was the college's attitude towards career progression for administrative colleagues……The only way which was open to us

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to do that was by regrading for a post ……. if you've got someone doing a job and doing it very well, you want them to be happy and you want them to stay because you want to be sure that the role is going to be carried out well". (QP10_DAB)

7.5.2 Upskilling requirements of quality professionals

As part of the interview schedule, participants were asked to consider where they considered that they had competence or skills gaps and how any skills gaps that they may have had were managed when they took up the role.

A strong feature of the professional development of quality professionals is that most knowledge and skills have been learned 'on the job'. This route has been compared by some participants as an apprenticeship.

> …that it's been a kind of apprenticeship route for people, an informal apprenticeship route where people have worked within the system. (QP21_PI).

> It's quite diverse, if you could write an apprenticeship on it, …. I think it probably would be the best model that you could give (SL10_PI).

The lack of availability of formal quality related learning in a higher education context was cited by several participants across all sectors.

> I think it's hard in Ireland because there's no education quality certification program. So if you're in health quality, the thing in RCSI, but the only one that's available is one that's run out of Melbourne and I know different people have done that……It's quite striking how there's a profound lack of knowledge about, you know, how the system works and what the labels mean and what's legally binding and what isn't (QP7_DAB)

For some participants (n=4) they were appointed to the role having to come to get to grips with assumed tacit knowledge as to how the quality architecture in Ireland works and why the systems operates as it does.

"I'd love to have an education quality for dummies, Irish version offered by QQI…… I really do feel that it would be great to have some sort of training…… I just feel sometimes I feel inadequate because I don't have information that I feel I should have… It feels like you joined quality at this point in its history. So, it's in the middle. So, all of this has gone before it and you don't necessarily know how it's evolved, why it's evolved, and you miss things… And you're kind of going what else do I not know?" (QP12_IT)

While participants acknowledge the value of training events provided by QQI, they take place using face to face activities and support materials are not available for those that may need to access it at a later stage.

a lot of those supports happened face to face. If there is a training event it happens once. It is a cross section of time, it then disappears. There isn't a lot of formal training material. (QP2_PI)

From a conceptual perspective, this quality professional from a DAB would like exposure to models other than the Anglo-Irish model of quality assurance and monitoring.

But also, other, in Europe and other places they don't have that same emphasis on the External Examiner, they've different models. So it's very hard to get a good feel for the different models that are operation, so even training that showed here's six different models and here's some pros and cons and allowing you to critique them. That would be really, really useful" (QP1_DAB)

It is interesting to note that some participants see a role for QQI in providing this contextual or technical knowledge rather than their own institution.

"I do feel that QQI are missing a whole chunk around engaging with quality assurance staff. And providing maybe some kind of training themselves. You know if you have to travel to Europe to do something every time, that's expensive for institutions and time consuming for staff…. I do think it's an area that they could do more for in terms of providing you know one day workshops

or training around different aspects of quality assurance……. I find when you go to the QQI conferences, some of the stuff is interesting and then some of it, not so much (QP17_DAB)

To supplement learning on the job, the availability of further training on policy development, writing and other forms of technical writing would be welcomed by QP8_DAB.

But I think policy development, there isn't that much training out there for that and that involves both how you write a policy but also, how you project manage it. (QP8_DAB)

Influenced by increasing external demands, training on data management and performance management is viewed by quality professionals as an area that requires attention.

"And the ability to be able to set clearly defined targets that you can then measure against, understanding the lessons that you have been taken from…all that type of activity. (SL10_PI)

A process of self-evaluation is a cornerstone of internal and external quality assurance. The ability to carry out self-evaluation exercises was cited by some participants as a presumed individual or organisational skill that may not actually be present within the higher education sector.

"like the ability to undertake…to draft a self-evaluation document. But the ability to actually undertake an evaluation, it's not something that we can take for granted, because there is so many people that don't know how to undertake an evaluation, what type of things do you look for? what questions should you be asking of yourself or the organisation or the department or whatever that you are evaluating". (SL10_PI)

"So a lot of what we do in quality assurance and enhancement centres around self-evaluation. Self-evaluation is a whole skillset in itself. And people have never been trained is the wrong word or professionalise is maybe the wrong word. We have never

adapted a more strategic professional approach towards that. And I think we need to. professionalisation of…self-evaluation. It's something we take for granted and we just go into it and do it. But we don't self-evaluate our self-evaluation" (QP20_IT)

The ability of HEIs to critically reflect on their quality assurance activities has been cited in institutional review reports as descriptive rather than evaluative (QQ1, 2021 and this finding would support the observations of a need within the sector to develop these skills.

The development and enhancement of soft skills such as emotional intelligence and people influencing is highlighted by a number of participants across the sector. QP24 highlights how they developed their emotional intelligence skills through learning on the job and through trial and error. The believe that a more formalised approach to this form of personal development would be more effective.

> "I think on the, the necessity of … emotional intelligence. So some people have it more to a certain degree than others. And but you know, you can build it and you can increase your awareness of that…. So if you'd had the insights, and you'd been made aware of those things earlier, you could have probably used them, and you'd have been able to use them more. Whereas like, I think the way my kind of experience and expertise has developed has been on the job…. and you know, that can be hit and miss" (QP24_DAB)

Being able to influence people without having management authority is a beneficial competence required for quality work. Speaking about a range of courses that were offered a participant from a linked provider observed in a similar vein:

> There were elements of those that were very, very beneficial. I did a course there on managing people effectively. And it wasn't about managing because …first I thought it was managing the people that work for us, but it was more about how you work with different types of people" (QP6_LP)

Figure 7.4 summarises the range of areas that quality professionals perceive there is need for additional professional development.
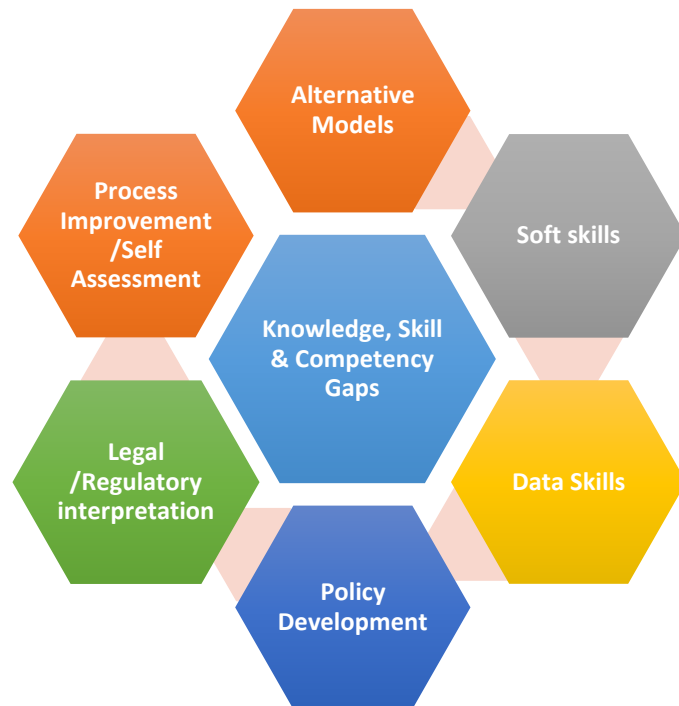
Figure 7-4: Professional Development Needs highlighted by quality professionals

In terms of their own perception of their competence to carry out their role, this participant from a linked provider expressed a fear that the lack of structured training and their own view of a perceived lack of knowledge may impact on organisational effectiveness.

> I've come into this role and try to navigate this over the last couple of years. So there's always the worry that you're going you're taking everyone in the wrong direction, do you know so? (QP26_LP)

This participant from the IoT sector observed that a structured programme would be welcome and provide more confidence to quality professionals. In reflecting on this gap, they highlight a fear of unknown unknowns as well as known unknowns.

> I was reflective of somebody who knew an awful lot but nowhere near enough in quality of education and yet I took the role and

didn't get any education myself for the role. So, I am unaware of gaps until they actually come up. I don't know what I don't know. I know what I do know because obviously I read up on it and I'm beginning to experience it but what about the things that may be up in two or three years before my job. Things that have new initiatives that came in and were bedded in by the time I came in. I know nothing. I might have picked them up or I mightn't have. I just don't know. So, a formal and structural education, a comprehensive one. I would embrace that in a heartbeat. (QP3_IT)

Various options for the type of programme of learning or qualification that could be useful were provided by participants. In recognising the value of on the job and experiential learning, an apprenticeship approach to a structured programme was suggested by this senior leader.

"I mean even when I look at things, I have done myself, whether it's accredited or non-accredited, nothing has really ticked every box. You go and do different things that ticks certain parts of certain boxes and collectively it gets you there, but nothing beats the actual hands on experience…… And then experiencing things like doing a programme validation, revalidation, shadowing somebody on a panel all those types of activities. It's quite diverse, if you could write an apprenticeship on it, …., but I think it probably would be the best model that you could give". (SL10_PI)

QP16_DAB suggests that the use of micro credentials or smaller chunks of learning as an option for the provision of the technical knowledge required for quality work.

I think it would be very hard to assign a particular qualification or at least a large qualification, a major one. The knowledge base I think might be useful, I mean if you were down at very small learning sizes just on making sure I or other people really understand technical facts. …….whether it is you know a small programme around things. So, I think that can be very useful…. I don't think there has to be something big, but I think various little things can help. (QP16_DAB)

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The ad hoc nature of the approach to the training of quality professionals has served a purpose. Quality professionals have gained knowledge and developed skills and competences while they have carried out the role. While there is no doubt that on the job experience is of significant value, these findings suggest that on the job experience should be supplemented with a structured training programme to enhance the effectiveness of quality professionals.

> We are moving into a far more regulated space and therefore the skillset needs to be a lot more determined and therefore the training needs to be a lot more structured. I think that would be very beneficial and that would benefit the institution massively as well because the processes would be streamlined and made more effective and efficient. (QP22_PI)

7.6   Summary

This chapter has presented the findings relating to the professional identity of quality professionals, how that identity impacts on how they carry out their role, the knowledge skills, and competences that quality professionals believe are necessary to undertake quality work and whether they view the role as a profession.

Quality professionals consider themselves to have a range of professional identities, some rooted in their original roles as academics or disciplinary expertise and others who consider themselves to be administrators. Of the minority that consider themselves to have a quality related professional identity they have been in their role for a longer period. All the participants consider themselves to be professional in their approach to their work, however many do not consider themselves to belong to a profession, primarily due to the lack of a defined educational or professional development path associated with the roles that they undertake. Senior leaders recognise that quality roles require a distinct expertise and skillset which is based on technical knowledge and interpersonal skills. These interpersonal skills are considered by senior leaders to be essential to the effectiveness of the quality professional. Much of that expertise has been learned on the job through experience and taking part in a largely informal system of continuous professional development. Quality professionals have a desire to supplement those skills with formal education and training in

areas such as policy development, data analytics, self-assessment, and the development of soft skills. There is also a desire to develop an intersectoral network to support continuous professional development and share practice across the sector.

The next chapter presents findings on the behaviours that quality professionals engage in as they carry out their role.

8   Behaviours of Quality Professional

This chapter addresses research questions two and three; *How do QA practitioners negotiate the cultures that operate within their institutions and within Irish Higher Education?* and *How do they perceive their status, role, and influence within their institution?*

Quality professionals and senior leaders have observed an evolution in institutional attitudes to quality assurance and enhancement over the past twenty years. As the quality system of the sector has matured and greater devolution or delegation of responsibility has been afforded to institutions in the private/independent and institute of technology sector, quality professionals have employed different practices to carry out their role and interact with colleagues in their institutions and within the sector. This senior leader in the IoT sector describes how the quality system in their sector was influenced by its relationship with QQI and HETAC as an awarding body.

> "it's gone from very much being minded by HETAC and using HETAC and subsequently QQI as that crutch that we lent upon and used them as this compliance exercise or regulatory exercise, and we basically need to comply with that one. It's something that [we] have to own and something that we do, people have to do, people realise we have to do it. I still think there is a way to go, I don't think it's pervasive yet, I think people still will turn around and go that's somebody's else job or filling in a form it's someone else job. Or why should I review my programme or why are we doing this exercise. You still get a bit of that. And I think it's about taking ownership, I think there has been a lot of evolution in that, particularly in our sector with delegation of authority and as we step up to level 9 and as we mature, I think that becomes more of a realisation" (SL4_IT)

Aspects of the system that are observed by participants to have changed are the levels of engagement within institutions and the emergence of the student voice as illustrated by this quotation from QP3_IT.

> Some aspects certainly are the same but broadly speaking the whole engagement, student engagement, learner engagement

and engagement with colleagues has changed dramatically. I'll give you a simple example. We were talking about reviews there recently. When I arrived at one institution the staff wouldn't have seen the school review documentation that was going for the panel, it would have been written by the management and the staff were there to defend it. So, that would have been a mentality once upon a time but that has changed. So, the engagement with staff on academic as well as with learners, which the learner engagement has changed dramatically in that time. (QP3_IT)

The context of higher education has also influenced the evolution of quality systems in higher education. The increased role of regulation across the sector is viewed by a number of participants (n=7) as contributing to putting quality assurance and enhancement 'front and centre' (QP11_IT) within higher education. SEC 3 observes the influence of an accountability culture at all levels of society from government to student expectations.

"it has become more complicated, but I suppose that's the way of the world It has certainly become more detailed and in some cases more prescriptive. As governments themselves have got more involved as there's greater demand for accountability. There's much better information to students, to the taxpayer, to government agencies and to the general public, I suppose, which probably keeps driving a more detailed, or more, more complicated in some cases, more detailed, more in depth responses" (SEC3)

Although this increase on regulation has been observed, some participants (n=2) also refer to a move away from a compliance culture.

I think there is much more transparency and there is much more of an enhancement focus on quality. Whereas previously it was one of very much about compliance and whilst there is still a role of compliance there, it seemed to be something much broader now. (SL10_PI)

Notwithstanding this, quality professionals still experience resistance to quality activities and use a range of mechanisms to navigate their respective

organisations and their cultures. When asked how they went about their work, quality professionals used these exact phrases or language that was coded by the researcher as facilitators (n=20), diplomats (n=11), trustees (n=14) and change agents (n=7). The following describes the tools and mechanisms that they use in carrying out their role.

8.1 Quality Professional as Relationship Builder

Quality professionals build Relationships are through creating trust, co-creation of policies and initiatives and in mutual respect for roles. This quotation from QP16_DAB describes how they create these relationships highlighting the importance of spending time and understanding their perspective.

> I think you need to keep people company in organisations in lots of different ways to learn cultures, systems, perspectives. So, it's time. As I say, I might not have given things enough time on previous occasions, but I do believe that is spending time with people, just learning what they think, where they're coming from and what they're trying to achieve, and you know how they experience the system and policy and procedures and how it works or doesn't work with them. And you know, trying to unpick that (QP16_DAB)

Trust is considered by many participants to be critical to the role (n=14) Trust is engendered through listening, communicating and being an objective but guiding voice in interactions. Gaining and maintaining the trust of colleagues is seen across all sectors to be a core requirement of the essential relationship building exercise that quality professionals engage in when taking on their role.

> "I suppose one huge aspect of the job is confidentiality. There's an element of diplomacy to it as well because sometimes you know when you're feeding back, also things like surveys that things go to the right committees, they do it in the right order. Things are done properly, and things are communicated in the right way and information is kept confidential and only provided to those who should have access to it. That's a trust as well that anonymisation and proper processes and everything are there.

Because if you're asking people, you know, confidentiality and self-assessment report is very important in that we're trusted. We retain that. We've done all that. So, I think we've earned that" (QP6_LP)

I think developing good relationships with the key players at all levels is crucial. I think developing relationships where people trust you, they know that you won't... you will ask for what you need and not for anything more, that you will deliver on your commitments and expect them to do likewise. A good open communicative relationship with trust is crucial". (QP10_DAB)

QP22_PI observes that trust has to be reciprocal between staff and the quality office.

trust is just hugely; hugely important you know. That they trust you and that you ultimately trust them. Like and the same way that you can design a programme, or you can get a programme validated etc. etc. And you have to trust that the faculty are going to stand and deliver that programme as it's designed, you know. So, the quality assurance office has to trust staff hugely. (QP22_PI)

The engagement of the quality professional and quality function in the broader community is also important to the success of building relationships and trust.

"So I think kind of communication and listening. Awareness of what is happening in the environment like. You can't just live in a bubble say we are the quality assurance office, and this is what we do. You have to be aware of different factors going on around the college. And that's relationships again and being involved in different activities and again because we are trusted and that we tend to be on different committees and get asked to be, to represent and then we find out different information and we communicate it amongst ourselves". (QP17_DAB)

In building that trust and in building relationships, the study explored whether the background of the quality professional impacted on how they

were perceived among colleagues. Participants agreed that having an academic background is of value when dealing with academic staff so that quality professionals are seen as credible and understand the perspective of the academic.

> "But from my personal perspective what I think works very well when I go out to talk to lecturers, to work with lecturers is because I was a lecturer, I was a programme chair, I was an assistant at a school and I kind of worked my way up so that I can talk to them and know exactly what they're saying. I understand the language. I can talk to them. [using]. non-QA vocabulary and we can communicate very effectively …. So, I think when I go down and speak to them, I think that people assume and mostly they're right, that I understand the issues, the problems (QP14_DAB)

> "If I'm going into an academic department and I'm explaining to them that we are going to review all of their quality systems and let's consider research. And if you are coming from a background with no research background, there is a very cynical view from the academic's perspective, whose bread and butter is research. But if you can prove that you have got a fairly decent understanding of what their day to day work is and it's very difficult to get buy in…., you do need to be able to engage on a particular level". (QP19_DAB)

This view is shared by senior leaders in a DAB and linked provider, who believe that credibility based in an academic background is seen to complement the personality and skillsets of the quality professional.

> "the personality and the skill sets are more important than the background. But the background, the academic background does give some credibility when dealing with departments. If you think about it, as if you were doing quality reviews in an airline, a pilot would be better and if you were doing quality reviews of doctors, a doctor would be better, not necessarily in having the skills or having any different perspective but just having the credibility that the other person would assume that you had the understanding of what the issues were" (SL8_DAB).

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"on the director level of QA that it does need somebody who can have positive and influential relationships and good and mutual relationships with, obviously with senior staff to the president, vice president registrar, but also with school and with faculty a certain level of credibility, who can bridge that gap, you know, between them (SL7_PI)

This quality professional in a linked provider believes that recognising and acknowledging how quality assurance requirements can impact on the academic workload can assist the quality professional in building relationships.

...so and I do think myself that quality functions can do a lot around that in terms of the mechanics about, but also in terms of suggestions around how quality is done within functions, you know, to mean, so it avoids that distortion of workload or particular individuals (QP6_LP)

QP14_DAB believes that academics inaccurately often view the quality professional as someone who doesn't understand what the academic does and doesn't relate to their world.

....in most cases incorrectly you perceive these people here as quality assurance people, they don't really know what we do, and I don't think that that's actually the reality. But you know, I've said before the perception of reality is more important than reality." (QP14_DAB)

For quality professionals who come from a non-academic background, they use different devices to build relationships and demonstrate their credibility and legitimacy in the role. Being visible and actively engaged with academic colleagues builds relationships where quality professionals are seen to be helpful and supportive.

"It's about getting us out of the office and getting us seen in the university and known in the university. And we always try and go if somebody asks us to do stuff, for the most part we'll go yeah. We'll try and do that, or we'll try and help with that. And, again,

it's becoming we got that… I don't know if validation is the right word…that recognition or that respect. So, it's that respect from senior academics which you need in order to be effective in what you do". (QP13_DAB)

One way that I found useful is kind of positioning quality assurance and the quality assurance office as a support function for academics. So, …. just working with staff over the last number of months who are involved now in programme review and a lot of them are involved in programme review for the first time. And yeah, I suppose being there in a supporting role. (QP22_PI)

Quality professionals' experience in higher education and the political skills that they have developed also assist them in relationship building. Being diplomatic with language as well as demonstrating competence and discipline knowledge assists in creating legitimacy and trust.

I've worked in higher education for long enough, I've paid attention to how things run. So I kind of know, some of the landmines that you just don't tread on between your use of language or use of concepts. So I understand those. But what I would say is that I am fully conversant with higher education as an as a legitimate area of research. I am well read. (QP23_DAB).

Relationships with senior management and governance are also regarded as important by quality professionals to their effectiveness.

"So, I suppose I wouldn't say schmoozing, but I spend a proportion of my time just making sure that not too long an interval has intervened between my last meeting with a particular person, a head of school or a head of a unit, and the most recent meeting. So, just keeping in touch and knowing what's going on and them knowing that they can call on us for assistance." (QP10_DAB)

8.2 Quality Professional as Broker

A number of quality professionals interviewed described an aspect of their role as 'intermediary' (n=2) or 'broker' (n=9) between either the awarding body or quality assurance agency and the institution or between senior management and academic staff.

Quality professionals working in the private/independent sector can find themselves having two different hats as a mediator or broker between QQI and their institution as this participant has observed.

> In being there in a supporting role rather than as a, not a regulatory role, that's the wrong word to use but as the kind of, the mediator between a regulator/awarding body and our own institution. So, that's been useful, and it's benefitted me in getting to understand the processes and some of the difficulties in the processes that the staff are being asked to undertake. How certain difficulties can be slightly remedied and lessened to a degree and then also just yeah, just practical working relationships with staff has been very beneficial. (QP22_PI)

In this case, the quality professional uses their role in their own organisation to explain or mediate with QQI to change process to assist implementation within the institution and to further build relationships. A balance has to be struck as sometimes the quality professional is seen as the voice of QQI within the institution.

> Yeah, I suppose the difficulty is that you're trying to, and especially as a private provider you're very much a lot of the time speaking on behalf of QQI and things like that, you know. That can be challenging" (QP22_PI)

Another quality professional from the private/independent sector has had similar experience where they use communication and discussion with QQI to inform their own opinion and their communication of QQI policy within their own institution

> where I don't agree with something I will challenge myself as to why I don't agree with something. So, almost try to argue with

myself and if I have a good argument then I'll kind of pick up the phone and I'll talk to someone about it from the regulator side and kind of give them that feedback or ask for more context and see where we're at after that. I don't like taking things on blind faith. So, if I can't find a good reason for something, I will go looking for a good reason whether that's from the regulator or whether ringing a peer in another institution that has more experience than me. I just kind of reach out and look for people to talk to about it. Because what I would never want to happen is that I would bear a negative opinion of something that I would then kind of pollute the chain internally. Because ultimately, we have to do it and if you let that negativity kind of fester then people are getting involved in compliance exercise for the sake of it. (QP2_PI)

QP2_PI is aware of their potential of their personal opinion to colour the long-term effectiveness of the particular policy within the institution.

A quality professional working in the DAB environment also sees themselves as working on the boundary between agencies and their institutions in bringing policy back to the institution. In doing so, they become a mediator and interpreter when thinking about how that policy can be implemented within their institution. In this case, they have to give consideration to the autonomy of the institution and find a way to meet the requirements of an agency and what is considered palatable in their own institution.

Let's say there's an external policy. And so from a policy agency perspective, they're interested in, you know, a straight implementation, there's this rational policy, and it needs to be implemented in the institution. But as somebody that's on that mediating boundary, I will be thinking about, well, how do we frame this internally? How do we use what we're doing currently to respond to, to perhaps this policy ask, and where's the line in what's reasonable for the policy to ask for, given the autonomy of the institution, so I'm always juggling that one in my mind" (QP23_DAB)?

Quality professionals are also viewed as collaborators and enablers across the entire institution working with a variety of roles by senior leaders. This ability to collaborate constructively is highlighted by this senior leader as a requirement of the senior quality professional so that the quality agenda is viewed as constructive and positive.

> "I think it's really important that you don't have, and we've had some people in QA that were very difficult very self-important, very sort of self-righteous, very blame driven…. the last thing you want is somebody in QE that's feared, because then it gets in, you know, that's really not a good place to be. So, you want to enable capable, supportive, not entirely tolerant of everything, but, you know, constructive enabler of best practice" (SL6_PI)

Quality professionals are also required to act as interpreters of legislation, consultation documents guidelines and standards for their institutions. For this quality professional in the private/independent sector, the application of frameworks from a range of environments assists them in benchmarking activities and supports the quality assurance system as a whole within the institution.

> "I suppose things that are coming from the HEA that are guidelines that maybe not necessarily as a private institution that we have to do, that we should be benchmarking for good practice and anything that's coming from any relevant professional bodies. That we're able to take their standards and their guidelines and interpret them appropriately for our environment because quality assurance is a provider led process, but it needs to be informed by the relevant standards" (QP2_PI)

Quality professionals see it as their role to translate official documents into the language of the organisation or to synthesise it into relevant and supportive documentation that will help users of the documentation in whatever activity that they are engaged with. According to QP16_DAB, if the documentation is not translated from technical, bureaucratic language, it creates a disconnect between the rationale for doing something in a particular way.

QA is often text heavy, understanding exactly what we're talking about involves a lot of words and you don't have to be a millennial to prefer to work in pictures or in sound bites. So, to get into the detail which some of the QA stuff requires or understanding nuances around it, people like don't have the patience..., so they want you to do it for them. You just tell me what to do, which doesn't help because ultimately the disconnect will grow and you'll end up telling people to do things that they don't want to do and there's no longer a will to know why. So, that sense of how to make it interesting, how to make it relevant, how to make it supportive" (QP16_DAB)

Interpreting and translating is also used to different effect when dealing with different stakeholders. Differentiating between principles and requirements, rules and procedures is essential depending on the stakeholder group and how they relate to quality assurance requirements.

"So you know, sometimes when I work with and, you know, from working almost from an administrative perspective, I would become very aware of language. So, you know, how administrative practice can be quite rules based. And so, you know, I suppose I would attune myself to see, you know, thinking, Well, how do we translate that now into a context, that's going to make sense for the academics, so you kind of move from rules to principle and principle back to rules. And so I find that, that that's the stock and trade, of tracing in this space that you're translating, you're mediating. And I think you're tuning in, and quite easily. You know, it's often the case that interesting matters or indeed quite valid policy considerations can and enjoy very poor support, based on how they're how they are framed, so framing is very, very important". (QP23_DAB)

QP23_DAB highlights the ongoing relationship between translating and mediating that takes place between the quality professional and stakeholders and the need to carry this out in order to gain support for policy initiatives.

8.3   Quality Professionals as Co-creators

Quality professionals use techniques to bring the views of peers together to create new knowledge such as a new policy or process. These techniques include the use of cross functional teams or working group to bring key stakeholders together to co-create policy. QP11_IT describes how they created a working group from across a wide range of stakeholders to create a new initiative. This extensive engagement in developing the initiative ensured buy-in from the beginning and reduced the potential for resistance to the initiative at a later stage.

> "So, first of all, I got together a team of people who were from across the institute. So, basically, nobody could say there was no input from whoever in that particular initiative. It just developed without talking to or consulting or anything. So, it was very much a cross institute team, got their input, then put together the website. So, they were very much front and centre in developing it. So, when you're front and centre in developing it, It's very hard to come along and say I don't like it". (QP11_IT)

Another quality professional from a DAB expressed a similar view that by getting stakeholders involved in the development of the quality assurance mechanism, the mechanism is more likely to succeed as the considerations of all stakeholders are taken into consideration.

> "I think a common challenge in the implementation of new policy or procedure is failure to account for all the detail of the implementation and operationalisation because policies are full of principles and how something should be done. But if you end up getting a policy approved about how things should be done and the system won't let it be done or nobody thought about what changes have to be made to the operations to fulfil whatever the requirements of the policy are, then the whole thing falls apart. So the best way of preventing that is in the policy development phase, when you create policy working groups. You get the operational people involved directly from the outset and they help to crystallise your mind about what you're trying to achieve, what systems you need to achieve them.   What the operational

implications are, all the way down the line. So I think that's really an important thing. There's no point in devising a policy that won't work in practice" (QP8_DAB).

This approach to co-creation also increases compliance and embeds the quality culture in the organisation through greater ownership. In the example below QP14_DAB describes how the redesign of a process through engagement with an academic grouping increased compliance with submission of annual reports. Through a combination of taking away some of the administrative burden associated with the process and co-developing the process, academic staff have taken ownership of the process.

> So, what we did is we redesigned the form so to speak, completely. We provided all the data for them instead of them going off to find data. We provided that for them and redesigned the form and we gave them ownership of the form……. We let them develop the form with us and then over two years we got up to 100% compliance with it and that would mean that, now it might have been 98% but it means now you can go after the 2% and say look everyone else has dropped this in, you need to get this in, this is what you developed. This isn't imposed. So, I think that works very well, giving them ownership of the quality assurance procedures. (QP14_DAB)

8.4   Quality Professionals as Influencers

The influence of quality professionals is viewed by quality professionals and senior leaders as being embedded both in the person and in the role which they inhabit. Influence can be achieved through membership of academic and operational committees as well as through the personal attributes of individuals. Where operational responsibility for quality lies in senior roles such as Registrars or Directors of Quality, the quality professional is perceived to have more individual overt influence. QP2_PI illustrates this view by highlighting that quality issues are actioned to attended to as a result of the seniority of their line manager, even if staff do not agree with the approach taken. Their role at middle management level has less influence due to lack of seniority.

"So, I'm not at a senior management level, I'm kind of at a middle management level so I'm not the ultimate responsibility for quality assurance. So, that's where my influence would be limited that I'm not on the top layer. But at the senior level where the responsibility is for quality assurance there it will be listened to because that's where the responsibility is delegated. So, even if people don't agree with it, they'll ultimately kind of get on with it because the person with the responsibility for it is saying it" (QP2_PI)

Yet not being a member of senior management is viewed by QP26_LP to be positive as it allows the quality professional to operate separately to management. By not being part of the senior management team, QP26_LP sees that they have more freedom to challenge practice.

"I'm actually glad I'm not really on it. [senior management team] …. because I think I can probably stand outside and actually, you know, I have more I can say then you know, in a way" (QP26_LP)

However, quality professionals in all sectors highlight the importance of having their voice at decision making fora so that quality matters are considered.

I think the quality assurance office can make and should be allowed and empowered to propose recommendations that are then either rejected or accepted and to feed those into different committees, in particular, …. operations and academic council. And I suppose a reason be given as to why a particular recommendation isn't being accepted. (QP22_PI)

A distinction is made between being a decision maker and being consulted when decisions are being made. The emphasis is on ensuring that the decision making process is informed through appropriate consultation with the quality professional.

"I would like to be involved in this, even if I'm only sitting in do, you know what I mean, if I'm not a full member, or whatever, whatever capacity is needed, particularly sitting in here hearing the discussions that are going on, because, you know, I can

always bend somebody's ear afterwards to say, what is my need to be involved there, whatever, and I'm happy to help out, ...they do consult on certain thing. (QP24_DAB)

The size of the institution also impacts how influential the quality professional can be as does their length of service within an institution, even if not within the same role. Communications across institutional silos is seen to be important which is perceived to be better in smaller institutions as indicated by the view of QP21_PI.

Now if the head of the department here had a certain wish or a desire or a plan to do something, that would be taken on board but also any input from the QA side would be fully taken on board as well and it wouldn't proceed without QA approval, really. But I think in other organisations it may do and that the influence might be slightly siloed sometimes and that maybe that role is seen more as an overarching role, rather than as a particular role that has involvement in every programme and every project and QA is involved in every programme, every project that goes on, which keeps life interesting. (QP21_PI)

The influence held by the quality professional is also connected to the quality of the communication coming from the quality function and its visibility within the organisation. QP13_DAB from a degree awarding body highlights the challenges to communicating through the committee structure of the organisation.

"It's [communication] not going down. And that's to do with size. The small institutions have everybody there. Larger institutions have representatives. So, it's about trying to get that filtered down and that's what we find the hardest I think is to get it filtered past those key areas like academic council and that. So, that's why we try and do go out to faculties. it's that communication piece". (QP13_DAB)

Both quality professionals and senior leaders share a similar view of the influence of the quality professional role, linked to the importance of the

culture of the organisation in supporting that influence. QP12_IT perceives their influence as impacting incremental rather than dramatic change.

> "I think it is influencing change positively whether it's a very dramatic change? Probably not. It takes time. I think it's influential in the sense that it's helping us get better every year. I have to think that otherwise I'd just pack up and go home. I do believe that". (QP12_IT)

The behaviours that quality professionals use are a factor in the achievement of positive influence. Using soft skills and persuasion a soft power is exercised. This senior leader in a DAB observes that if the approach taken to quality is one based in enforcement, the influence becomes negative and the response from the community is one of compliance.

> "I think it's influential, but not authoritative. In the sense, I think its influence is in soft power. It can persuade and suggest, but it can rarely enforce something. …. If the quality function gets very enforcement focused, then the community backs away from it. And it can be it can be disempowered, then by being focused on token things that don't make any difference" (SL8_DAB)

The relationship between the quality function, its director and senior management is an important factor in the influence that the quality professional has in the organisation. The Director role needs to have the support of the senior management team in the HEI to carry out their role.

> And what becomes very important, I think, in terms of quality being influential, is that it has senior sponsorship and support. (QP24_DAB)

This view is supported by senior leaders who point to the central role of institutional leaders in supporting the lead figure in the quality function:

> "the degree of influence it has depends on the communication piece around it and often the leads, you know, the champion, the lead figure in it, but it also depends on the leader themselves. It's the tone at the top piece…. if you if you have a quality lead to

director of quality who's doing their best or whatever, but you have somebody in a senior vice presidential or presidential role who…is not interested in quality, doesn't take it seriously, who doesn't see why we should listen to it. It's going to be enormously difficult for that person to gain any traction. So there is a two way dimension to the quality process which I think depends not only on the leader in the function, but also the tone of the top piece" (SL9_LP).

The leadership attributes of the quality professional and how they engage within their organisation impacts the influence that they have within their organisation.

Leadership of course is central. You have to be able to lead people and you have to be able to lead people in a collegial manner. It's not a confrontational post. It's very much a collegial development rather than as I say there's no stick. You have to lead people without them knowing they're being led if that makes sense". (QP11_IT)

Taking a leadership role in developing a culture of quality is also identified as enhancing personal effectiveness and that of the quality function.

"The interesting thing that I think I would like to develop is around that cultural thing. Is around raising quality as a cultural thing within the organisation to somehow have it that within this organisation we do things right first time, you know, there's an expectation that stuff is done right. So, I think there's something around that piece that that's something I'd like to work on around, how you develop or help to develop a culture around that. Because I think if people have bought into the idea and understand why quality is important, getting them to do the forms and so on afterwards is relatively, it's easier. Whereas if all you're doing is giving them forms and they really haven't bought into the culture why this is important or why we need to do it, I think you're always …. So, it's maybe something about leadership as well maybe as well as culture, you know. As I said, you know,

you can sit down and develop a good process and procedure and a good form and so on but it's that other piece really that you have to try and sell the idea to" (QP15_IT)

This influence of quality roles is also seen to be based in the importance that the institution places on external quality assurance activities such as re-engagement with QQI and the CINNTE institutional review process. This senior leader describes how the institution prepared for the re-engagement process with QQI and how communicating what quality roles do and how important the outcome of the re-engagement process is to the institution has enhanced the perception of the role within the institution.

"and we've done a lot of things like town halls, over the past year, where we've been updating people on changes we're making, we've done a lot of stakeholder engagement, when we've been doing some policy review, really, to try and give people as much ownership as possible. And in all of the processes that that we're developing or reviewing. And so I think all of that has, has helped, and, and people I suppose have, also, I think, their respect for the people involved and, you know, is, is quite good "(SL3_PI)

The creation of new roles with a dedicated quality related focus, such as assistant registrar, is also seen to have enhanced the influence of the quality agenda within institutions in the IoT sector. Both QP12_IT and SL4_IT highlight the importance of this role in enhancing the quality assurance and enhancement capacity of their institutions.

"I think even having the extra body means that we can do more. So, all those things that we knew. We knew that we needed to be providing more support in designing new programmes, for example. Nobody had the time to go away and do it". (QP12_IT)

The role of assistant registrar has been key, rolling out key projects and key initiatives. And that's what...we have had two

assistant registrars in that time, and they both served that role of leading out on key projects to get stuff. And by getting those up and going, we got success. (SL4_IT)

A quality professional in an IOT also commented that a combination of institutional focus on quality and the personal attributes of the individual also contribute to the influence of the quality professional.

> So I've been told that I have form, right...... So people would say yes, she knows what she's doing. So I'm just not like a blow in right. But the other thing is that I'm actually surprised at how many not only just lecturers but say heads of our department and our deans are now asking for my advice. Not just me as the person but me as the head of quality (QP9_IT)

Sectoral and senior leaders hold the view that quality professionals could be more influential through demonstration of leadership in quality enhancement rather than in compliance.

> I think the quality office could have more of an influence in terms of setting an agenda and really communicating clearly quality enhancement as a focus rather than quality, compliance, So I do I do believe the term quality is used a lot. I just don't I'm not totally convinced that it is the first thing that somebody thinks about when they're thinking about how they will deliver their programme next year. (SL1_DAB)

Further influence within the sector could be achieved through the development of 'thought leadership' within the sector according to a sectoral representative as discussed earlier in Section 7.3 p.212.

> And in a sense, you know, I would like to see the quality community be a little bit more of a thinking sort of community. And I know, it's very difficult because there is a lot of process to, you know, to be delivered and to work through and, you know...for good or ill we, there are legal obligations that have to be fulfilled, you know, and, but it should be a community I think ...that is doing a little bit of thinking You know, again, I hate using

the jargon but some level of thought leadership in it, you know. And is saying things around is saying things around quality and, you know, courageously to where issues around funding and other supports from the state are inadequate (SEC4)

This corresponds to the view of QP24_DAB that quality professionals should be setting the agenda for discussions in Section 7.3. p.211 and a view by QP14_DAB that QQI should create a 'thinktank' where quality professionals could inform national policy before it was sent out to the sector for wider consultation.

> QQI could facilitate a kind of thinktank of quality assurance people.... They know the people that have written documents, [that have]. written a quality assurance system .... [and] know the complexities... I think would help the QQI policy development (QP14_DAB).

8.5   Quality Professionals as Change Agents

Overall, quality professionals see themselves facilitators of change. This change is being enacted through slow and incremental continuous improvement not necessarily through dramatic change:

> "unless we are making effecting positive change regularly, then we are not doing our jobs properly". (QP19_DAB)

Facilitating quality enhancement as the preferred focus of the role was a continuous theme through the interviews with participants. While quality assurance processes are deemed to be important and essential for accountability and compliance reasons, greater value to the institution is delivered through quality enhancement and action based on the outcomes of quality assurance activities.

> I think for me the bit where you're trying to change and evolve and enhance is the bit that excites me more if that makes sense, on a personal level. (QP12_IT)

Being a change agent and affecting change can be a challenging part of the

role for some participants. This is linked to influence and being able to impact the discussion on how to link review outcomes with actions and to have those implemented within the organisation, particularly where implementation is hindered by wider institutional issues.

> "there's a great good intent to deal with review outcomes, but sometimes if they're too difficult, then, you know, there's lots of ways of seeing why the review, you know, why, why they're not possible. And, and nobody seems to own those. And I think that part of part of the role and the bit that I would really like to develop around my service is that where there are matters, which are, I would describe, you know, institutional significance that they are horizontal, and that, you know, that we would enable those to be progressed. So, you know, to configure and, you know, let's just say short term groups to advance those and to, you know, function as the point of coordination and bring at the relevant parties together to take the matter forward to serve the institution? I think that's, and that's something I would love to be able to do. But that's something that is, a little way away". (QP23_DAB)

A senior leader acknowledges that a compliance mindset can set in at committee levels where documents are considered, and the concern is with compliance rather than thinking about quality or a strategic approach to change management.

> our committee on quality has become a bit stale in a sense and has become just another committee that drives a compliance focus. So [the committee] reads, what is coming in from QQI or from other bodies, and then just make sure make sure that the university is able to address those issues in the best way that the university can in the context of that requirement, rather than necessarily thinking about it in a specific way (SL1_DAB)

Others have used the processes and rituals of quality assurance to affect change within their organisation. QP14_DAB has used the requirements of the quality assurance process to introduce pedagogical enhancements in programmes.

"I'd been at that stage working for maybe six, seven, eight years on education development and found that you can only go so far and there was a barrier. So, I tried to do that as merge those two areas, quality assurance and education development to try and push the change further out among more people...... Quality assurance became part of the vehicle by which I thought I could introduce educational development." (QP14_DAB)

8.6 Summary

This chapter has presented findings relating to the behaviours that quality professionals use to carry out their role and relate to their colleagues, line managers and representatives of external agencies.

The approaches that quality professionals take to working with colleagues in their institutions are common across the three subsectors. Quality professionals work as brokers, mediators, collaborators, and relationship builders to influence their colleagues and institutions. They see themselves as change agents and interpreters of policy, with an important role in assisting their institutions to meet their objectives.

The role of quality professional is seen to be demanding and requiring skills of diplomacy and patience. Quality professionals require resilience and can find that the role can be isolating. They experience both passive and overt resistance in carrying out their role and in order to be effective need the support of senior leadership. Senior leaders agree with quality professionals that such support should be found through the communication of the importance of quality and the quality function as well as the appropriate resourcing and recognition of the quality unit and its staff.

Sectoral and senior leaders also favour a more influential role for quality professionals, calling for quality professionals to be thought leaders on matters of quality and to be courageous in calling out where there are deficiencies in the sector as a whole. Some senior leaders and sectoral representatives would like quality professionals to challenge their institutions and the sector more. The challenge at institutional level is to push the organisation beyond compliance with statutory requirements to using the statutory obligations as a mechanism for quality enhancement.

The next chapter presents findings on the challenges experienced by quality professionals at an institutional and sectoral level. These challenges are presented as challenges to the individual as well as challenge to the achievement of an effective quality assurance and enhancement system.

9 Institutional and Sectoral Challenges to Quality Professionals

This chapter presents findings that participants reflected on in terms of day-to-day challenges that they encountered and then on broader issues facing the quality role. These range from challenges to the individual as well as challenges to achieving an effective quality assurance and enhancement system within their institution or the sector as a whole.

9.1 Resistance Experienced by Quality Professionals

While carrying out their role quality professionals experience resistance and conflict in passive and overt ways through non engagement, compliance behaviours and in temporarily or permanently strained relationships. Participants describe the need to be resilient in the face of unpopularity and resistance to the requirements of the quality assurance architecture of Irish higher education and of their institution. While participants reported that they had seen an evolution from an attitude of overt resistance to the requirements of the quality assurance to an acceptance that these requirements are an inherent part of the institution, quality assurance professionals experience resistance to the requirements of quality assurance activities. Participants' views of the source of this resistance suggest that it is related to the existing workload of academic staff, so that the requirements of the quality assurance framework are unwelcome because they add additional tasks to an already burdensome workload. This view is particularly evident outside the university sector where the teaching loads of academic staff are higher than those of university academic staff.

> That people don't, some people don't have the time and some people don't have the inclination to they're, you know they are having lunch at the desk, they are not mixing with people. The place is a bit, […] is a bigger place than in 2001 when I joined. You'll often see offices and people are eating lunch at their desks. They are not really, they don't, it's hard for them to get a chance to talk to people in other disciplines. (SL5_IT)

This senior leader from a linked provider shares the view that workload allocation can negatively impact on the relationship between academic staff

and quality professionals. Resentment or resistance is not against quality itself but on the additional workload that it brings.

> often a quality process can add really quite significantly to a workload situation, in a department or in a discipline or in a function. And if you all if you already have a situation, which you do in many cases where workloads are unevenly distributed, and in some cases, the workload in relation to the quality process, ends up with the people who are already busy. That that creates resentment and difficulty, which is not actually in some ways belonging to quality itself, but it's because the distribution of workloads tends to be a bit uneven anyway, even with good workload models (SL9_LP)

Other reasons for resistance cited by participants are a difference in perspective and mindset of the academic where quality assurance is seen as part of a teaching and learning agenda that they do not fully share, where research is the preferred activity of the academic. QP14_DAB highlights this tension where academic staff see their jobs as researchers and that the additional workload associated with quality work as taking away from that time allocated to research.

> "I'll talk about teaching and learning but even quality assurance in that. They predominantly see their jobs; a lot of lecturers see their jobs as researchers. So, they come into the university to really research, not to teach. Teaching is something that just provides the mechanism for them to do research. So, if you're saying okay, we have all these quality assurance procedures or we want to be more innovative in your teaching or we want you to give feedback on students and then integrate that and reflect on that. They see that as just taking away from their research activities. So, it's not that they don't really agree with it and actually a lot of the stuff you ask them to do they do in their research, you know. They're doing it all the time in their research; they'd never do the things that they do in their teaching in their research. But it's just taking away from their time". (QP14_DAB)

Fear of being exposed as not being 'good at their job' through quality mechanisms such as student feedback mechanisms or through peer review of programmes is regarded as another reason for resistance by QP3_IT.

> "Anyone in quality anywhere is going to be regarded with scepticism. I think sometimes, not all of the time. Sometimes we instil fear in people that there's going to be some kind of judgement and some kind of extra work …. the judgement is probably because obviously we publish all of our reports now. And for anyone who regards themselves as really professional, that reflection on what they're doing. On what aspect of it they're doing, it would instil fear wouldn't it because we're talking about quality and people assume that they are quality" (QP3_IT)

This quality professional identified that the documentation of processes and procedures, which is a requirement of quality management systems can create fear and resistance where administrative staff felt that individuals' roles within an institution could be put at risk and their place within the institution eroded. Documenting operational procedures is perceived by QP6_LP as normal practice in industry but not necessarily recognised as practice in higher education. By explaining the benefits of documenting the process, resistance has been reduced.

> …the whole thing of writing down your processes…there was this 'what do you want'? ……when you work in a more formal industry based, it's the norm. It wasn't the norm here, but I think it's becoming recognised as necessary and useful thing……. there can be an element of that, that [view] that their area can be scrutinised or whatever. Whereas we've conveyed that this is documenting this because it's good to capture this knowledge and make sure it's up to date and enables training, it enables people to go on leave and I think that's getting there (QP6_LP)

QP4_DAB experienced similar resistance from administrative groups.

> Initially it was insecurity and people felt like, I do a job and I'm good at it and if I write it down. This now was particularly within …[dept] when we started first. I do a job and I'm good at it but if

I write it down anybody else could come in and do my job for me and there was very much this, you know, it's my knowledge (QP4_DAB)

Where resistance to quality assurance processes is met and cannot be overcome through negotiation and persuasion, quality professionals refer their concerns to senior management in an effort to find resolution. QP7_DAB describes how the support of senior leaders is important in diffusing difficult situations.

if somebody has a temper tantrum at me, and they have had temper tantrums with me, I have had somebody tell me that they're going to resign if I force a quality review on them, ... [senior leader] goes out and you know, ... [and] talks people down (QP7_DAB)

Escalation to senior management is invoked where all else has failed and considered as a last resort as the quality professional is aware of the impact that an unwilling participant in a review can have on the value of the process.

if they were just purely being obstreperous and, you know, not wanting to do is because they just didn't want to do it, and nothing was going to move them, but then I'd have to take probably a different approach. And I would acknowledge that that's the way I sense it, that they're not doing this for any valid reasons. But they are actually just don't want to do it. And that's a very different scenario. And that's where you probably have to get very tough and just say, I'm sorry, you're going to have to do this and to try and work with them as best you can. But I think if you end up in that situation, you're probably going to be working with the department who's going to resist all the way through? And I don't know if they get much value from the exercise (QP24_DAB)

QP15_IT describes how the committee structure of the organisation as the 'stick' to encourage peers to engage with processes. This includes exception reports to Academic Council, or through presenting to academic or governance committees.

we do monthly reports to academic council, so this is where we're at in the process and this is where we'd be and obviously faculties don't want to be appearing on a list as being in delay. So, that maybe you know, pushes people along (QP15_IT)

This raises the visibility of quality matters within the organisation and can bypass elements of resistance. The committee structures are also used by QP26_LP as a support structure to help with implementation and difficult decisions.

I think what's. interesting about higher education which is different to private industry... in private industry, it tends to be your fault. You're kind of on your own if something goes wrong, generally, you're to blame or, get to take the worry on you, I find in in higher ed that because of the committee and structures that you can, to a degree, you know, you have other people you can call on if you if you need them. (QP26_LP)

The balance between using senior management and the governance structures as a buffer to overcome resistance is a delicate one. As pointed out by a senior leader resorting to this approach can further ingrain resistance to quality functions and perpetuate frustration on behalf of the quality professional.

"And I think there's a sort of a vicious cycle that nobody likes a review. Nobody likes any kind of external oversight. So, the quality officer can then feel a bit defensive. And then the kind of reinforcements you call in when you feel defensive are the regulations, the documents, the ESGS, and that alienates people still further from them. And so, you get this sort of compliance because it's in the rulebook, and we have to comply, which leads the academics to see this as the bureaucratization of higher education and leads the quality officer to say nobody likes what I'm doing and it's a frustrating role". (SL8_DAB) _

9.2 Perceptions of Quality Professionals.

The perception of quality professionals within higher education organisations is perceived by the participants, including QPs themselves, to be mixed and responses to this question brought forward a response of both self-deprecating language from quality professionals themselves and an acknowledgement from the senior leaders that the role is difficult and can be challenging.

> "as people working in the quality assurance area, you will get joke remarks, but they are tongue in cheek really, there is a bit of element of truth in there. And where you referred as the doctor's receptionist or the rottweiler or even the Stalin office!" (SL10_PI)

> "I wouldn't personally like to be in a quality role myself because I think it's a hard role to be in and you're asking people to do stuff. And people often don't see the obvious benefits of it or why they should do it. (SL9_LP)

Behaviours used against quality professionals are indicative of compliance behaviours and game playing as indicated by the experience of QP26_LP.

> "I remember being told by one academic that people would smile at me and nod, but they wouldn't do a thing I said. (QP26_LP)

The separation of personal and professional identity has proved challenging for quality professionals. This is dealt with through depersonalising negative feedback and developing skills to appreciate that feedback is usually cyclical.

> "you have to be incredibly reflexive and think about your own practice and what you're bringing to the situation and how you create objectivity in your role. So, that people don't think that it's you and so that you don't take it personally when the bounce back comes and it's not easy by any means. But it's important" (QP2_PI)

> "I suppose then you're kind of regarded as policing in one part of your job and there might be a mixture of respect and resentment as a result of that and that is one thing that's very hard to accept,

you know. But if you take the barbs and assume that on other days the same people will be offering compliments then, you have to move on and just accept that" (QP3_IT).

QP26_LP illustrates the struggles that quality professionals engage with where they feel the responsibility of calling out an issue, maintaining a position of trust in the organisation and maintaining professional relationships. Calling out an issue is particularly challenging where there is a power imbalance between the quality professional and the other party.

> I've developed more of a thicker skin now in the last while which is which is interesting…. I had to speak up about something and that person doesn't speak to me now, and they're in a position of quite a lot of power, …. I would feel awful if everybody had a mistrust of me. You know, I know there are certain people who do. And I try to keep, like, you know, where I can if even if I've had confrontation with somebody on an issue, I tried to still keep, you know, you know, the lines of communication open to a degree, because it's swings, and roundabouts and things will come back round. … it's not personal. It shouldn't be personal, you know. So, I try I suppose to keep the personal out of it if I can do you know, and which that's important (QP26_LP)

Quality professionals see themselves as being perceived as compliance officers, 'disruptive', blocks to innovation, 'a thorn in the side' of their colleagues and institutions. One participant from the IoT sector referred to quality being seen as a 'necessary evil' by senior management.

> "It [quality] ranges from tolerated and this is from the top down. Even at upper management levels, quality is seen as a necessary evil at times rather than as something that is a virtue and something that we need to have because it brings very positive outcomes to the institute. So, but that can change. There are times that we would be seen as being, you know, fantastic. It isn't always, it's a dynamic sentiment. But there certainly are times we've been accused of holding up the development of the institute" (QP3_IT).

This participant from a DAB illustrates a similar experience.

> "I think when you're starting to talk the language of quality assurance it is, for a lot of people an automatic turnoff. It means you're pressing a button of interference. Whether it's that I as the internal voice of the regulator, the internal regulator …. So, I'm either controlling or interfering or, perhaps far more benignly, boring, you know. It's just you know, really can we just get on with our jobs and really, we don't have to keep making sure the policy is up to date, we know what we're doing, and you know, just it's holding us back". (QP16_DAB)

Some quality professionals can cope with the negative relationship that they may sometimes experience and even embrace the idea of being a 'disruptive person':

> ". people are afraid to put their head up over the precipice because probably got their heads smacked down in previous iterations, so they've learned not to put their head up. Whereas, you know, I suppose I have... I don't mind getting...., I'm thinking quality management, you need to have somebody who's a disruptive person, otherwise you are not going to change anything. There's no point. You can't just leave everything the same way, because that's what people are comfortable with if it's not delivering quality." (QP7_DAB)

The compliance officer view of the quality professional is influenced by the type of quality work undertaken by quality professionals. Where the quality office is associated with the statutory review process, which is engaged in on a cyclical basis, participants suggest that quality is seen within the institution as bureaucratic rather than as a supportive and integral part of the processes of the institution.

> "Everybody understands the need for quality, and therefore they support the notion that we should be thinking about quality all the time. In practice, I think they look at the way in which we impose a quality system through the unit review, and through the programme review, as being administrative and bureaucratic and

not necessarily all that helpful, even though when units go through the process and take active part in it, they see the benefits of the other end of the work that they put in, other units would see it as something that they have to do, and it's a tick box to a certain extent. And they find that it is not useful. But that's because they didn't expect it to be or try to make it. And I think the quality office is seen in as being a somebody or a unit that comes in and make sure you're compliant rather than necessarily supporting Quality Enhancement, even though that, of course, is not what they actually do." (SL1_DAB)

The scope of the quality office and role of quality professionals can impact perception and will depend on awareness of what the role of the quality professional does within the institution.

"So, I think unless they're involved, they tend to not know what we are until we appear and then they have a weird perception of what we're going to do" (QP13_DAB).

A positive perception is reported by qualify professionals across the sector when units that have engaged with the process see the value of the quality assurance process being used as observed by QP12_IT.

"I definitively would have felt I was a thorn in their side but ultimately, they came back, and they felt that the process was really worthwhile and that they learned a lot. Where I was pulling them up, while they still view it as a pain, but they feel they know why it's happening, and they know it's a good thing ultimately even if it is a little bit painful". (QP12_IT)

The perception of the quality professional is also positive where their work through the development of policy helps colleagues get their work done. QP17_DAB's experience is that staff in HELIs appreciate when policy helps them work through issues that they encounter. The quality assurance system is used to their advantage and provides clarity.

"I think most people when they come across it first, they are a bit apprehensive but when they see how the policies work and when

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they see when they have problems or issues, how they are boxed off nicely by the quality system that you know exactly where you stand…. When they see things like that, they kind of go ok, I can see where you're coming from now. It helps me and that's the bottom line" (QP17_DAB)

Communicating a positive perspective of what quality is and the role of the quality function is highlighted by QP23_DAB. Their experience is that quality activities are assumed to be based on the premise of unearthing what is wrong rather than reflecting on what is working well.

It seems to me that people construe quality although they find value and benefits in it, they often start from the premise that quality is about finding out what's wrong, rather than identifying what's already working well. And so we often find that we have to do a lot of work and with units to help them to think about and put forward a study of good practice and, one would have thought actually, that it would seem easier to see what you're good at than to be in writing a narrative says that says, Well, we know we could be a bit better at this or, you know, to evaluate very honestly. But curiously, that has not proven to be the case". (QP23_DAB)

Confidence and resilience are personal characteristics that are highlighted by participants across the sector as required for the role to counter these perceptions and resistance experienced in the role.

"So, you do need to be confident in yourself…. a strong sense of personal competence". (QP2_PI)

"Thick skin definitely, because in the heat of the moment people can say things that maybe they would ultimately regret, maybe not …. But if you were to take all of them to heart you wouldn't leave your office and certainly the quality promotion part of it, if you were to take the offenses to heart, you'd never be able to face another team or a school or a unit, you know and motivate them to do the best representation or to question how they're putting in different parts of their submission, you know" (QP3_IT)

"They also need to have confidence because you're dealing with senior, mostly academic staff." (QP5_DAB).

The language used by a sectoral representative of survival, scoffing and booby-trapping points to an environment that often has a negative attitude to quality and quality professionals.

> if someone gets the role and they survive in it...to try getting an institutional quality culture in place that's across organisation., I think you have to have confidence and credibility as well. To be able to make that argument and pitch for it to go at it, I think you have to have resilience. Because there will be an awful lot of scoffing and resistance and there will be booby trapping. (SEC4)

During interview two participants raised the question of what would happen if the quality officer role or function did not exist and if the quality of higher education institutions remained unchanged as a result. This observation by a senior leader addresses the issue.

> if you asked the academic community here, what's the value of the quality office I would think the majority view will be it is a token box ticking exercise driven by bureaucrats. But if you actually look back at what has happened over the last 10 years, we've seen quite a number of changes and increases in standards because of the work of the quality office. So, it's not very reassuring if you're a quality officer, but ...the truth is that it is not a popular function when it's [a review] happening, but we are a better institution for having had it than we would be if we hadn't had it. (SL8_DAB)

9.3   Day to day challenges

A number of challenges that quality professionals identified within their institutions are mirrored at a sectoral level. Within their institutions, policy development and implementation are seen to be difficult to achieve due to the bureaucratic nature of policy approval and the failure of institutions to fully appreciate the resourcing and change management required to implement policies once adopted. Although often a support to quality professionals in countering resistance, the committee structures of higher

education can be seen as an obstacle to effective development. QP19_DAB describes how institutional structures can slow down the pace of change and momentum can be lost.

> I think the biggest challenges are around the length of time that it takes to get buy in and get documents signed off and things signed off, so that you can actually get down to operating or implementing any sort of project, these are the biggest barriers. And because we tend to work very much about committees in [INSTITUTION], setting up committee that that stakeholder engagement section although it's very important, the stakeholder committees can be very large and we are not very good at delineating and assigning our responsibilities...., things tend to fall between the gaps. (QP19_DAB)

Keeping up with the policy requirements for quality assurance is challenging. This participant from a private/independent institution highlights the need for effective policy implementation as well as development. Resourcing implementation adds additional cost to the institution.

> "it's all very well saying we need this policy but then when we get back to the implementation or if we could get forward to the implementation, you're then saying well, who is going to do it and again, it's a matter of capacity. Again, for smaller college, which is a not for profit college, this cost can be a big element as well. So, you have to look at costing quite carefully as well". (QP21_PI)

The resourcing of quality functions within organisations is also cited by participants as challenging to their day to day effectiveness. The increasing demands on functions due to external requirements on the sector has not been matched by increased resources

> We haven't really increased resources to the quality assurance offices at all. So, in other words people there are probably just working a lot harder than they were working. I would argue the resources are not given; the resources required. Except for one or two of the private colleges or whatever. One or two of them

that I'm aware of and that could be just because they were so far behind in their quality assurance they needed to step up. Whereas in universities it was the other way around, you already have these good people here and just get them to do more and more and more, you know. But if you're starting from scratch, I don't think you could do it that way, you know. I think if you start from scratch, you will realise you need twice as many staff. (QP14_DAB)

The observation by this participant that some private colleges may be better resourced for quality assurance is interesting. Another reason for additional resourcing in private institutions may reflect the coordination required at an institutional level for the relationship with QQI as an awarding body. This participant from the private/independent sector, however, also raises resourcing as a challenge facing quality professionals.

There's going to be a significant increased demand on quality assurance staff, units, offices, whatever you want to call them regarding the different kind of processes that we're going to have to do and the reports that we're going to have to produce and engagements with QQI that are coming down the line say in the next four to five years. And I suppose, you know, generally consensus amongst people is it's thinly spread as it is, and I think that's challenging. (QP22_PI)

QP20_1T highlights the impact of organisational growth and impacts of restructuring also impinges on the effectiveness of the quality functions as the increasing complexity of multicampus quality assurance is not considered in terms of resourcing quality:

"but organisations grow and grow and grow. But central services tend to stay the same in terms of resourcing and capacity. And there comes a point where, that becomes a challenge for people who are in central services trying to operate them. In multi campus organisations like ourselves, student numbers grow year on year, staff grow year on year in terms of delivering programmes. Central services I don't think grow proportionality. (QP20_IT)

Participants also indicated that resources to move ahead with quality enhancement activities rather than maintain the status quo of compliance are limited.

> When you start moving away from a compliance approach to quality and start looking at an enhancement, at an improvement. there's always things to improve. If it was just compliance, you could say yeah right, that's done, off you go onto the next one. But when you start looking at things from an enhancement perspective that's the pandora's box, that just keeps giving because there's nothing is ever perfect you know. So, resourcing. (QP22_PI)
>
> ....

9.4 Sectoral Challenges

Participants were asked to outline broader sectoral challenges that they perceived for quality assurance professionals. The challenges identified were (i) the increasing complexity of the regulatory environment (n=10), (ii) sectoral funding (n-=6), (iii) building and maintaining a quality culture (7) and (iv) demonstrating accountability. (n=4)

The most significant challenge that quality professionals identified in carrying out their role is the changing and complex nature of the regulatory environment. The demands of government, the HEA and QQI as well as professional and regulatory body accreditation are seen to impact on the role significantly.

> if you look at the role of quality assurance, the need for quality assurance and the requirements for quality assurance because of QQI and so on and so forth. That has just grown and grown and grown and we still are thinking of ways to even grow it by integrating with an accreditation. (QP14_DAB)

This senior leader raised the issue that communication of how the regulatory framework has changed since 2016 has not been fully achieved.

The entire statutory and regulatory frameworks has changed since 2015. And awareness and communication around that I think is a huge, not just for this institution but nationally and each institution. … The entire regulatory framework has changed from what followed from the ESG and all the new conditions and guides of 2016/17 and this responsibility more broadly and to some extent even management are not necessarily aware of that change (QP20_IT),

The additional demand on institutions is recognised at a sectoral level.

I suppose for colleagues within the private HEI sector, it's kind you know there are additional expectations now of them that they need to grapple with and become familiar with. And convince their colleagues of the utility of and the value of. …. So one of the examples would have been you know, we talk to [named person] from the private HEI about the AIQR. and the comment was made 'well I have to go back to my institution and say there is another report that we need to do. I need to be able to sell that to my colleagues'. So that's certainly, that's a challenge. (SEC2)

Access to funding for higher education in general and specifically for quality assurance and enhancement activities is also cited as challenging to quality assurance professionals across all sectors.

"Money is one of the biggest problems for us at the moment. If we had better resources, we could do our job so much better and if there were more resources, not only for the quality side but in general in the college, if there were more resources there would be less corners being cut. Some of the corners impact quality and money is easily the biggest drag that we have at the moment". (QP3_IT)

"I mean we're expected to do more with less. Budgets have been cut, you know, we're still expected to do the same thing". (QP4_DAB)

The contradiction of increasing statutory obligations and requirements while enforcing a recruitment embargo is highlighted by participants.

> "There's a lot of work to do and I think with the recession and the recruitment embargo, that really was a challenge because while that recruitment embargo was there, you had new legislation and new requirements coming in that couldn't be met with staffing". (QP6_LP)

An observation from a quality professional in a DAB shows how institutions tried to supplement state funding with other forms of income in order to maintain quality.

> "how do you maintain quality against a background of constantly dropping exchequers report? ……. if you're living on commercial fee income, as you expand and develop the operation, there is a limit to the degree you can increase fees" (QP10_DAB).

This lack of funding is perceived to add to the negative perception of quality assurance activities where the recommendations that arise out of quality processes cannot be actioned due to resource constraints.

> "If your recommendation said you need a… you know …a new chair in this or an associate professor in that, going through a quality review can bring that to the attention of quality, an academic council, but it's not going to get you the money to do it. And so, where resistance does build is where people say like, you know, …. then you will have a percentage of people doing, you know, to the end, will say that it wasn't worth the time and effort. But part of that is because they don't see that they're getting anything out of it, that is going to fix their key problem. Which are things like staff/student ratio, you know. Vacant positions, equipment and facilities and student learning environment that needs to be addressed…. if we were not living in such a resource constrained environment, then quality might be a neutral or a positive" (QP7_DAB)

This view is shared by a senior leader also in a DAB.

"But for the quality officers and for the university, the more interesting and valuable part is the part that's transforming and trying to change an organisation is always going to be difficult and always going to be frustrating. But I think it's particularly difficult at a time when everything is, so resource constrained, because there aren't the resources to dramatically change things" (SL8_DAB)

Concern about funding was also expressed by a sectoral representative. While the system continued to meet its obligations, they questioned whether systemic damage has been done, particularly in the context of attracting researchers.

we've had massive efficiency gains in the systems in the post 2008 experience, [you could see] the higher education system as being an exercise in demonstrating either how much fat was in the system or how close to the bone you can cut the system without it actually falling over but with big question marks over, you know.... Even if we increase the resources, have we killed the seed corn? Will we be able to attract back the researchers who have come here, flourished for a while in the early noughties and then discovered that we were nationally going to renege on our commitment to continue to support high quality? I think it's particularly sensitive in the research area more so than the strategic area." (SEC1)

Impacted by the preceding challenges, a further challenge identified by participants is the embedding and maintenance of a quality culture within the institution. Gaining and retaining buy-in is seen as an ongoing challenge for quality professionals in an external environment characterised by limited resources and increased demands.

So, I think that's something you have to work on all the time. That buy in. I think because of the nature of quality reviews, a department or office goes through quality review, but the quality doesn't finish with the quality review ....in the past [.it was a case of.] The quality review is over, let's go back to normal (QP6_LP)

"Work load fundamentally, the volume of work that's coming through as we ramp up in this base and resourcing that and then continue to get buy in from staff. It's a constant challenge as more and more is expected" (SL4_IT)

The challenge of ensuring the full implementation of the quality assurance system is acknowledged by a senior leader in an IoT:

"I suppose, people who are working in quality are dependent on it being embedded in the institution for it really to work. So, it's this thing about quality assurance, how are you assure that… those student engagements are going on and the feedback is being acted on and so forth. So, we are very good to put the systems in place, putting the resources in place and thinking it out is a bit trickier" (SL5_IT).

This senior leader from the private/independent sector highlights that consistent communication is required to support this activity through enhanced internal public relations.

"I think people get it that it can be right and if they have structures and supports to do it right it's you know, maybe we should do it right in the first place. Our ability to communicate and win the crowd… You know, 'win the Colosseum and win Rome, you know what I mean? (SL6_PI)

Quality professionals are also concerned with their ability to demonstrate organisational accountability which is an increasing requirement of the higher education system.

".… Extremely high work load demands associated with it ….and it is very demanding that you know, generating reports on what you're doing. I mean what you're doing is demanding enough and then reporting on what you're doing is like that next level. But it is important, and I think that really important thing across the Irish public sector as a whole is accountability. Like how institutions are, how are people, how are whatever, especially that are in receipt of public money, demonstrating accountability and

I think that for me is where quality assurance is so important that it is showing that you're actively being accountable for what you're doing (QP8_DAB)

"adhere to all the guidelines that we have and trying to ensure that we're reviewing what we need to review. That we're not being seen as just literally ticking boxes on guidelines or ticking boxes on reviews, that it is actually there to improve practice and validate good practice and there's a tendency say with the institutional review and you're still doing all your reviews. It's a huge amount of pressure on the office which is quite constrained in terms of the amount of people that work in the office for a large university" (QP13_DAB)

This senior leader in a DAB describes a concern that the increased requirement for the evidencing of quality through metrics may distort and contaminate quality assurance processes.

"the biggest problem is getting people to understand that not only is quality part of everything that we do, but we have to be able to demonstrate it in a very kind of overt way. And so, I think in many respects, people do things that they know, are quality...but actually finding ways of describing it and measuring it and demonstrating it is actually becoming more and more of a challenge. I think when we look at QQI, when we look at HEA, and we look at government, they are not satisfied with somebody, just saying yes, it all looks very well. I'm an expert in this area, and I'm telling you that everything is fine. I think they now want much more output generated metrics. And actually, they're very difficult to find in a way that actually doesn't contaminate the process, in a sense, soon as you start bringing in those metrics, and people start working towards them, then it distorts", (SL1_DAB)

This concern that metrics can be used to distort the system is shared by QP14_DAB. In this case the concern is that the metrics being used are invalid as a measure of quality

> They [the HEA] are using metrics as a measure of quality when they are not valid or reliable measured of quality. (QP14_DAB)

Other factors that are deemed challenging are the lack of agreed sectoral metrics and increase in student expectations.

9.5 Support for Quality Professionals

This section describes findings on the institutional and sector supports available to quality professionals and those that they would like to see more of.

9.5.1 *Institutional*

In asking how their institution can support quality professionals in carrying out their role the following mechanisms were highlighted (i) support at a strategic level for quality (n=10 (ii) access to senior staff and governance (n=11), (iii) support for continuous professional development (n=9), (iv) role recognition (n=7), (iv) building an organisational quality culture (n=5)

Senior level support is cited as essential by participants across the system to allow quality professionals fulfil their role. This support at a strategic level is manifested through the presence of and support for the quality voice within the organisation, though the overt support of leadership roles, the culture of the organisation and its communications policies.

> I need the backing of senior management because you're going nowhere unless you have that. You need the support to ensure that you are able to communicate, that you have the communication channels made available to you and I think that's a big thing that your senior management respects the role, respects the function, references it on a regular basis through communications, makes sure that it's identified in... it's strategies or business plans. That it is clear quality theme and a quality leader and that that has a distinct voice or presence, it's recognisable in the documentation and the communication strategies of the organisation. I think that's probably the biggest thing that the space is explicitly created for it. (QP16_DAB)

"just that notion of having a voice that's listened to and not just being a reporting function. Of being able to make recommendations based on evidence, completely impartial and objective with the benefits of the institution and the students at its very heart and to make those recommendations and for those to be listened to, trusted and you know, accepted brilliant and if not accepted then a reasoning behind why when the evidence states this, you know. And that's a demonstrable trust in quality assurance, in quality assurance practitioners and the knowledge that they have (QP22_PI)

Appropriate representation, being consulted on decisions or having a voice that informs decision making is an important indicator of support for participants as illustrated by QP24_DAB.

"I think definitely by keeping us in the loop and keeping us informed of what's going on and providing us access to at least the decision making forums and be involved in some of those decision making forums appropriately and definitely is to inform. And I think recognising that we have a value and yeah, I think actually I probably can come back to the same point. I definitely think being having the quality office more involved in institutional decision making. And even if it is on the basis of a kind of consultation, expertise voice in the room and because I know say so much that we are involved in the decision making process, to determine a certain level that's not appropriate and that maybe that's fair enough, you know, to me, but definitely that your voice is heard" (QP24_DAB)

Another manifestation of voice is having access to key personnel and committees. Where the quality professional and quality agenda is not represented well at decision making fora, quality professionals are not confident that the impact of decisions on quality related activities are understood and considered.

"if you have someone on senior management who values what you do and can speak for you at those meetings that you're not at, at those SMG meetings where we're not representative …….is

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continually there at the table going, well, you're doing this, are you thinking about this? Are you thinking about that? Because I think that gets frustrating for us if they're going, they're discussing at senior management, and they make this change and they don't think of the impacts of what it does on our office or on the quality of what we do.... The support from the senior management who sees the review and goes, this is validated. Again, going to governing authority and being our voice at the table" (QP13_DAB).

This participant from a DAB observes that not having that representation, observation rights or direct access to people or committees' forces quality professionals to interpret the outcomes of decisions second-hand.

"I certainly have support from my institution in some regards, but I suppose I wouldn't have access in ways that you know, I think would be beneficial, but I have people who have access and I use them, but you know, the same kind of thing, it's just a case of there are some meetings that I would like to be a member of for quality purposes, but it's seen as duplication because of somebody else attends those, you know. But then it's just very hard, really, you know. You end up having to read minutes of meetings to figure out, you know." (QP7_DAB)

The importance of quality professionals' representation on and access to key decision making committees is a view shared by senior leaders as illustrated by these observations from participants from private/independent and linked provider sectors.

"I think that as a senior academic, you know, it important to believe that QA does have a representation with senior management teams, senior management boards, there's so many ways, you know, you know, very simply, the QA director is the guardian of our licence to fly or licence to operate. And so that, so that voice has to be heard at the highest level, you know, on a regular basis, and given due attention and respect" (SL7_PI).

"you need to give quality, the space and the airtime. So quality officers and leaders need to be enabled and supported by you to say their piece in those various fora. And that's very critical. I also think that in terms of your, the way you respond to their piece, that is respectful, that is supportive, that it is enabling. And I do think then and in terms of staff as well, again, it comes to this tone at the top piece because often you will get even you know, people who are like Deans coming to you and saying, Well, you know, I don't have time to do this or there's more important things than quality. And that's where you know, the certainly in me. role, you go back and say, Well, actually, no, I know you're really busy. But quality is important" (SL9_LP)

Senior management support is also required in building and maintaining a quality culture that is based on a strategic rather than compliance view of quality.

"I think taking it more seriously and realising that it's not just a tick the box, …. I would consider it a strategic imperative and it's seeing the link between you know, the overall umbrella of quality and not just reviews and surveys and stuff like that" (QP4_DAB)

"I feel like I'm in this position and I'm certainly trying to bring it into different place in [INSTITUTION] A place that needs to be seen as, you know, increasing importance. And not because I'm looking for it to be important. I think it's important for the institution (QP7_DAB).

Senior managements' support in achieving compliance as a first step is highlighted by this participant in an IoT as a basis for pushing ahead with greater enhancement.

"it comes back to culture and culture quality and emphasis from the top particularly on this is how we do things, and this is important and we're doing this for a reason. So, then people aren't... not that there's a huge amount of resistance but I suppose it would be more compliance. And if you've got the compliance going on and we have our procedures and they're all

being followed, that leaves more scope then to do constant improvement with the enhancement bit "(QP12_IT)

The support of senior management to allow experimentation and innovation is identified by this participant as an important support and cultural attribute.

> "the biggest support in terms of enhancement is a sort of almost like a culture of innovation. I know that sounds like a very sort of trite statement but being prepared to pilot different approaches, gather data, learn from it, and refine as you go. You know the way some places and it's almost like having a growth mindset (QP18_PI).

These senior leaders from the IoT and DAB sectors share the view that overt support for quality assurance and enhancement activities is essential to institutional success.

> "I think if you were foolish, you'd simply say yeah, quality is ticked off, I have told them to do that, get it done and the whole lot. I mean it's a realisation that things can happen in a certain way, and we get that done. Resourcing it, supporting it, putting them out there as champions, not behind you that they are with you and ahead of you on things" (SL4_IT)

> if I had a magic wand, one of the things that I would want to do is to try and link whatever additional resources we can get to things like quality, so that we can use the resources to support improvements in quality, which would actually make staff then actively seek quality reviews as a way of mobilising their resources to move further (SL8_DAB)

Despite having support for staff in quality roles, this senior leader accepts that there may be a superficial consideration of the output of some quality assurance activities and a failure to follow through in terms of quality enhancement, due to the volume of information that is produced by the quality assurance system.

It is about sponsoring their activities in terms of making sure that everybody is very aware that this is something that actually the university takes very seriously…that It is discussed at every level of the university and is …really discussed, as opposed to, again, on the agenda for the optics rather than for actually analysing…And I don't think we're quite there yet. We've moved to a system where the unit reviews, are actually discussed at various levels, quality improvement plans, etc, all and interrogated. But the interrogation is very superficial, because there are so many of them, there's so much to do, that only kind of the people who are who are already reading them, continue to read them, as opposed to everybody being involved, and actually being more challenging around what they're saying…… And I think that's the same for the quality improvement piece. The follow on is …where the benefit really comes from, but we don't necessarily follow on in terms of the quality improvement (SL1_DAB)

Greater support from senior management through leadership of ongoing quality improvement is regarded by senior leaders across the system as a key issue to continue to support quality professionals in their role.

"what we have to provide is that leadership. And if we are not delivering the message then why would you expect others to. If you are not living the message, then I think it puts your dean of quality and your academic quality office in a not so nice position, say at academic council. (SL5_IT)

"I mean, the most important thing is valuing it in the sense that it is always an uphill struggle to get the buy in from the community. And so there needs to be a complete buy in from senior management. If the senior managers are rolling their eyes and saying this is just a box ticking exercise, that's the starting point of this making it much more difficult for the quality officer" (SL8_DAB)

Senior support is also required for quality professionals to be empowered to develop their professional competences and maintain their professional networks. These quality professionals from the private/independent sector highlight how the support and permission to engage with peers outside of the institution is important to personal and organisational learning.

> "need support to have an external network because you can feel like you're in a bit of a silo and if you are meeting that resistance day in day out no matter whether it is personal or not it can take a personal toll". (QP2_PI)

> "I suppose you need the support of your organisation as well to be involved in those sorts of areas that we were just mentioning. The external associations but their formal networks or informal networks and then if your organisation supports that as well, as we were just saying that that can help bring best practice back to the organisation". (QP21_PI)

The recognition of the role and visibility of quality professionals within their institution is also considered an essential support to quality professionals and important to their effectiveness. Institutions can provide support to their quality professionals through "a demonstratable trust in quality assurance, in quality assurance practitioners and the knowledge that they have" (QP22_PI) but also in resourcing physical and virtual entities that gives the quality assurance and enhancement function brand recognition within the HEI.

> "I think to effect, to have impact and effectiveness you need to have visibility. And you need to have sometimes you know that offices like this are kind of dispersed. Functions within the area are dispersed. So, I think you need as well as virtual centres, you need physical centres, or centres that bring together the different functional units. That can then be seen as a focal point for people as well and establishes a brand that you understand a function." (QP20_IT)

> And I think you know we have put quality enhancement office in place, it's up to us to resource it. It's up to us to, to give it clear I

suppose directions, advice, guidance as to what their needs are. But then once that's said it's kind of important to defend it too and to us to support the message" (SL5_IT).

The benefits of external visibility to the organisation are supported by this senior leader as a mechanism for professional development.

"I was very keen for example that quality officers would be attending QQI meetings and be visible and be seen and recognised as an expert in their own right. And we did succeed to a degree in that one, that the quality officer is well known and the assistant registrar. They are out there, and they are being headhunted to come onto panels…they are being developed. And I think if we can continue to do that, we are doing something right. And I think that they are happy and that they like the role and they progress from the role." (SL4_IT)

The need for mentoring within the IoT sector is referenced by this senior leader in the context of turnover in key positions at senior level as well as requirements for handover periods.

"this year, for some reason, we have a phenomenal number of new registrars, which are, which is really worrying in as you're trying to push quality to the top of the agenda. So, if you've a new registrar who is finding their feet, and things are moving at a pace and they are really swamped, you know, you know…., sometimes you see, people get down at a level that's too low, and don't operate at the appropriate level, because they never, they don't have the supports our maybe they are happy down there. I don't know, you know, but you really have to be focused on the job at the level that you're operating. And without that experience, without some mentoring, which is absent, you know, you could be in trouble." (SL2_IT)

A quality professional, also in the IoT sector has a view that the public service does not support mentoring as a way to manage staff turnover and succession planning.

broadly speaking I think the public sector suffers from a big problem in that nobody gets trained in their role. Roles are not filled until they're vacated. There is no question of mentoring. The previous person, almost never is there to help the person that's coming in. So, across the sector this is a problem. I don't think it happens to anywhere near the same extent in the private sector. And this is from the president down, the previous present hasn't helped the new president (QP3_IT)

Mentoring is identified by another senior leader in the private sector as a way to support quality professionals who are in their early career. Mentoring is viewed as helpful to the development of collaboration and relationship building competences of quality professionals:

"supporting earlier stage staff with the development of those softer skills, you know, and to see the importance of them, because I know certainly in the early stage of my career, you know, my I would have been very focused on getting jobs done and taking boxes and, you know, the quicker I can do that, the better. And as I learned throughout my career actually quicker isn't always better. You know, that's sometimes the painfulness of more stakeholder engagement and taking time and you know, you know, it is a better way to …go. And the other thing is sometimes you know, letting and you know, good …be good enough. Because sometimes, you know, if you try to negotiate a change, that is you've no institutional buy in for and you're better off negotiating a change that is good enough, you know, it was actually brings people on the journey" (SL3_PI).

Resourcing of quality offices is also highlighted once again as a key issue by quality professionals. Having access to additional staff would allow quality professionals to carry out more additional activities such as thematic analyses and assure organisational consistency with its policies rather than managing administrative tasks.

"you need the support of your organisation then as a whole as well to put the money and the resources into that and the people.

You need IT support. You need all of that to be kept up to date. You need good statistical reporting; good information" (QP21_PI)

9.5.2 Sectoral Support

Participants were asked how sectoral bodies could support their work. QQI is seen as the body most relevant, however its role involves a different perspective for those institutions for whom it is also their awarding body. Participants acknowledge that QQI is a young institution with a wide remit where higher education institutions make up a small part of their stakeholder group. This diversity of stakeholder group is seen to impact the relationship with some institutions as QQI is forced to work in a particular way due to is funding and staffing levels.

> it's an impossible ask, QQI need to think about what we need rather how they can work (SL1_DAB)

Some participants (n=4) raised the role of QQI in relation to the role of the National Forum for Teaching & Learning in Higher Education ('the Forum'). QP23_DAB raises the potential for the blurring of responsibilities between the different agencies and the need for a clear demarcation in responsibility.

> "It's also interesting to look at our landscape is, you know, where does the line, where's the line drawn between QQI and something like the National Forum? And, you know, they, they're both operating in in the same space. And, you know, they're both crossing boundaries in terms of governance and participation in various projects and initiatives. And, but, you know, where, where's that demarcation? And so I think, you know, probably, a focusing of QQI would, would not be …a bad thing" (QP23_DAB)

Participants cited the Forum as having a potentially greater role in disseminating quality enhancement development opportunities

> "I think the national forum should have a much bigger role, not only in training educators but also in delivering quality education to educators. They have started to bring a lot of their material online which would make it accessible" (QP3_IT)

However, the role of the Forum in enabling professional development in quality assurance is less clear. While the Forum may offer opportunities, the challenge is to reach those in institutions who have not bought into the quality enhancement agenda in teaching in learning as highlighted by this senior leader in a DAB.

> The National Forum is in a difficult position …I don't think it can do much in terms of quality assurance, what it can do is in terms of quality enhancement, and it has the potential to do great work there, finding the right levers in terms of quality enhancement is difficult because if there is a risk of the quality enhancement work of the forum being preaching to the converted, you know, the quality officers looking at the centres for teaching and learning at it and the people who are already teaching and learning enthusiasts who are possibly people they could sit down to write that material, but to reach the people who are disengaged from it is much more difficult. (SL8_DAB)

The Forum model is cited by another senior leader in the private/independent sector as a model for how QQI could enhance its support and operation for quality professionals both in terms of sharing practice and in bringing a network or community of practice together.

> , "celebrate, enjoy, facilitate, embrace, support, share, put out best practice… But I think they need to know their client. Respect the privilege and responsibility they have to facilitate and embrace learning at all levels in the country. And, and to support and to celebrate what's good, facilitate more. (SL6_PI)

The most common role cited by participants (n=14) in terms of how QQI could support quality professionals is to facilitate the creation of a community of practice for all roles and levels within the quality architecture. QQI is viewed by QP14-DAB as the more appropriate enabler of this process than the Irish Universities Association (IUA) or the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) due to its apolitical and cross sectoral role.

> if they could facilitate type of a thinktank. Again, this is only my opinion but if THEA did it or IUA did it you're losing a sector. If

they joined together to do… it still becomes political. The nature of those organisations is they're political organisations. Where's if QQI could do it genuinely as kind of a, this is, I'm not sure what you'd get away with calling. But call it forum or something. … And you know really engage in getting knowledgeable people into a room to discuss you know, all these quality assurance issues before…. they issue their green papers and their white papers. They go into everyone and they're really generic and the nature of that then is any feedback that the knowledge people have, it just gets swamped in everything. Whereas if they could do that before they go out. I think that would be helpful for us because it also means we learn more about the QQI's expectations as well which I don't think are that solid yet. You know, I don't think they really know everything they expect from every process they've developed, yet (QP14_DAB)

This community of practice would facilitate greater two way communication between QQI and institutions through consultation in advance of issuing guidelines or procedures as well as facilitating professional development events. QP2_PI believes that the communications approaches of QQI are too reliant on personal relationships rather than the fostering systematic engagement of professionals and building relationships with quality professionals.

QQI can sometimes rely too much on those personal relationships and forget that if you aren't reaching out to them that there are people that are just doing that, they're just not reaching out and they still need support. So, there needs to be more structured opportunities to get support and not just the people that are picking up the phone to have the conversations…. But they're not doing it in a very systematic way, it's kind of band aid solutions and deal with it as things come up. (QP2_PI)

QP16_DAB has a similar view about the lack of systematic engagement.

> "possibly better information updates on things that happen within the country and maybe they're there, I'm struggling to get on the mailing list. So, but that's a good example of it's not systematic. Whatever is going on it can be a little bit hit and miss. So, a more conscious effort to communicate with, you know, the practitioners out there in the field and to do so cross-institution I think would be good". (QP16_DAB)

This view echoes the earlier findings relating to the requirements for continuous professional development and supports available for institutions who are not members of formal membership organisations.

Sectoral representatives from QQI see the role of QQI as the custodian of the national systems of quality assurance and creating a policy architecture that can be used by institutions in their internal processes.

> So, I think it is about defending the QA, articulating, and defending the QA, providing national infrastructure tools, guidelines, or qualifications frameworks. Those kinds of policy architecture bits that can be used internally by institutions (SEC1)

Participants from QQI see a role in providing professional development where it is the awarding body, and such events support QQI's validation and external quality assurance events. There is a recognition that the inclusion of stakeholders in the development of processes is a positive approach and develops capacity within the sector.

> "by engaging and involving quality assurance practitioners in our processes. So, for example with our AIQR enhancement project. So, for example with private HEIs involving representatives of those institutions in our working group to build capacity and knowledge, that they can bring back to their own institutions". (SEC2)

In relation to the creation of a community of practice, this participant from QQI does see it having a role, however undefined that it may be, but they were not entirely sure how to bring this about particularly due to resource constraints:

> We could do more probably to build this community of practice. I say could. That's probably one of the more difficult pieces for us to get support for. To allocate resources for it or get resources for it. That tends to be, I won't say seen as empire building but it's seen as being a luxury if you like as opposed to being the more centrally system architecture. Including the review and monitoring mechanisms and so on

They went on to describe how they do informally bring quality professionals together through consultation and training events. The sharing of practice and community building is a by-product of those activities rather than their primary intent.

> So, we tend to do that as a kind of by product. I think we would probably continue to do that.... So, it would be under the guises of the consultation or a panel training or something like that, rather than sort of saying you're going to set up a guild of quality assurance professionals. Maybe if that were proposed.... It could turn out to be a more efficient way of doing it than almost doing it under the radar or as a side effect. (SEC1)

The qualification that QQI would have to get support, presumably from the DFHERIS to develop a community of practice and that it is not seen as central to the system architecture could be seen to indicate an example of a disconnection between the sectoral ambition to have a leading education system and the resources needed to develop it.

9.6 Strategic Integration of Quality

Quality agendas in Irish higher education are influenced by legislation, the higher education performance system, and the reporting requirements of QQI. Participants from public institutions were asked how outputs from quality assurance and enhancement processes informed strategic planning processes and if they could see evidence of quality assurance processes influencing the strategic dialogues related to funding and institutional performance management.

A close and integrated view is taken between the quality agenda and its contribution to the overall development of the institutions in the IoT sector.

"Absolutely completely integrated. Because and this is the emerging view as I understand it is that the quality assurance and enhancement system being used in the context of meeting institutional objectives and verticals, and they ultimately are expressed not only in our strategic plan but also in our compact. And our compact objectives are really tied in with our strategic plan objectives. So again, absolutely because they have to be. And I think that's the trend such that quality assurance and enhancement is not something that is kind of happening down in the cellar off in the distance it is increasingly …seen as a means of a management tool for helping achieve some of the objectives". (QP20_IT)

The role of quality is viewed by a senior leader in an IoT as an area that they had invested in in order to demonstrate institutional progression to the HEA.

"…….in our last compact, we put a huge emphasis on quality. And big amount of information and what we were doing in this space …. In our strategic plan…. quality was one of the standalone strategic goals deliberately. And now what we have done is that it is underneath all of the 5 strategic goals for the last two plans. We find basically quality as a theme cuts across. now it's actually embedded in, it's central". (SL4_IT)

Those working in other publicly funded institutions did report some links between how their quality processes informed strategic thinking or how they were evidenced in the compact agreement with the HEA. This senior leader in a DAB however held the view that although there were linkages, the compacts are primarily informed by the agendas of government.

"I think they do. And possibly in in two ways, there are the ones so we would do things like thematic analysis, unit reviews to try and look at things that might be emerging. And that will feed into our strategic thinking. And we will then bring that with into either directly or indirectly through our strategic planning in conversation with the HEA. The other side of that is thing, you know, where the HEA/QQI or the government have a particular

agenda, then, of course, the HEA will start to impose that that kind of conversation into that strategic planning as well. And it feeds the other way. So, yeah, I mean, I'm not sure that I could say that that's the HEA, with the exception of the Institutional Review, that the HEA would kind of bring items that are coming through our unit reviews back to us". (SL1_DAB)

This view that the compacts are used to progress the agenda of government is shared by another senior leader in the IoT sector where quality can be used to further other agendas such as widening participation and equality.

"Funnily enough I think when I read the compact, when I read the compact in relation to academic quality really, the compact is more focusing on the access agenda......Though I think they kind of tend to go with a lot of the issues of the day, the gender equality is gone huge, item six, we went up to Dublin for our confession. They asked us about finances, they asked about how things were going Athena Swan and all that so. I'd like to see it [quality] more highlighted to be honest" (SL5_IT)

For other institutions, this overt link is not as integrated as the outcomes of quality reviews are not used strategically. QP23-DAB considers this lack of integration to be related to a reluctance to act where outcomes of a review are not fully accepted by the institution, even though the outcomes are informed by internal stakeholders.

"And I think that's a work in progress. That's, that's the piece that's institutionally we've been called out on saying ..., And I think it goes back to what I was saying earlier on the bit about just, you know, kind of resistance slash inertial slash culture. And so, it's about its [quality] about moving from being good but peripheral, in the strategy sense to be... legitimate and relevant and in terms of strategy. ...and I think the other thing is that sometimes when it when it suits because, you know, the, the outcomes of quality are in a way a critical mirror, it's, you know, based on the evidence provided, and the expert view of, of peer reviewers, we, we get a mirror back as to what people are saying, and as to those areas, or domains that that might be developed.

Further, I think that's uncomfortable. And I know, it's uncomfortable, because I've been on both sides of the review table, I've gone through review twice within a unit, and in other institutions. So, I understand that feeling. And I think then that strategically, what can often happen is that the power of the quality agenda gets diminished by being described as a technical process, or a more such political language, and when outcomes are just not comfortable" (QP23_DAB)

This failure to deal with the outcomes of reviews has been attributed by a senior leader to the manner in which review reports are written. The language of the report is diluted so that it can be published without reputational damage. If the outcomes are not explicit enough, the report loses its power and the outcomes become easier to accept:

They tend to be written for public consumption. And that makes them, what's the right word, that makes them easy to accept. Because while it can be in a sub text hard hitting, they don't tend to come out that way (SL1_DAB)

This presents a dilemma for the quality professional as on the one hand, as presented in earlier findings, they are required to have the political acumen to write diplomatically and on the other to ensure that the outcomes of reviews are fully understood even if they are not accepted by the institution.

For participants in the private/independent sector, (n=5) the quality agenda is seen as being critical to institutional reputation. The recognition afforded by quality assurance systems such as programme accreditation and professional body recognition is linked to their ability to operate as an institution and therefore is central to their strategic and operational goals. A senior leader in the private/independent sector describes how the quality agenda is critical to the survival of the HEI.

"There's a very fundamental understanding that… without our validation and accreditation, we don't exist as a business. And I think particularly because we have our programmes, are typically all professional programmes, there's a very strong clear understanding of that. And, you know, it isn't simply a case that

we lose accreditation or validation in a particular area, and we go on, it's critical to the business. And so, I think, I think from that, for that reason, I would feel that it is always at the table" (SL3_PI)

This senior leader also from a private/independent institution describes how important the quality agenda is to the continued receipt of public funding which is won via open tender. The reputational impact of student complaints or the loss of public funding to operational management can significant.

"…. the government tenders which we've been winning a lot of recently, you know, those programmes, which are, you know, clearly government funded, …., the issues around quality are quite key and central. ….. this is one of those situations where, you know, if our QA processes hadn't been as robust as is required, then we would have could have had a major problem and also so those issues around quality, how we handle those complaints, those processes are reputationally so damaging. So small cases can do an immense amount of damage" (SL7_PI)

Quality has been used by the IoT sector and smaller organisations such as a linked provider as an institutional selling point:

So, there's a real consciousness around it. So, I think that's where you recognise the strategic piece to quality really that you know, If you want to survive in this world of ours, you need to be able to prove your quality improvement relatively quickly (SL9_LP)

Having a closer alignment of strategy and the quality agenda is indicated as a feature of recent CINNTE review reports. While clearly giving precedence to the strategic plan of the institution, this senior leader in a DAB highlights the potential for multiple and potentially opposing agendas where quality improvement plans, compacts and strategic planning are not aligned.

"quality implementation plans… set an agenda and if we're serious about following them up, looking at how they're going, they set a direction for the university. Having the compact with the HEA sets another agenda, and having a strategic plan sets the

third...perhaps one of the keys is that those should align. And so, with our institutional review, part of our agenda in writing the response to that was to align our response very closely with the strategic plan, which maybe meant enhancing some of the things that were already in the strategic plan. But we didn't have the quality review to direct us away from what we were trying to achieve in the strategic plan. But there certainly is a risk of those three pulling in different directions or setting three different lists of targets. And you'd like to think if you're trying to get something done if you could even agree on the list of targets and have one set because that will make it much more likely we get done "(SL8_DAB)

9.7   Quality as a contested space

Throughout this work participants have referred to the differences in perspectives from different stakeholders in relation to quality assurance and quality enhancement. The idea of quality itself seems to be a contested space within the sector. As one sectoral level participant put it

> This quality as a concept is very protean and for a lot of people, it's whatever you fancy, you know. And people define it in ways that suit them and their culture. I mean, there's nothing particularly wrong with that. I think that that's what happens. But it is a very elastic concept (SEC4)

At a sectoral level some quality professionals believe that there is an overlap between how the HEA and QQI interact with institutions. While participants see a role for both institutions, there are tensions between caused by this overlap and duplication of reporting requirements:

> "I think nationally the QQI and the HEA need to have a conversation where they separate out their roles because I think there has been crossover and narkiness and so on. And I think some of the things the HEA look for really should be falling under the remit of QQI. And because they're under the HEA and the HEA

don't really understand them, they are using metrics as a measure of quality when they are not valid or reliable measure of quality" (QP14_DAB)

A senior leader from an IOT argued that HEA was exceeding its remit and expertise in attempting to intervene in quality assurance.

> Now, I am very conscious of the fact that you know that, that there is a tension between the HEA and QQI. And that, for me, there is a tension in relation to HEA, where they see their role, and how far you go with the compact. And quality assurance is the remit of QQI, you know, HEA are there have taken in recent years have taken on a role of...for strategic direction for the sector, which is something that they never set up to do. You know, they were literally a funding agency at the start.... now, I don't have a problem with them taking on a role with strategy. I do have a problem with them trying to interfere in quality assurance. And so, I'm happy to report on them, but I won't take direction from them in relation to actually quality. ....and I think people need to be very careful about the boundaries, that we don't need multi agency involvement in relation to what we do, particularly when it's not their remit. (SL2_IT)

These tensions are also acknowledged by sectoral representatives with a hope that the HEA reform bill may resolve the perceived overlap between the two agencies. One sectoral representative acknowledged some degree of over-reach by the HEA, even suggesting that the agency may have gone beyond its statutory remit:

> "I hope we can maybe disentangle what some of the potential for overlap between the two institutions by making the future HEA/HEC's role, more defined, better defined. It's currently been operating almost illegally, but certainly ultra vires for a long time on a whole load of things. Just because I thought it was a good idea. We didn't have a legal basis to do. And there's always been a bit of grey area between what is QQI's role in its broadest sense and HEA's role as a funding and regulatory body, I think that probably does need to be clarified. But they, I mean, they need to

work together because they're presumably at the same long term objective is to provide high quality sustainable higher education system for the for the country" (SEC3).

Participants have identified that this blurring of roles centres around the role of the HEA as funder and their agenda to ensure value for money and accountability to the public purse as well as its increased authority as a regulatory agency subsequent to the Hunt Report. Another sectoral participant acknowledged a blurring between issues around academic quality with an agenda of employability pursued by the HEA:

> "But, but the whole agenda around performance and value for money and etc, etc, and delivery for enterprise and business and, and all of that agenda that and the metrics around that they start to eat then into quality, but on the other side quality itself within the more traditional academic sphere, which is around the quality of the educational activity, you know that because there are demands on the delivery around you know, what education is effectively delivering for the state, that area starts going into that area and then you have the clash then between both...those who are looking at performance purely in terms of performance and then quality stroke performance then, and, you know, it's is it is very blurred (SEC4)

This observation from a sectoral representative indicates that the DFHERIS also has a value for money focus and performative view of quality.

> "The HEA bill, it sort of takes as read QQI as independent statutory agency. The department does still worry about what they call quality. I think it's more back in what, I say department because there's supposed to be a review of quality. I think they're not quite confounding with performance, but I think if it is closely related to concepts of value for money and how low is low enough in terms of funding (SEC1)

These examples highlight a difference in the perspectives of participants on quality and their view on how the HEA defines quality. The HEA view of quality as value for money, accountability, and performance (as evidenced

in their documentation) is at odds with the values of education providers where quality is rooted in the totality of the student experience and academic outcomes.

> "if there's an over emphasis on regulation and compliance and documentation and proof and evidence, I think we lose sight of what we're meant to be doing in the first place which is giving people the best education that they can get and to me that doesn't necessarily mean the education with the best employability" (QP21_PI).

This contestation of quality is also visible at an institutional level. The findings with respect to the categories of work that quality professional undertake suggest that the institutional perspective on quality is not uniform and emphasis is placed on either institutional or academic quality.

The external policy environment impacts on how quality is perceived within the institution and how quality professionals communicate those requirements. A quality professional from a DAB point to the challenges of operating in a quality function which has to take account of these different value systems and this awareness of differing value systems between academics and state agencies is essential to being a quality professional.

> "I truly believe from a values perspective, I think, I see that the field in which we work is one where for our academic colleagues, quality means high standards, it means mastery. The policy environment is one which is about measurability, performance, diversity, and outcomes... predictability. And those two, those two orientations are diametrically opposed. And so, I see my role as being in the middle of those two kind of oppositional, almost oppositional perspectives and, and trying to conduct my work within the institution, always being aware of that tension because neither is right nor wrong. They're just the kind of forces that shape our internal world of higher education (QP23-DAB)

9.8 Summary

This chapter has presented findings relating to the challenges that quality professionals experience when carrying out their role. They experience

passive and overt resistance from colleagues which is perceived to be rooted in resistance to additional workload and a difference of values. Quality professionals are often perceived to be the agents of management or a national regulator and of a system that blocks innovation. However, positive experiences are reported where the quality professional or office is seen as supportive and helpful rather than supporting a bureaucratic agenda.

The findings suggest that senior leaders support the views of quality professionals and acknowledge that they need to support quality professionals through resourcing the function and by supporting the quality professionals in committee environments and through institutional communications.

Both quality professionals and senior leaders see a role for the integration of the quality work and the outcomes of quality assurance events into the strategic planning of the institution. The findings suggest that this integration is tighter in some institutions than others with the compact agreement with the HEA being a significant driver.

Support for quality professionals and for quality as a whole at a sectoral level was mixed. Most quality professionals see a role for QQI in supporting the development of a community of practice and in assisting with professional development.

The findings also suggest that the roles of different agencies with an interest in quality assurance and enhancement are blurred which causes tensions in discussions between HEIs and the agencies. There are different understandings of the definition of quality between higher education institutions and the HEA/DFHERIS. This difference in understanding leads to tensions when reporting on institutional metrics related to quality.

The following chapter discusses the findings presented in chapters 6-9 in the context of the literature and conceptual framework.

10 Discussion

This chapter addresses the findings of this research study presented in Chapters 6-9 using the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 5. The findings are examined using the 'being', 'becoming', 'doing' and relating lenses and related filters as adapted from Anteby et al (2016). This discussion also draws upon Anteby et al's definition of occupations as socially constructed entities that include: (i) a category of work ;(ii) the actors are understood—either by themselves or others—as members and practitioners of this work; (iii) the actions enacting the role of occupational members; and (iv) the structural and cultural systems upholding the occupation' (p.187).

10.1 On being

This section discusses how quality professionals see themselves and their professional identity and begins to address the final research question as to the emergence of quality practices as a profession. The findings of the study are discussed in the context of social identity theory and the literature on professions and professionalisation.

10.1.1 Professional Identity

Participants in this research identify with a number of different professional identities and in some cases with none. The degree of identity exploration and commitment (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016) varied among participants.

There was a sense of ambivalence about the idea of having a professional identity and participation in this research raised questions for some participants about what their professional identity was. This 'identity diffusion', where there is little exploration or commitment to an identity could be an indicator of divergent exploration or delay of commitment (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016) to an identity due to the length of time that some participants are in post.

For those who joined a quality role from an academic or specialist discipline, there is still a strong connection or 'identity motive' (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016) to preserve that identity. Maintenance of their academic identity helps in their role as quality professionals to provide legitimacy and credibility. It also preserves a sense of belonging to a particular grouping as illustrated by QP_12_IT

. I actually did struggle with the change going am I still an academic? Even when I came to things, am I still eligible to vote for academic council and so on? It became quite important to me. I found it difficult to explain but it's just because I'm so long associated in myself with the role of academic and being an educator and I think that's so important" (QP12_IT)

A struggle with identity is experienced by some quality professionals as they consider what it means to lose one identity and take on a new one. In experiencing a form of 'sensebreaking' where they questioned their identity, some participants are still in the sensemaking phase as they identify what is important to them and transition into having a new professional identity.

These quality professionals are experiencing identity development which is to be expected for those in liminal or boundary roles (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). This questioning of professional identity stems not only from career change but also where their role is ill-defined. By not formally labelling themselves as a quality 'professional', some participants thought it an opportunity to play with their identity and create different versions of themselves until such time as they are ready to settle on one (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016) or create an independent to undefined space within the organisation (Whitchurch, 2012). This example from QP22_PI illustrates.

> when you say that you're a quality assurance practitioner I think that's, you know, there's a lot more ability to conceptualise it according to institutions, according to organisations, according to the individual who ends up inhabiting the role. (QP22_PI)

Quality professionals use their different social identities for example that of critical friend, internal regulator, academic to navigate the requirements of the role, each one becoming more salient (Ashforth et al., 2001) depending on the context that they find themselves in and the occupational group that they are dealing with.

Although multiple identities are used, there doesn't appear to be any sense of identity conflict among quality professionals. Their professional identity as it exists for them is rooted in their occupational history, the tasks that

they undertake and the values and behaviours that they use to interact within their organisations.

10.1.2 On being a quality professional

Membership of the occupational group of 'quality professionals' in the first instance was assigned by the researcher through an invitation to be involved in the research study based on the role title and assumed tasks that the role title entailed based on my own experiences in the role. In responding to the invitation to participate in the survey, only one person actively declined as they felt that they did not fit the profile of the intended respondent. In accepting the invitation to participate, survey respondents and interviewees have indicated that they carry out a role or set of tasks that they consider to be quality work in higher education. The initial survey findings and subsequent interview process found that most participants did not have an immediate affiliation with a 'quality' related professional identity. However, when specifically asked if they thought that a profession was emerging, almost all interview participants agreed that the role was distinct from other administrative or academic roles and required unique knowledge, skills, and competencies. Using Anteby et al's (2016) definition of the occupation, this recognition of specific work where '*the actors are understood—either by themselves or others—as members and practitioners of this work',* supports the description of this group as a distinct group or occupation. This definition will be returned to throughout this chapter.

Quality professionals use the professional identity that they align with to support their influencing role within the organisation. Rather than using positional authority, (Whitchurch, 2012), legitimacy and credibility is sought and found through identifying peer linkages for example academic to academic, being supportive (Huising, 2015) and being judged on the manner in which the job was carried out. This legitimacy is seen to be enhanced by taking a pragmatic and sociological citizen (Anteby et al., 2016; Canales, 2011; Huising, 2015) approach to supporting academic colleagues in particular in delivering on quality assurance and enhancement obligations. Quality professionals who take a compliance and letter of the law approach to the interpretation and implementation of policy are widely perceived by participants as being less likely to be successful.

10.1.3 Occupational Profile

Participants cited the lack of a defined body of knowledge has been cited by participants as being a shortfall in their own understanding of their role and identity as a quality professional An occupational profile can be developed from the findings of this study. This occupation profile can also be used to integrate the concepts of quality management outside of higher education with professionals in education, quality assurance agencies and in other sectors. While there are variations required of the sector specific sectoral knowledge, there is a common set of practice. Table 10-1 outlines a proposed Occupation Profile for a quality professional in higher education. This profile is adapted from the occupation profile template required for the development of statutory apprenticeships in the Republic of Ireland (Apprenticeship Council of Ireland, 2017, p26)

By integrating the work of Jingura & Kamasuka (2019), Cheung (2015), Martin et al (2021) and ENQA (2014) with the findings of this study, a deeper and complementary profile or 'knowledges' (Whitchurch, 2013) of the quality professional in all contexts can be developed. In making this comparison, the education based competency frameworks of Cheung, ENQA, Jingura & Kamasuka and this study have been mapped to Martin et al's (2021) categorisations of competences that are required in quality professionals outside of higher education

Occupation Profile	
Occupation Title	Quality Professional
Typical Tasks/Responsibilities	Devising and writing policy
	Advising on policy
	Organising and managing quality assurance events such as unit, programme, and institutional quality reviews
	Evaluating data sets for quality assurance and enhancement purposes
	Representing institution at events
	Acting as peer reviewer nationally and internationally
Knowledge	Irish Higher Education systems
	Irish quality assurance system and policies
	Models of quality assurance and enhancement appropriate to the HE sector
	European higher education environment and quality assurance system
Skills	Written and oral communication skills
	Data Management
	Project and Process Management
	Negotiation skills
Competences	Build trusting relationships across a range of internal and external stakeholders
	Influence and lead quality assurance and enhancement activities within their institution
	Proactively manage continuous professional development

	Be politically and environmentally aware

Table 10-1: Proposed Occupational Profile for Quality Professionals in Higher Education

In addition to the customer or student perspective dimension, which is evident through student engagement activities, quality professionals have a holistic strategic understanding is evidenced through the links between quality assurance and institutional research and inferred through the identified need for institutional political awareness in the role.

The occupational profile and the competency frameworks presented in Table 10-2 can be used to further develop a defined body of knowledge (Burns, 2019) or specialised knowledge (Hodson & Sullivan, 2012) which is a requirement for the definition of the traditional profession.

| Author | Dimension | | | |
	Human	Methods	Conceptual	Contextual
Martin et al (2021)	Change Management Communication Pedagogical abilities	Organisation specific quality management concepts Established tools and methods for quality management Standards and management systems Data analysis Information processing and visualisation	Customer perspective Harnessing technology Holistic strategic understanding	Experience from other contexts Experience from Internal contexts Contextual Adaptability
Jingura & Kamusoko (2021)	Attitude	Communication Skills Managerial & Leadership Skills Digital Skills Interpersonal Skills Personal Skills Analytical skills Research Skills		
Cheung (2015)	Professional Practice Reflective Practice Interpersonal Competence	Project Management Systematic Enquiry		Situational Analysis

ENQA (2016)	Diplomacy and Political Sensitivity Professional Attitude Teamwork/Flexibility Personal Resilience Autonomy/Proactivity	Project Management IT and Data Skills Problem Solving Skills Analytical Skills Communication skills		Higher Education National Quality Assurance International Dimension of QA and QE
O'Sullivan	Diplomacy Change Management Emotional Intelligence Resilience	Technical Sectoral Knowledge Data Analysis and presentation Project Management Written and Oral Communication Skills Negotiation Skills		Experience from other systems Political Awareness of the environment

Table 10-2: Comparison of Competences required by Quality Professionals

Throughout this work, I have used the term quality professional to describe the occupation group being studied. Acknowledging the linguistic shifts in the definition of profession and professionalism of language described by Burns (2019), some participants in the study were definite that while they were professional in how they carried out their role, they did not consider themselves as quality 'professionals'. This was because they did not have formal training or education in quality related work. However, when considering Evetts' (2013) and Whitchurch's (2012) work on broadening the definition of occupational professionalism (See section 4.5) to include other characteristics such as learning on the job, as illustrated by QP21_PI and QP24_DAB

> that it's been a kind of apprenticeship route for people, an informal apprenticeship route where people have worked within the system. (QP21_PI)

> my kind of experience and expertise has developed has been on the job (QP24_DAB)

and authority being exercised through trust and practitioner relationships (Whitchurch, 2012) which is observed by senior leadership

> I think its influence is in soft power. It can persuade and suggest, but it can rarely enforce something. (SL8_DAB)

the findings of this study point to the existence of a group of professionals who occupy a specific occupational group.

10.2 On Becoming a Quality Professional

The findings of the study relating to the emergence of a distinct profession are also discussed using the 'becoming' lens, identified in the Anteby et al's (2016) framework of occupational analysis. Through a discussion of socialisation, control and inequality, the world view of the quality professional and how they have found themselves as a member of this occupational group is explored. Insights into how quality professionals perceive themselves and how they are perceived are also discussed.

10.2.1 Socialisation

Through the socialisation filter of the 'being' lens, common attributes of the activities typically attributed to professional socialisation can be observed even through the occupation is not professionally organised and does not have a representative professional association. Quality professionals are educated to similar levels and have had professional formation within an educational environment. Two strands of professional background have been identified in the findings- academic staff who have taken on a quality related role or administrative/professional services staff with a background in academic or regulatory administration. This formation environment is common to both new and established quality professionals in all sectors.

The sharing of practice and cultural norms through involvement in peer review processes is used as another form of socialisation. This form of socialisation is found to be the most common and helpful to quality professionals where they learn from the direct experience and practice of colleagues in other institutions.   Through these peer review processes and other shared activities, a range of tacit knowledge, behaviour, and routines is created and shared among members of the occupational group (Ibarra & Obodaru,2016).

Unlike occupations that are professionally organised, a defined body of knowledge (Freidson, 1983); Hodson & Sullivan, 2012), Burns, 2019) for the quality professional in higher education does not yet exist. This lack of definition of the role and more formal continuous professional development has led some quality professionals to feel underqualified and ill-prepared for their role as they feel unaware of what they don't know. QP12_IT referred to the assumptions made about the temporal nature of occupations where they felt that they had 'missed' something. The professional development available in the sector appeared to assume that everyone had started the role at the same time and there was little formal support for those that had joined more recently.

> … It feels like you joined quality at this point in its history. So, it's in the middle. So, all of this has gone before it and you don't necessarily know how it's evolved, why it's evolved, and you miss things… And you're kind of going what else do I not know?" (QP12_IT)

Coupled with the lack of a formalised body of knowledge, the survey findings show that those currently working are relatively inexperienced in the quality setting. Mentoring is viewed as a valuable mechanism to support quality professionals and senior leaders as they take on new roles.

The availability of a network is essential to the development of a profession or occupation. The existence of a distinct professional body as a network (Whitchurch, 2011) or career development mechanism is not available to quality professionals which puts a greater emphasis on the role of a formal or informal network. The networks that are available to quality professionals focus on the sharing of practice and experience for example the use of personal networks

> . I just kind of reach out and look for people to talk to about it. (QP2_PI)

and sectoral networks such as the IUA quality officers' group and HECA quality enhancement forum rather than controlling of entry to the occupation.

10.2.2 Control

While entry to the occupation is not controlled by educational or other credentialization characteristics associated with an occupation or profession (Muzio et al, (2019), other forms of control over the quality professional occupational group can be observed which are exerted internally within the organisation and externally. While quality professionals have autonomy over their day to day work, a form of internal control is exerted through resistance from other occupations. This resistance is experienced not only directly through non-compliance with policy, but also through 'tick box' based compliance where the 'game is played' (Newton, 2002): here the relationship with quality assurance and enhancement is entertained to meet statutory compliance, demonstrating a reactive culture (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008) rather than engagement in a more regenerative dialogue with quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms.

10.2.2.1 Regulatory Control

External control (Susskind & Susskind, 2015) is exerted on the occupational group through the regulatory requirements of QQI. This impacts member of the occupational group differently. Quality professionals within the degree awarding bodies are viewed by those working in the private/independent sector as less impacted by the requirements of QQI than they are. Greater control is exerted by QQI on the tasks and reporting activities of these quality professionals in the private/independent sector. The different nature of the relationship between institutions in the sector and the regulatory body could potentially to impact on the cohesion of the development of a single occupation. Yet the findings suggest that more similarities rather than differences are apparent among the tasks and relating activities of quality professionals in the HE sector. As the Institutes of Technology become degree awarding bodies and opportunities for delegation of authority to make awards become available to the private/independent sector, the relationship between quality professionals across the sector and QQI may become more cohesive over time.

10.2.2.2 Financial Control

Another form of control experienced by quality professionals is the lack of funding provided to the quality agenda. Quality professionals and senior leaders believe that this lack of funding to the sector is likely to remain a consistent challenge to the resourcing of quality functions, carrying out recommendations from quality reviews and on the successful development and maintenance of a quality culture within the sector. While participants did not explicitly state that the quality function was underfunded within the institution, there was broad agreement that the ability of the quality function to drive a quality enhancement agenda rather than a compliance with quality assurance agenda is hampered through a lack of funding of the higher education system in general. This is felt particularly within the public sector where the effectiveness of quality review processes is impacted as the outcomes of quality assurance and enhancement activities cannot be implemented due to a lack of funding. This impact on implementation is perceived by both quality professionals and senior leaders to contribute to feelings of apathy and resistance to the work of quality professionals. This restricts the ability of the occupation to develop its mandate further and to have a deeper organisational reach. As suggested by this senior leader connecting funding quality processes will make the process more relevant to other, HE staff.

, so that we can use the resources to support improvements in quality, which would actually make staff then actively seek quality reviews as a way of mobilising their resources to move further (SL8_DAB)

10.2.2.3 Network Control

The various formal and informal networks that currently exist within the Irish HE sector also exert control over the development of an occupational group through the selective invitations to working groups and events. Quality professionals recognise the differing contexts and relationships that require sub-sector groups e.g., IUA quality officers' group (IUAQOG) and HECA Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF), however, those who are not associated with these groups feel disconnected from the wider group.

While other events such as the QQI annual conference and European Quality Assurance Forum are open to anyone who identifies with the topics under discussion, funding for and release to attend these events is dependent on internal control mechanisms such as funding and the esteem in which the role is held within the institution. This issue of esteem is discussed below (section 10.2.3).

10.2.3 Being unequal

While Anteby et al's analytical framework proposes inequality in occupations through the lens of gender, ethnic or other forms of minority discrimination, findings from this study refer to two forms of perceived inequity. Parity of esteem among those working as quality professionals was raised in the contexts of the role title and remuneration for those undertaking the role within the DAB sector.

The perceived importance of quality related roles and divergences between quality professions from academic or administrative/professional grades was also raised by Directors of Quality who had challenges gaining support for the development of their staff. Areas of development that are seen as normal for academic staff for example attendance at conferences, time to research various topics were not seen as relevant to quality professionals that were seen to be 'administrative' staff. Those with academic backgrounds were able to avail of the academic progression opportunities available to academic staff where progression is based on personal

achievement, while quality professionals with administrative backgrounds were tied to the grade associated with the role.

Of note is that over a short period of time, male Directors of Quality who had taken on the role from within the academic ranks within the DAB sector have been in the main replaced by female directors from an administrative background. This in itself is not an issue of gender but may be signalling the beginning of a gendered role within the DAB sector.

10.3 On Doing

Reflecting on the findings using the 'doing' lens of the framework, allows an analysis of what type or 'category' (Anteby et al, 2016) of quality work is undertaken by quality professionals, how quality related labour is divided and contested and provides additional perspective on the emergence of new work and roles. Through the doing lens, the research question relating quality professionals' self-perception of their influence within their organisation will also be addressed.

10.3.1 Tasks

Quality professionals undertake a range of tasks and the diversity of the tasks undertaken is dependent on the sector of higher education. Documenting the tasks and associated knowledge skills and competences used and required of quality professionals allows the comparison with work already undertaken in other jurisdictions and described in Chapter 2. (Elken, Frølich, et al., 2020). Quality work undertaken by quality professionals is influenced by the historical development of quality in the Irish higher education context. While quality related roles are centralised in all cases, there are different emphases depending on the type of institution. Using Elken & Stensaker's (2020, p26) perspectives on internal quality systems the tasks undertaken by the DAB sector illustrate a decoupled relationship between the internal quality system and the needs of what they call 'practice near' quality work of academic staff. The focus of the quality role is on complying with the statutory requirements. Other quality work for example at a programmatic level takes place at the faculty or school level. However, Elken's perspective maintains that a decoupled system has low 'translational' emphasis where local requirements are not taken into account. However, in the DAB context, there is an assertion of local autonomy by quality professionals and senior leaders and that the local needs of the organisation are paramount while acknowledging the tensions

that can exist to maintain external compliance while maintaining institutional autonomy.

> clear role for quality professionals as, as key strategic resources within our institutions are both to maintain and preserve and help uphold the autonomy and academic values, and …, the mission of our institutions,". (QP23_DAB)

The experience of quality professionals in the Institute of Technology sector and private/independent sector is based on their relationship with QQI and its predecessor organisations as their awarding body. The predominance of quality work is at programmatic level and therefore is 'practice near' to academic staff. Such work is, however, more explicitly compliance driven by the requirements of the regulatory body and meeting the needs of the institutional leadership.

In all sectors there is a concern about the increased emphasis on regulatory demands and therefore, compliance. As a result, without additional resourcing, quality enhancement activities are being given less attention, with added impacts such as added bureaucracy, a focus on reporting and less meaningful change. The resultant impact on the quality culture of the organisation is that it remains reactive (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

10.3.2 Jurisdiction

Participants in the study observed that they have experienced resistance to quality assurance and enhancement practice. Some of this resistance is described as historical, while in some cases it continues on a contemporary basis.

Some of the reasons for resistance cited by quality professionals as fear of roles being devalued (Susskind & Susskind, 2015), through the documentation of procedures and interference in the role of academic staff who know what they are doing.

In addressing quality work in higher education, institutional quality work can be seen as 'new' work where tasks are undertaken due to the creation of work because of new regulatory and statutory requirements (Fayard et al., 2017)

Other quality related labour such as programme validation or accreditation, programme review, and external examining has been carried out by academics as part of their role. As external pressures for greater accountability and transparency demand more structure and monitoring approaches to these activities, the jurisdiction of these tasks has become an area of contestation. The area of contestation can be about who should undertake the task, both in terms of removing power and responsibility from academic staff and giving academic staff more work to do and how it should be undertaken. Quality professionals advocate those parts of the process can only be completed by academic staff,

> when everybody's in everybody else's trough and a sense, then people kind of say, well, that's just QA's problem, I shouldn't have to do that. And QA are saying, Well, actually, you know, quite rightfully, that's really not our role. It's not our job to write your programmes and check your assessment. You know, those are academic decisions. So, it seems to me that clouding and blurring of the lines (SL7_PI),

while participants indicate that academic staff argue that their time is better spent teaching and researching.

> They see that as just taking away from their research activities. So, it's not that they don't really agree with it......... But it's just taking away from their time". (QP14_DAB)

Contestation over the jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988) of tasks can arise through the demands of third party organisations e.g., professional bodies and statutory/regulatory bodies. The relationship between institutional accreditation of programmes and professional or statutory accreditation has added additional load and sometimes duplication to the work of both academic staff and quality professionals. Within organisations there is some evidence of contestation of space where communication between the professional body regarding professional accreditation is directly with the academic home of the programme rather than the institution or quality function. Quality professionals indicate a requirement to be aware of that communication so that the institutional perspective is understood and protected.

The lack of clarity regarding the sectoral jurisdiction over quality matters between QQI and HEA is also apparent in the findings, where a perceived overlap of roles and jurisdiction contributes to additional workload for administrative staff, quality professionals and institutional researchers and the creation of new work through additional statutory returns and reporting.

There is a relationship between this contest of jurisdiction, the lack of definition of the role of quality professionals and the sometimes overlapping or duplicating external requirements of statutory and regulatory bodies as new work related to reporting and data is usually assigned to those working in quality roles. The Irish experience is consistent with Beerkens (2015) observation on role creep where quality roles have expanded to include additional data processing and information provision to statutory bodies.

10.3.3 On emergence

By identifying a common set of tasks that are undertaken by those identified in the occupational group of quality professional, a 'category of work' has been identified. This identification of a distinct category of work fulfils another pillar of Anteby et al's (2016) definition of the occupation where the category of work is identified. The 'occupational mandate' as described by Fayard et al (2017) and (Nelsen & Barley, 1997) has been created largely as a result of the increasing transparency and accountability requirements of the national and European regulatory environment. These requirements have led to the recruitment of what are described as 'professional directors of quality' (SL1_DAB) and an increased professionalisation of those undertaking quality roles. Other reasons for the creation of specific roles with responsibility for quality has been to manage the increasing workload of the Registrar function within the Institute of Technology where a more specific focus and remit is required on managing the requirements of quality assurance and enhancement. Within the private/independent sector and until recently smaller public institutions, the institutional legitimacy and ability to function as an organisation that is firmly associated with the perceived quality of the institution and external approval of programmes through the QQI or professional body provides support for this occupational mandate (Nelsen & Barley, 1997) within this part of the higher education sector.

10.4 On relating

Using the relating lens, the second research question of how quality professionals navigate their institutions is addressed, evoking the third pillar of Anteby et al's (2016 p.187) definition of the occupation, to look at '*the actions enacting the role of occupational members'.* For those working in the third space or in boundary roles, relationships are more critical to the success of a project than structures or processes (Whitchurch, 2012). By collaborating, co-producing, and brokering, quality professionals interact within their own teams, institutions, with peers in other institutions, regulators, and other professional bodies.

10.4.1 Collaborating

The quality professional's influence within their organisation is seen to be at its most effective when collaborating in order to achieve a particular aim. Such transformational (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) boundary spanning requires leadership on behalf of the quality professional and a significant level of trust between them and the 'other' group (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2010). As found in this study (see section 8.1), quality professionals place significant value in the trust that they develop and maintain with colleagues. The practices of relationship building, collaboration and influencing that they use can be found in the 'connecting practices' that Ernst & Chrobot-Mason argue are the practices of boundary spanning leadership.

During the period of programme validation, review or quality review, boundaries between the quality function and the area under review are suspended until such time as the activity is complete. Neutral zones (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason) such as away days are used to create spaces to work on self-evaluation projects, points of communication and internal networks relevant to the review are created.

> so, we take them off site for the day. …. the whole thing costs so much money…. And I said, [Snr Mgr], if we lose anything, anything at all of the reviews, you know, in terms of funding, I said, we cannot lose that because it's actually the thing that makes it work (QP26_LP)

Quality professionals expressed a wish to be able to lead more effectively through horizontal rather than vertical relationships. Collaborative leadership is exercised through facilitation and enablement and quality

professionals can achieve this by moving agendas forward (Whitchurch (2012). and exerting mutual influence through multiple lenses of different stakeholders. One of the dangers identified by quality professionals of creating a temporary group or team is that on completion of the activity, the relationship is not maintained and is suspended until the next review.

> So, I think that's something you have to work on all the time. That buy in. I think because of the nature of quality reviews, a department or office goes through quality review, but the quality doesn't finish with the quality review (QP6_PI)

To counter this concern and maintain buy in, quality professionals will have to take a leadership role to 'weave interdependence' (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason) between themselves and the other group so that the relationships built are maintained and continually enhanced and that the quality work is extended beyond the formal review process.

10.4.2 Co-Producing

The quality professional as co-producer is evidenced through the co creation and development of policy, academic regulation, and documentation for quality reviews and validation processes. Co-production is achieved through the boundary practices (Hawkins, 2012) of consultation and interpretation of international and national guidelines and the creation of new practices. The creation of working groups to develop policy and practice is used frequently by quality professionals as described in Section 6.63 p.257. Using boundary coordination practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), such as translating the jargon of quality assurance and policy documentation to language that is understood and commonly agreed, quality professionals work to find support among colleagues. These co-production practices are also consistent with findings of Whitchurch (2012) who describes the translational function of third space workers that engage in the co-production of knowledge through the creation of a network of relationships and interaction with people and environments.

10.4.3 Brokering

Brokering among quality professionals is largely experienced as the negotiation (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Kallenberg, 2016b) between the external requirements of the regulatory bodies and the creation and implementation of internal policy. This brokering function is more prevalent

in the independent/private sector due to the central role of QQI as their awarding body as well as the national quality assurance agency.

> especially as a private provider you're very much a lot of the time speaking on behalf of QQI and things like that, you know. That can be challenging" (QP22_PI)

A reflecting (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) form of boundary spanning is evident in the practice of showing empathy and considering the values and perspectives of stakeholder groups.

> so, from a policy agency perspective, they're interested in, you know, a straight implementation, there's this rational policy, and it needs to be implemented in the institution. But as somebody that's on that mediating boundary, I will be thinking about, well, how do we frame this internally? How do we use what we're doing currently to respond to, to perhaps this policy ask, and where's the line in what's reasonable for the policy to ask for, given the autonomy of the institution, so I'm always juggling that one in my mind" (QP23_DAB)?

Through the tasks that they undertake, quality professionals are also involved as knowledge brokers between students and other stakeholder groups and the institution. Through activities such as the processing and reporting on student evaluations, mediating between quality review groups and the HEI they engage with a range of knowledge that is essential to the quality enhancement of the organisation. This information is shared through internal reporting and externally to other agencies via the Annual Quality Report. The influence that quality professionals have as brokers is impacted by the degree of influence that the quality professional has within the organisation. Such influence is shaped by the culture and structures within the organisation.

10.5 Structures and Cultures

Using the final pillar of Anteby et al's (2016) definition of an occupation, the 'structural and cultural systems'(p187) that quality professionals find themselves working in are examined through addressing the placement of the quality function within the organisation and their experience within that environment and in the sector as a whole.

10.5.1 Placement within the Organisational Structure

Whitchurch (2012) identified three typologies of 'third space' – integrated, semi-autonomous and independent. The characteristics of the integrated third space (Whitchurch, 2012, p34) using a mix of academic and professional activity with explicit recognition and integration within the structures and relationships of the institutions, lend themselves to the placement of the quality function and quality professionals. As set out in the findings (section 6.2.2), the quality role is placed at the centre of each organisation and quality professionals report to senior management roles. Decisions by the DAB sector to move away from the 'interested academic' model of management of the quality function to the recruitment of 'professional' directors of quality indicate a greater integration of the quality function into the structures of the organisation.

While all institutions do not have a dedicated quality function, the statutory obligations of the institution as it relates to quality are integrated into the structures of the organisation through its academic committees, management and reporting structures. The impact of these statutory obligations has instigated the creation of new roles (Fayard et al., 2017) to manage these obligations. This is particularly noticeable in the institute of technology sector where additional posts, such as assistant registrar, have been created. A maturing of the quality function can be observed across all sectors; however this maturity is combined with significant turnover in quality offices where 61% of staff have served in their current post for less than four years (see section 6.2.4). The prior experience of those working in senior quality posts raises some questions as to what is institutionally important when recruiting senior quality roles. 75% of those in this role do not have previous experience in quality roles. (see section 6.2.4)

While a lack of experience or background in a formal quality role mirrors experiences in higher education in other jurisdictions Alzafari & Kratzer, 2019, Nguyen, 2017) and in the wider quality area (Antony & Sony, 2021), it is perhaps unsurprising given that the function has existed only for twenty years. The findings suggest that expertise in administration and/or formation in an academic environment of those holding quality roles appears to be more important to HEIs than having an expertise in the development of quality management systems or in the quality management techniques seen in industry.

A lack of expertise in quality assurance and enhancement is seen as a deficit by some authors (Alzafari & Kratzer, 2019; Nguyen, 2017) in the sector and also raised by some participants in this study.

10.5.1.1Impartiality

The original objective that quality offices would be seen as being 'apolitical' (IUQB, 2008) within the academic institution reflects the findings from Whitchurch's (2012) study where third space professionals were found to be 'non-partisan but politically aware'. As illustrated by the findings (section 6.2.2) this impartiality continues to be considered precious by quality professionals.

> We had one review, it was at the very beginning, one of the first few over the first years. And the department really weren't engaging. But I had a sense of why they weren't. And I went and spoke to the head of department, and I said look I think the problem is X and the person said yes that's correct, we are concerned. Because of something else that had happened. And then I kind of built a relationship with that person and reassured them actually that is not the purpose of these reviews. And we have successfully refused, I'd say senior management would love to see this self-assessment report. And we successfully refused that. We didn't give it to them (QP17_DAB)

It is also considered critical by sectoral representatives when the placement of the role for operational management of quality is seen to be subservient to the role of Registrar.

> an assistant registrar would still be under the registrar. So, it hasn't yet got that clout where it could be. It could be reviewing the Registrar and his unit. And I think it has to get to that point. (SEC4)

As time has passed the quality functions have moved to being more related to the Vice President for Academic Affairs/Registrar function as they are seen to have overall institutional responsibility for quality assurance. This movement away from the President's Office does not appear to have had a detrimental impact on the impartiality of the quality function, however the continued support of the Vice President/Registrar continues to be critical.

10.5.2 Role of Networks

The findings suggest that quality professionals place value in the role of a professional network, to support continuous professional development and for personal support.

To address this issue of expertise and the professional development skills gaps identified by this research (section 7.5.2), quality professionals use informal structures more than formal structures to support their professional development. The lack of formal training available by some quality professionals is cited as a reason for not being considered 'a professional'. There is a desire among quality professionals for additional structure, particularly in supporting technical knowledge requirements that support quality assurance policy and in broadening the experiences of quality professionals beyond the Anglo-Irish system. Participants have suggested a role for QQI or the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in providing this support in a more structured way. The way in which the National Forum brings together interested groups through its seminar series and working groups was cited by participants as an inclusive and effective method to create a network or community that concentrates on the shared learning and experience rather than furthering political agendas through membership organisations and groupings such as the IUA and THEA.

Although QQI is identified as a potential provider of professional development for quality professionals, it is not viewed as being within their formal remit by a QQI representative interviewed. There appears to be a mismatch on priorities within funding of quality within higher education given that the 'system architecture' is dependent on a cadre of quality professionals who are facilitating its implementation on the ground. This also illustrates a contradiction in expectations by quality professionals of the role of QQI with respect to capacity development in the sector.

The environment that quality professionals work is described as challenging where quality professionals need a safe space to retreat to. The safe and risky space identified by Whitchurch (2012, p 84) for the third space professional is one where the professional can exert autonomy and agency, however a 'dark side' which included a lack of a sense of lack of belonging and voices of struggle and conflict is also identified. This dark side is evidenced by some of the experiences of quality professionals where they

have experienced isolation, frustration, and relationship strain. This lack of belonging in their own institution, can heighten the need for occupational belonging outside of their institution through formal and informal networks.

The caution expressed by participants regarding ownership of the network, the agenda set and the need to respect sectoral diversity in such a network could be considered attributes of occupational protectionism, it is not valid to consider this as occupational closure as described in occupational literature (Muzio et al, 2019). The findings suggest that a desire for a cross sectoral network could be considered to be the beginnings of professionalism from below (Evetts, 2013) across the sector where the desire for consistency of a role description by the Council of Registrars could be described as professionalism from above.

10.5.3 Power and Influence

Although quality is considered as ephemeral (Hazelkorn et al., 2018), quality assurance and related quality enhancement in Irish higher education has an importance that is located in the explicit statutory requirements and the association of funding for quality objectives that are part of the governance and management of public higher education and in the impact that such funding has in the private/independent sector when available. As a consequence, those who hold quality related roles could be assumed to have influence as the outcomes of their work can be directly linked to the reputation or financial success of their institutions. However, influence is perceived by quality professionals and by senior leaders to be based not on their positional level within the organisation but more importantly on their ability to use collegial practices (Whitchurch, 2011), and getting involved with colleagues in day to day work (Huising, 2015) or micro-practices (Noordegraaf, 2020).

10.5.4 Internal Support systems

The support of institutional leadership which is identified as a key requirement by quality professionals in this study is seen as critical by Whitchurch to support those in integrated third space roles to ensure that institutional structures support the work of quality professionals. As outlined above in Section 10.5.1, the structural placement of the quality function and quality professionals indicates an integration of the role into the organisation. However, the achievement of real integration and

recognition of the function or of the quality professional depends on the continuous support of senior management and referencing of the work done by quality professionals in the communication channels and mechanisms of the institution. This support provides further legitimacy, allows the quality professional to be 'wired in' (Noordegraaf, 2020 p.218) and supports the occupational mandate (Nelsen & Barley, 1997) of the quality professional.

10.6 An emerging profession?

Using Anteby et al's (2016) definition of an occupation, an occupation of quality professional exists within Irish higher education, and this can be associated with the occupational characteristics of quality professionals or practitioners in other sectors. To address the final research question, the findings of the study have been explored further to see if the characteristics of nascent professions, occupational professionalism or organisational professionalism can be observed among this occupational group.

Quality professionals see themselves as acting with professionalism, where 'trust, discretion, expertise' are key components of their value system (Evetts, 2013) They see themselves as **being** professional in carrying out their work, in being **a** professional but in some cases, they do not see themselves as being a 'quality professional'.

Yet, the findings suggest that a distinct occupation exists, with an emerging knowledge, skill, and competency base and with a common value system. The knowledge and competency base can be compared with those working in the broader quality field outside of education (Section 10.1.3). Given that few of the participants in the study identified with a quality related professional identity, it is not surprising that while membership of quality related professional associations is open to those working in higher education, none of the participants in this study is a member of one.

Using the broader perspective on professions, quality professionals in Irish HE also could be considered as organisational professionals (Evetts, 2013; Noordegraaf, 2015) where their relationship is embedded within their organisation rather than in an external occupational grouping. Comparisons of the findings of this study with reflections on the emerging profession of corporate social responsibility (CSR) professionals (Brès et al., 2019) are of note where Wickert describes CSR professionals as a 'sub-type of

organisational professional with a craft like knowledge base' (p.252.). Their roles are understood even without specific job titles. The findings suggest that in its current state the quality professional in Irish higher education plays the part of the connective or connective professional who 'navigate relations, get wired in, understand social experiences, navigate risks, and gain respect' (Noordegraaf, 2020, p218). This concept of being 'wired in' is particularly important to quality professionals who seek to be represented, to be consulted with and to inform institutional decisions as described in section 9.5.1

> . I definitely think being having the quality office more involved in institutional decision making. And even if it is on the basis of a kind of consultation, expertise voice in the room and because I know say so much that we are involved in the decision making process, to determine a certain level that's not appropriate and that maybe that's fair enough, you know, to me, but definitely that your voice is heard" (QP24_DAB)

Quality professionals link their expertise to other professionals, managers, students and external stakeholders through statutory quality reviews, programme accreditation activities, memberships of working groups and academic committees.   Their authority is rooted in the connections that they make and the manner in which they make them. They reconcile the values of trust and impartiality with the compliance and managerial aspects of the role.

10.7 Impact on the practice of 'quality work'

This study looked at the quality work undertaken by those who have day to day responsibility for the operation of quality within HEIs in the Irish context. The quality work that is described in this study relates to a defined set of tasks. However, other forms of quality related work takes place within academic units such as. faculty, department, and programme management, in teaching and learning units, for example, development of pedagogical improvements, staff development and in other operational units for example, ISO accreditation. To have an integrated and collective (Elken & Stensaker, 2020a, p183) view of all of these activities requires that quality has a broad interpretation across institutions which is co-ordinated and where emphasis is placed on the practices used. As boundary spanners who are in a position of trust within their organisation, quality professionals can

play a critical role in that coordination of quality related activity and in the knowledge management of their institutions.

10.8 Impact on quality culture

The quality professional plays a vital role in the success of the creation of a successful organisational quality culture. Using the skills of collaboration, co-production and brokering, they interpret national and international policy and assist colleagues in the creation of a quality system from within and to map existing practice with this policy (Vettori & Lueger, 2011).

By being a sociological citizen (Canales, 2011), the quality professionals can interpret the organisational context and policy requirements in the interest of the greater good, leading to the creation of a regenerative (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008) quality culture where the aims of the institutions are informed by the requirements of external agencies rather than driven by them. To have this regenerative culture, support from institutional management and from regulatory agencies is important.

Support from senior management can allow quality professionals to become leaders at the boundaries within their organisations to tackle the 'interesting' work (Elken, 2020c, p.) and use their experience and place of organisational trust to break down institutional silos and enhance organisational innovation.

Although the argument that quality professionals are boundary spanners is advanced, the relationships and interdependence with other groups within the organisation need to be continually maintained and interwoven (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2010). There remains a danger that the new spaces that quality professionals and their colleagues inhabit are timebound and exist only when a particular quality review or programme validation process is taking place, representing a responsive quality culture (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). For a regenerative quality culture to exist, quality professionals need to continue to take the lead and nurture those relationships even when groups have gone back into their own space (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2010)

This leadership can extend to the wider sector as quality professionals can also play a role in facilitating a wider discussion on what is meant by quality in Irish higher education. In common with the Austrian experience (Vettori, 2018), the findings show a tension at sectoral level on how quality is

perceived by participants to be interpreted by the HEA and DFHERIS as a value for money or performative concept (Stensaker, 2008), to be interpreted by academics as based in academic or pedagogic (Brennan & Shah, 2000) norms and experience and by policy makers as based in standards and consistency (Stensaker, 2008; Vettori (2018). As observed by a participant, 'neither is wrong or right' (QP23_24), however an appreciation that different meanings are understood may alleviate those tensions. What is clear from the findings is that while acknowledging their role in statutory compliance, quality professionals favour an enhancement led approach to quality, rather than one of control.

11 Conclusion

This final chapter outlines a summarised answer to each of the research questions which were addressed using an adaptation of Anteby et al's (2016) occupational analysis framework and their definition of an occupation which has provided a conceptual framework on which to examine the research questions and present the findings of this study. Findings that lie outside the framework are also summarised.

I also outline how this research can be used to inform the practice of quality professionals, institutions, and national policy.

The limitations of this research, proposals for further research and some reflections on my learning journey are also provided.

11.1 Research Questions Answered

Research Question 1: What professional identities do QA practitioners align with and has that changed since taking on the role?

Quality professionals do not identify with a single professional identity. There is evidence that some quality professionals are reconsidering their professional identity and alignment with a quality professional identity is linked to length of time in post.   Quality professionals' identity is shaped by the previous roles and experiences. They share a common formation within the higher education system and come from an academic/subject discipline or administrative/professional services background. These roles and experiences inform their world view and shape how they see their role within their organisation. From the perspective of the quality professionals, the senior leaders and the sectoral leaders interviewed, quality

professionals carry out a specific 'category of work' (Anteby et al, 2016) within the higher education sector.

Research Question 2: How do QA practitioners negotiate the cultures that operate within their institutions and within Irish Higher Education?

The 'actions enacting the role*'* (Anteby et al, 2016) and behaviours that quality professionals use to negotiate the academic, administrative and management cultures within their organisations are consistent with the behaviours indicated in the literature that describe boundary spanners (Akkerman & Baker, 2011, Kallenberg 2016a, 2016b; Whitchurch, 2012) and boundary spanning practices (Hawkins, 2015; Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2010).

The practices include collaboration, co—creation and co-production of policy, brokering and mediating the using soft skills of persuasion and influence rather than positional authority.

The structures and cultures that support quality professionals can be observed in the statutory basis for the work that they undertake and the explicit placement of the quality function at the centre of the organisation, usually reporting to the senior academic officer of the institution.

Although based in the centre of the organisation, there is a culture among quality professionals of maintaining an impartial or apolitical stance vis-à-vis management and functional areas under review. Support is generally organisationally based through relationships with senior leadership. This leadership is critical, not only to supporting the individual, but also to advancing the occupational mandate (Nelsen & Barley, 1997) of those inhabiting quality roles.

Research Question 3: How do they perceive their status, role, and influence within their institution?

Quality professionals perceive that their role, although ill-defined, is important within the higher education sector. The status and influence of the role is impacted by how other colleagues perceive their credibility or legitimacy (Cheng, 2009). While an academic background is considered an advantage when dealing with academic staff, however status and influence is significantly enhanced where the quality professional has empathy with

the perspective of other staff and units in their HEI. Their institutional influence is positively impacted by overt support from senior management, their personal characteristics and where positive outcomes from quality assurance activities are visible within the HEI.

The role of the quality professional in Irish HE is challenging, it can be isolating, and it requires resilience on behalf of the quality professional.

Research question 4: Is QA practice in Irish higher education emerging as a profession due to the influence of national and/or European policy on the creation of a common occupational profile?

Using Anteby et al's definition of an occupation where '(i) a category of work ;(ii) the actors [are] understood—either by themselves or others—as members and practitioners of this work; (iii) the actions enacting the role of occupational members; and (iv) the structural and cultural systems upholding the occupation' (p.187). the findings have demonstrated that an occupation of quality professional exists.

In support of this occupation an analysis of the 'category of work' (Anteby et al, 2016) has been undertaken which outlines the tasks that are commonly undertaken by quality professionals. Based on this analysis, an occupational profile is proposed which (see 10.1.3) can provide institutions with guidance on the knowledge skills and competences required within quality assurance and enhancement teams. It can also provide the basis for the development of a formalised programme of learning or specialised body of knowledge (Burns, 2019; Hodson & Sullivan, 2012) which quality professionals view to be missing within the Irish HE system.

Through the mapping of other competency frameworks outside of education, the findings suggest that the occupation can also be associated with the occupational characteristics of quality professionals or practitioners in other sectors.

While all of the traditional attributes of a profession cannot yet be attributed to the occupation, there is evidence of the development of a nascent profession. In that development however, there is no significant finding of a desire to close entry to the occupation. When seeking additional professional development and a network, their motivation is for learning

and knowledge transfer rather than for credentials and occupational closure (Muzio et al, 2019).

Moving away from the traditional definition of a profession, an alternative form of professionalism (Evetts, 2013; Noordegraaf, 2015; Noordegraaf; 2020) can be observed. Observing the boundary spanning practices of collaboration, co-production and brokering that quality professionals use, I argue that following Noordegraaf (2020), quality professionals can be described as connected or connective professionals who 'navigate relations, get wired in, understand social experiences, navigate risks, and gain respect' (Noordegraaf, 2020, p218).

11.2 Additional Findings

External supports from QQI or other agencies is experienced differently by quality professionals depending on their context. While individualised support is available on a piecemeal basis, there isn't a structured approach on behalf of QQI to support quality professionals in their work. Quality professionals see a role for QQI in developing a broader approach to developing networks, although this is not seen to be within the remit of QQI or likely to secure funding by sectoral participants.

Lack of funding for the sector and for quality enhancement in particular is seen as a significant challenge by quality professionals, particularly those in the public sector. A lack of funding contributes to the negative association with quality assurance and enhancement activities where no reward is seen for additional work.

Senior leaders acknowledge that dealing with the outcomes of reviews can be uncomfortable and not fully integrated into wider strategic planning. Greater integration of quality, strategy and institutional research as a sectoral norm would provide additional support for the quality professional and enhance institutional quality cultures.

11.3 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to scholarship on higher education and the place of quality work in higher education institutions and systems as the first study of quality professionals across the higher education sector in Ireland. It contributes to the recent European literature which has given voice to quality professionals in higher education.

An occupational profile for a quality professional in higher education is proposed and this is suggested as an area for further research.

11.4 Implications for Practice

Quality professionals should continue to work as boundary spanners and connected professionals to connect the various forms of quality work throughout their organisations. In crossing different boundaries, supporting and working with colleagues they can help create a quality culture that is agreed and integrated into the strategic aims of the institution. Quality professionals acknowledge that their role can be challenging and difficult, however it is by challenging our organisations and policy makers that we can support the enhancement of our teaching and learning, and the services provided to students.

While there is some support for a sector wide community of practice, there are different views as to how the community should be formed or curated. Both QQI and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning have been suggested as institutional homes for such a community. The proposed Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum would appear to be a natural home for such a community of practice, however in keeping with the theme of different forms of quality work, a possible future for a network may be as a special interest group within the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. Bringing institutional and programmatic quality assurance and enhancement together at this level could pave the way for greater collaboration at institutional level and an integrated understanding of what quality is in Irish higher education.

11.5 Implications for Higher Education Institutions

The findings from this study provide an occupational profile which can be used to create and develop quality office teams and to provide a professional development framework for those working in quality roles within HE. This may be particularly useful to the technological university sector which is undergoing significant organisational change. The adoption of this profile may provide better role definition within institutions.

Overt senior level support for quality assurance and enhancement is critical to the success of quality professionals in carrying out their role. Higher education institutions need to discuss what quality means for their institution, where the quality function is best placed organisationally within

the HEI and how quality roles are represented in decision making fora. Institutional leadership needs to accept the independence of quality professionals and be open to challenges that they may bring to decision making fora.

11.6 Implications for Policy

Perhaps the greatest implication from this study is the need for a broader cross sectoral discussion on a definition of what quality means for different stakeholders in Irish HE. Within the European and Irish policy systems there is no sense that there will be any pull back from the requirements of European or national standards and guidelines. Professional accreditation and regulation are placing continuing and increasing demands on institutions. This discussion on the meaning of quality, its assurance and enhancement must address funding for higher education but also funding and support for the development of the quality functions as they grapple with the additional administrative burden that compliance with statutory requirements places on institutions.

It remains to be seen if the proposed Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum (IQQF) will fulfil the needs expressed by quality professionals for a think tank or greater thought leadership from within the sector. The terms of reference for the IQQF do not appear to address the wish for a more formalised approach to professional development for those working in specific quality related roles.

11.7 Limitations of the Study

This study is limited as the views of key sectoral stakeholders such as the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, innovation and Science and the Higher Education Authority are not included in this study. The contribution of linked providers is also not representative.

The study took place at a time when the higher education sector is in flux and the IoT sector in particular is undergoing significant structural changes. During the period of this research, institutions have merged and become technological universities. The degree awarding powers of institutes of technology have changed and some of these institutions that did not have quality functions or defined roles at the commencement of this research now do.

11.8 Further Research

While this research looks at how quality professionals perceive how they relate to their colleagues in institutions and their views are supported by the senior leaders and sectoral representatives interviewed, the views of academic and professional services staff who interact with quality professionals would provide further support for the use of the occupational analysis framework and provide feedback to the higher education system on how quality cultures within the sector can be enhanced.

As the national quality assurance system has moved to a tertiary model, a similar study of quality professionals in further education would complement this work and provide a rounded view of the quality professionals who are required implement the policies of DFHERIS and QQI within their institutions.

Further research into what institutions consider to be their definition and interpretation of quality could be undertaken to inform national discussion.

11.9 Reflections

I started my doctoral studies six years ago with the initial goal of completing within four years. This was an ambitious goal as a part-time student with a senior level role, nonetheless it was one that I set for myself. I found the first year of study relatively straightforward, thanks in large part to the structured nature of the programme. The following two years were not so easy as finding the time and space required to allow themes from literature and ideas to percolate is challenging when adding it to the demands of every day personal and working life.

I had begun to formalise my research design when an opportunity arose to change job and move to another institution and location. This brought further challenges but also benefitted the study as I experienced a different perspective on what it is to be a quality professional within a different context. While I believe that I would have been granted access to the same breadth of institutions had I not changed role, I think that moving to the university sector as an insider researcher to that cohort may have provided a level of trust with colleagues which may not have been the case had I remained within the private sector.

By engaging with my peers and senior leaders within the sector, my own perspective as to what constitutes quality work has been broadened. The

challenges that we face are common, regardless of the subsector and we share many experiences.

In taking an academic approach to this research, I have found it challenging at times to find my own voice. As a quality professional who has been required to be a diplomat and objective observer, learning to state my own position has been difficult as was changing my writing style from report writer to the exposition and clarity required for this thesis.

Perhaps my greatest learning throughout this period is to continue to question my assumptions and to check myself when engaging with further research topics and indeed when engaging with colleagues within my institution around their understanding of the meaning of quality.

11.10 Final Reflections

There is a role for quality professionals to provide leadership and challenge their institutions to be more than compliant, reactive, or responsive organisations. Quality professionals can become leaders at the boundaries to investigate interesting work (Elken, 2020c, p.10) within their institutions and with external agencies. Such interesting quality work may be to explore at a sectoral level what quality means in Irish higher education, otherwise there will always be tensions. While value for money, performance and fitness for purpose are valid objectives, the transformative nature of the outcomes of quality assurance and enhancement for the individual and for the institution will better serve the sector and its students.

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13 Appendix 1 - Survey

This survey was administered online using Microsoft Forms.

Spanners in the Works: The Role of

Quality Practitioners in Irish Higher Education

The questionnaire is divided into 4 broad topical areas. The first set of questions (1-13) concerns your consent to taking part in the study and your understanding of where and how the data will be stored.

Questions 14-23 refer to your organisation and role.

Questions 24-33 ask about you and your professional background

The remaining questions ask about the activities and tasks that you undertake during the normal course of your work.

It should take you about 15-20 minutes to complete. Please provide your name and institution. Confidentiality and anonymity are assured.

If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact either of the contacts below:

Researcher Contact Details: Supervisor Contact Details

Sinéad O'Sullivan Dublin Trinity College

osulls25@tcd.ie

Dr John Walsh, School of Education,

walshj8@tcd.ie

Required

1. Institution *

  Dublin City University

  O Maynooth University

  O NUI Galway

  O Trinity College Dublin

  O University College Cork

  O University College Dublin

  O University of Limerick

  O TU Dublin

  O TU Dublin, Blanchardstown

  O TU Dublin, Tallaght

  O RCSI

  O Athlone IT

  O IT Carlow

  O Cork IT

  O Dundalk IT

  O Galway-Mayo IT

O IADT

O Limerick IT

O Letterkenny IT

O IT Tralee

O Mary Immaculate College

O IMI

O Marino College

O Institute of Public Administration

O Garda College

O CCT

O Dorset College

O Dublin Business School

O Galway Business School

O Griffith College

O Hibernia College

O ICHAS

O MCP

O National College of Ireland

O Open Training College

O St Nicholas Montessori College Ireland

O SQT

O Waterford IT

O NUI

2. Please provide your name ∗

3. I have read and understood the information sheet *

   O   Yes, O No

4. I understand what the project is about and that the results will be used in a PhD dissertation and may be discussed or published as part of conferences, seminars or in research journals ∗

   O   Yes, O No

5. I am fully aware of all the procedures involving and any risks associated with this study *

   O Yes Or No

6. I understand that I am being asked to participate in this study as I currently work as a quality practitioner or have an interest in quality work in higher education ∗

   O Yes Or No

7. I know that participation in this study is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason ∗

   O Yes Or No

8. I understand how the data will be collected using a survey and that I may be asked to take part in a follow up interview *

O   Yes, O No

9. I understand that this interview will be conducted face to face at my place of work or by using online conferencing tools, and that it will take approximately an hour and it will be recorded *

O   Yes, O No

10. I understand that the data, (both survey and interview) will be encrypted and stored on password protected devices for a period of three years. *

O Yes Or No

1 1. I understand that I will not be named within the study, that my place of work will be anonymised, and that confidentiality will be assured *

O Yes Or No

12. I understand that I can contact the researcher or her supervisor at any time for clarification using the details above *

o Yes Or No

13. I agree to take part in this study *

Yes, O No

14. Is there a dedicated quality unit or department in your institution?

O Yes Or No

1 5. If yes, in which area of the organisation does it sit? *

O President's Office

O Vice President's Office

o Registrar's Office

O Teaching & Learning

o
[   ]

    Other

16. If no, where is quality related activity managed?

[   ]

17. What is your official job title? *

[   ]

**18. What is the official title of the department or unit that you work
in? ***

[   ]

19. To whom do you report? *

O   President

O Vice President

O Registrar

O Director of Teaching & Learning

O Director of Quality

O _____

   Other

20. **How many people work in your department or unit? ***

   O   On my own

   O 2

   O 3

   O 4+

21. **Do you work ***

   O   Full-time?

   O Part-time?

22. **Do you work exclusively in the quality area? ***

   O   Yes

O No

23. **If you answered no to question 22, please outline what other activities you undertake to teaching, other administrative work, discipline related research**

   [   ]

24. When categorising roles, does your organisation consider your role to be ·k

O   Academic?

O Administrative?

O Professional Services?

O [   ]

    Other

25. **What is the NFQ level of your highest qualification? ***

O   Level 10

O Level 9

O Level 8

O Level 7

O Level 6

O [   ]

    Other

26. **Do you have any formal qualifications in the specific area of quality management? ***

O   Yes, O No

27. **If yes, please outline the nature of those qualifications. What level on the NFQ are they, are they professional, academic etc.**

28. **For how long has your role existed in your organisation? ***

O   1 year

O 2-4 years

O 5-7 years

O 8-9 years

O 10+years

O Don't know

29. **How long have you been in post? ***

O   1 year

O 2-4 years

O 5-7 years

O 8-9 years

O 10+years

30. **What was the nature of the post that you held prior to this role?**
*

O   Faculty Administration/Management

O Programme Administration/Management

O Academic

O Central Administration/Management

O Quality role within education

O Quality role outside of education

O

        Other

31. **When considering your professional identity, what profession if any, do you align yourself with? ***

32. **Are you a member of any quality professional body, group, or network? ***

O   Yes, O No

33. **If yes, can you provide details**

35.In considering the activities that you undertake as part of your role; please indicate which ones you do and how frequently

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Core Activity	Done by Another in my Unit	Done by Another role in Institution
I have initiated process reviews as a result of quality assurance or enhancement activities	O	O	o	O	O	O	O
I proof programme validation or specification documents on behalf of programme developers	O	O	O	O	O	O	⬤
I advise programme developers on the content of programmes and modules	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
I organise programme

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Core Activity	Done by Another in my Unit	Done by Another role in Institution
I have initiated process validation/review events for my institution	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
I research and develop policy for all parts of my institution	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
I represent my institution at events relating to quality assurance and enhancement	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

I represent my institution at events

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Core Activity	Done by Another in my Unit	Done by Another role in Institution
I have initiated process relating to teaching, learning and assessment	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
I act as a reviewer for other education institutions	O	O	O	O	O	O	◯
I act as a reviewer within my own	O	O	O	O	O	O	◯

36. **Please rank these activities in the order of frequency that you undertake them. Use the arrows to move the options ***

       Advice and guidance on interpretation of policy or regulation

       Organisation of institutional reviews

       Writing self-evaluation reports

       Managing validation events

       Advice on teaching, learning and assessment matters

       Devising institutional policy

       Devising or Revising institution wide business processes/procedures

       Devising or revising business processes/procedures within my own department

37. **Please rank these departments or units in the order of frequency that you have most interaction with. Use the arrows to move the options ***

       Academic Departments

       Institutional Research

Student Welfare Services

Admissions Office

Strategy & Planning

Teaching & Learning Units/Centres

Examinations Office

38. **If other, please outline**

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39. **Please feel free to add any additional comment or observation below**

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40. Thank you for completing the questionnaire. If you are prepared to take part in the next stage of my research, please indicate below.

The next stage will involve a one-to-one interview of approximately 40 minutes to an hour. It will be a recorded interview which will take place at a mutually agreed time and location, most likely your workplace.

The interview will seek to clarify outcomes of the survey as well as investigate the following research questions.

What professional identity do QA practitioners align with and has that changed since taking on the role?

How do QA practitioners negotiate the cultures that operate within their institutions and within Irish Higher Education?

How do they perceive their status, role, and influence within their institution? Is QA practice in Irish higher education emerging as a profession due to the influence of national and/or European policy on the creation of a common occupational profile?

You do not have to take part in this study and may withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without prejudice *

Yes   No

40. As you have answered no to a question regarding consent, the questionnaire is terminated. If you wish, please let me know what additional information you require.

This question is not relevant if you have consented

14 Appendix 2 – Information Sheet and Consent Form

Information for Participants

Title of the Study	Spanners in the Works: The Role of Quality Practitioners in Irish Higher Education
The Study	I am a PhD student at the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin. As part of my course, I am investigating the role of the quality practitioner in Irish higher education.
	In the context of the debate as to the future of Irish higher education, the purpose and identity of emerging professional roles such as quality assurance, institutional researchers, and academic developers that straddle both the academic and central administrative divide remains unclear. There is an extant literature on librarians and a growing literature on the place of educational developers and instructional designers.
	Missing from much of this discourse is the voice of the quality professional. Indeed, even within the prolific quality assurance literature, the perspective of those required to implement QA policies is absent.
	For the first time, the regulated higher education sector in Ireland is now subject to the same statutory core quality assurance guidelines. This affords an opportunity to explore the role and perspective of QA professionals across the sector as they navigate the

	boundary between multiple cultures, the academic tribes and an increasingly market led and regulatory bound management.
Participant Information	If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to take part in a recorded interview which will take between 40 minutes and 1 hour. The interview will take place using Microsoft Teams. You do not have to take part in this study and may withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without prejudice. The survey addresses questions as to the nature of your work and tasks undertaken by those working in quality roles in Irish higher education. The interview will seek to clarify outcomes of the survey as well as investigate the following research questions What primary professional identity do QA practitioners align with and has that changed since taking on the role? How do QA practitioners negotiate the cultures that operate within their institutions and within Irish Higher Education? How do they perceive their status, role, and influence within their institution? Is QA practice in Irish higher education emerging as a profession due to the influence of national and/or European policy on the creation of a common occupational profile?

Anonymity & Confidentiality	No personal data will be revealed throughout the study. Data will be anonymised and coded to preserve anonymity and pseudonyms will be used for both names and institutions. Due to the relatively small number of potential participants, absolute anonymity cannot be guaranteed, however confidentiality will be assured at all times. Interviewees will be provided with a transcript of their interview for clarification and corrections that they may wish to make.
Data Protection	The data gathered as part of this study will be encrypted stored in a database which will be password protected. This data will be stored in accordance with current data protection legislation and will be destroyed three years after the study is complete
Use of data	The data will be used only for the purposes of this study. The data will be used in my thesis and may be discussed at conferences and seminars and may be published in a book or academic journals.
Contribution to new knowledge	My research will contribute to the creation of new knowledge the area of higher education management through the formal categorisation of the roles that quality professionals undertake at a sectoral level. This will make a practical contribution by identifying the professional formation required to undertake the role in the current policy context and as the quality agenda matures. It will also add to the literature on professional and support roles in higher education, not only in Ireland but internationally.

Consent Form

TitleofProject: **Spanners in the Works: The Role of Quality Practitioners in Irish Higher Education**

I have read and understood the information sheet	Yes	No
I understand what the project is about and that the results will be used in a PhD dissertation and may be discussed or published as part of conferences, seminars or in research journals	Yes	No
I am fully aware of all the procedures involving and any risks associated with this study	Yes	No
I understand that I am being asked to participate in this study as I currently work as a quality practitioner or have an interest in quality work in higher education	Yes	No
I know that participation in this study is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason	Yes	No
I understand how the data will be collected using a survey and that I may be asked to take part in a follow up interview	Yes	No
I understand that this interview will be conducted face to face at my place of work or by using online conferencing tools, and that	Yes	No

it will take approximately an hour and it will be recorded		
I understand that the data, (both survey and interview) will be encrypted and stored on password protected devices for a period of three years.	Yes	No
I understand that I will not be named within the study, that my placed of work will be anonymised and that confidentiality will be assured	Yes	No
I understand that I can contact the researcher or her supervisor at any time for clarification using the details below	Yes	No
I agree to participate in the above study:	Yes	No

Researcher Contact Details

Sinéad O'Sullivan osulls25@tcd.ie0879480977

Supervisor Contact Details

Dr John Walsh, School of Education, Trinity College Dublinwalshj8@tcd.ie

SignatureofParticipant   Date

SignatureofResearcher

15 Appendix 3 – Interview Schedules

15.1 Quality Practitioners

1. What professional identity do QA practitioners align with and has that changed since taking on the role?
    a. Can you tell me how you got into quality work?
    b. Has it changed or evolved?
    c. In your survey response you indicated that you had an affiliation with x profession = what does that mean to you?
    d. How does this fit with what you do now?
    e. Comment on core activities…. /activities never done
    f. What do you think of the term QA professional or QA practitioner?

2. How do QA practitioners negotiate the cultures that operate within their institutions and within Irish Higher Education?
    a. How do you go about getting your work done?
    b. In your day to day – what challenges do you encounter
    c. If there are conflicts, what to do you think might be the reason for them
    d. In broader terms, what challenges do you see for quality roles in general

3. How do they perceive their status, role, and influence within their institution?
    a. How do you think quality is perceived in your institution?
    b. Are there pockets of different opinion?
    c. How influential do you think the quality role is in your institution
    d. Why?

4. Is QA practice in Irish higher education emerging as a profession due to the influence of national and/or European policy on the creation of a common occupational profile?
    a. How do you keep up to date with quality issues and matters?
    b. Are you aware of quality networks? or

    c. You are a member of x network, how does that impact on your practice

    d. What skills and attributes do you think are necessary for those work in quality in HE?

    e. What training or education do you wish you had when starting out?

    f. What support do you think QA practitioners need from?

        i. Their institution?

        ii. QQI or other agencies?

    g. Is there value in a cross sectoral network?

15.2 Senior Leaders

1. What structures support quality in your institution?

2. Has quality work/the quality landscape changed? …

3. Do you differentiate between institutional and academic quality?

4. How do QA practitioners negotiate the cultures that operate within their institutions and within Irish Higher Education?

    a. What tools would you observe quality professionals using to get their work done

    b. If there are conflicts, what to do you think might be the reason for them

    c. In broader terms, what challenges do you see for quality roles in general

5. How do they perceive their status, role, and influence within their institution?

    a. How do you think quality is perceived in your institution?

    b. Are there pockets of different opinion?

    c. How influential do you think the quality role is in your institution

    d. Why

6. Is QA practice in Irish higher education emerging as a profession due to the influence of national and/or European policy on the creation of a common occupational profile?

    h. What skills and attributes do you think are necessary for those work in quality in HE?
    i. Do you see quality professions as distinct from other roles?
    j. Is there value in a cross sectoral network?

15.3 Sectoral Representatives

1 How did you get into quality work?
2 How do QA practitioners negotiate the cultures that operate within their institutions and within Irish Higher Education?
    a. What tools would you observe quality professionals using to get their work done
    b. If there are conflicts, what to do you think might be the reason for them
    c. In broader terms, what challenges do you see for quality roles in general

3 How do they perceive their status, role, and influence within their institution?
    a. How do you think quality is perceived in your sector?
    b. Are there pockets of different opinion?
    c. How influential do you think the quality role is in the sector
    d. Why

4 Is QA practice in Irish higher education emerging as a profession due to the influence of national and/or European policy on the creation of a common occupational profile?

    a. What skills and attributes do you think are necessary for those work in quality in HE?
    b. Do you see quality professions as distinct from other roles?
    c. Is there value in a cross sectoral network?

16 Appendix 4- Interview Details

Participant	Duration (minutes)
QP1_DAB	80
QP2_PI	44
QP3_IT	62
QP4_DAB	58
QP5_DAB	48
QP6_LP	74
QP7_DAB	58
QP8_DAB	55
QP9_IT	41
QP10_DAB	72
QP11_IT	56
QP12_IT	66
QP13_DAB	56
QP14_DAB	62
QP15_IT	60
QP16_DAB	60
QP17_DAB	57
QP18_PI	49
QP19_DAB	37
QP20_IT	63
QP21_PI	64
QP22_PI	77
QP23_DAB	69
QP24_DAB	72
QP26_LP	62
SEC1	69
SEC2	42
SEC2	38
SEC4	63
SL1_DAB	30
SL2_IT	60

SL3_PI	33.5
SL4_IT	27
SL5_IT	68
SL6_PI	59
SL7_PI	45
SL8_DAB	33
SL9_LP	33
SL10_PI	27