# An analysis of experiences of the implementation of Quality Assurance (QA) systems and processes in the FE Sector in Ireland

*Rachel Donlon*

*Centre for Education and Lifelong Learning*

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# *Acknowledgements*

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## *List of Abbreviations and Acronyms*

AIS Assessment Instrument Specification

CDETB City of Dublin Education and Training Board

CDU Curriculum Development Unit

CEDEFOP European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

COP Communities of Practice

EA External Authenticator

ETB Education and Training Board

ETBI Education and Training Boards Ireland

FE Further Education

FET Further Education and Training

FETAC Further Education and Training Awards Council

IA Internal Authentication

ILO's Intended Learning Outcomes

IV Internal Verification

LDA Locally Devised Assessment

MMM Macro Meso and Micro Levels

NCVA National Council for Vocational Awards

OBTL Outcomes-based Teaching and Learning

QA Quality Assurance

QQI Quality and Qualifications Ireland

UDL Universal Design for Learning

# *Abstract*

This research set out to ascertain the diversity and range of experiences and perceptions of quality assurance implementation in Further Education (FE) among relevant stakeholders. Recent studies demonstrated how perceptions held by those interacting with quality assurance processes are vital for the commitment of these personnel and crucial to the perceived effectiveness of quality assurance (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). Twomey (2021) acknowledged varied perceptions of quality assurance in an Irish Higher Education (HE) context. Most compelling, the variation was often explained by specific roles assumed. To capture diversity in this study, participants were grouped depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation. An anonymised survey was executed to probe experiences of participants. Analysis progressed by applying descriptive statistics, then inferential statistics to determine statistically significant differences between groups. Data generated from open-ended questions was analysed using Braun and Clarkes Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, an integrative data analysis was completed. The analysis revealed fundamental areas of convergence, and crucially, areas of congruence. Most significantly, it was the grouping of participants that facilitated these observations. Findings revealed a distinct and measurable diversity of views depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation. The extent to which diversity exists and where diversity exists has been confirmed and supported with statistical analysis. Viewpoints, perceptions and experiences reflecting each grouping have been discussed, and tensions revealed. Left unaddressed, these tensions have the potential to undermine a collective approach to quality assurance in FE. This research and subsequent implications for practice demonstrate through discourse and reflection, a stronger and shared understanding can be constructed. Ultimately, this research provides insights for an evidence-based approach towards an integrated, authentically transformative quality assurance system in FE.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

In this chapter, I will outline the background and rationale of this research study, framing it within the context of the current academic literature and movement in the Further Education (FE) sector. The relevance of my own positionality in the design, execution and interpretation of this research study will be discussed. A brief overview of the research study aims, and the methodological approach will be provided. The potential impact of this research will be explicated and finally, the structure of the dissertation, and its chapters, will be outlined.

This research set out to ascertain the diversity and range of experiences and perceptions of quality assurance implementation in FE, and the extent to which participants conflict or concur. To capture the distinct diversity of views observed, participants were grouped depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation in FE.

The grouping of participants according to level of involvement was theoretically justified by the well documented MMM-IEO model as termed by QQI (2018, p. 11). The model has two main perspectives, one involves activity levels, specifically macro, meso and micro levels (MMM). The macro level is viewed as the system level, providing the regulatory stipulations for quality assurance processes, and includes external authenticators, policy creators and regulators, and communities of practice. The meso level is viewed as the education and training providers and institutions, to include centre management and quality assurance specific personnel, and it functions to implement the macro-level regulations. The micro level is where assessment and verification takes place, and teachers / assessors and internal verifiers work at this level (QQI, 2018).

In summary, the MMM perspective helped to distinguish the roles of stakeholders across the three levels of quality assurance implementation (QQI, 2018). In relation to this

study, the groupings depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation proved crucial. Firstly, it supported the process of explicating the diversity and range of experiences and perceptions observed among participants. Secondly, the grouping revealed areas of statistical significance where those least involved in quality assurance implementation perceived and experienced quality assurance more negatively compared to those more involved. It is therefore evident without grouping participants and instead working on averages of all participant submissions, there exists the possibility of over-representing the views of those least involved in quality assurance implementation, specifically teachers / assessors, and under-representing the views of those more involved.

In my professional practice I have identified variance in perceptions and experiences of quality assurance implementation in FE among relevant stakeholders. In terms of the implications of variance, recent studies demonstrated how perceptions held by those interacting with quality assurance processes are vital for the commitment of these personnel and crucial to the perceived effectiveness of quality assurance (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). This research aims to provide insights towards an integrated quality assurance system in FE as left unaddressed, extant tensions between relevant stakeholders have the potential to undermine a collective approach to quality assurance in FE. Considering this position, this research poses the following question: *Concerning experiences and perceptions of quality assurance implementation in Further Education (FE), to what extent does diversity exist among stakeholders, grouped depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation.*

Analysis revealed many fundamental areas of convergence and most crucially, areas of congruence, concerning experiences and perceptions of quality assurance implementation in FE. Most significantly, it was the grouping of participants depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation that facilitated the observation of diversity,

the extent diversity exists and where diversity exists. Subsequently, viewpoints, perceptions and experiences reflecting each grouping depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation in FE have been revealed, and existing tensions uncovered.

The essence of this research rests in the context of the re-visioning of quality assurance systems and processes in FE by principally establishing any fundamental diversity in perceptions and experiences among key stakeholders. The subsequent orientation of these towards integrated negotiated objectives is aimed to promote optimal quality assurance implementation in FE.

## *Background and Rationale*

Gill et al (2022) assert the struggle persists to define quality in an educational context. Challenges to defining quality in education include its recognised multidimensionality, varying stakeholder perspectives and interpretations, and the dynamicity of quality with its susceptibility to change against varying educational, political, economic and social landscapes (Gill et al, 2022). A fitting representation of my thinking on commencement of this research study is that "quality is a highly contested concept and has multiple meanings to people" (Tam, 2001, p. 47).

The optimal approach to quality in any educational context is highly debated, and this includes FE. Approaching quality from a managerial approach can be justified by the expressed need for transparency and accountability according to Twomey (2021), but this approach can precipitate critical and compelling challenges for traditional academic processes. Twomey (2021) purports managerial and academic lenses are often positioned as polarised viewpoints concerning quality assurance in education.

My perspective on quality assurance in FE is influenced by my academic background and experience in the FE sector in Ireland. As discussed, in my professional practice I have

identified varying perceptions and experiences of quality assurance implementation among relevant stakeholders. Additionally, as a teacher in FE with multiple quality assurance roles, I became aware of the need to interrogate my own assumptions, given the potential biases of those involved at varying levels of quality assurance implementation.

This research coincides with a period when both the FE sector in Ireland and quality assurance are undergoing accelerated development. The FE sector is currently undergoing intensive structural reform. Within the last ten years, this has included the establishment of the Education and Training Boards (ETB's), a new Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) and Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland (QQI). Quality assurance in FE is undergoing a period of propelled development and review. In early 2021, QQI began their landmark Inaugural Review of quality assurance in ETB's in Ireland, the first of its kind, and once complete, will precipitate change. A similar pace of development is also evident in external authentication. In early 2020 the Education and Training Board Ireland (ETBI) convened a new National External Authenticator Directory for QQI awards, developed on behalf of the 16 ETB's for the independent authentication of Further Education and Training programmes (ETBI, 2021).

Concurrent to this theme, in 2014, the first national FET Strategy was published, in 2020 a consecutive FET Strategy was launched, and the department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was newly established. The 2020 national FET Strategy identified quality assurance processes and structures as an area of concern in FE, and implicitly states quality assurance practices must continue to be prioritised (SOLAS, 2020).

This period of rapid change has been a significant part of my daily experience as an FE teacher of 15 years. Alongside my teaching duties I have been involved with various quality assurance roles, gaining substantial exposure to quality assurance systems and

processes. My quality assurance roles range from working as part of the internal quality assurance team, quality assurance co-ordination and management for diverse awarding bodies, both national and international, and the creation of internal quality assurance policy for an international awarding body. Other quality assurance roles I assume are Internal Authentication for Pearson programmes in Sport, standard Internal Verification for QQI, and over the past four years I have assumed the additional role of External Authenticator for QQI, working nationally within the FE sector. The quality assurance roles I am involved with have been steadily gaining significance and with this my interest in creating a positive impact through quality assurance has been motivated, thus aligning with the objective of this research study.

## *Quality Assuring Assessment*

On defining quality assurance QQI (2016) assert quality assurance is a term generally used to describe the procedures and processes that seek to ensure the learning environment, including teaching and assessment, reach an acceptable threshold of quality. QQI (2016) also advocate quality assurance is the enhancement of education and training provision and the standards attained by learners. QQI (2013; 2018) advance the authentication process ensures validity of assessment and promotes consistent quality assured learner results.

The authentication process has a two-tier approach and must include internal verification and external authentication. The objective of the collective QQI internal verification process is to verify providers assessment policies and procedures are accurately and consistently implemented. Conversely, internal verification processes for QQI are not concerned with the moderation of learner grades. This responsibility lies with the external authenticator, who determines if assessment material presented is in line with national standards, and is consistent, valid, and reliable.

The QQI Policy on QA Guidelines document (QQI, 2016) states the principle of continuous improvement must be the goal of a quality assurance system in education. The transparency principle also applies, where quality assurance systems should enhance transparency by demonstrating accountability, including accountability for the investment of public money in the case of FE. Assuring these principles significantly challenges internal quality assurance systems in FE to proactively develop as a tangible resource and become an explicit part of the educational infrastructure.

## *Research Origin*

A changing political context, such as that of quality assurance in FE, purporting intended systemic benefits such as transparency and accountability can also promote a neoliberal or managerial agenda in education (Twomey, 2021). Considering this viewpoint has stimulated critical reflection on my own position and agenda regarding quality assurance. I began giving strong consideration to the consequences of an exceedingly managerial commitment to accountability, particularly one that may be promoted unconsciously and therefore, go largely unquestioned.

In relation to the implementation and internal monitoring of quality assurance systems, colleges of FE in Ireland can exercise their own autonomy, where primary responsibility lies with the provider (QQI, 2016). Despite this principled autonomy, external guidelines developed and published by QQI are fundamental to programme providers and must be considered and adhered to when developing internal quality assurance procedures (QQI, 2016; QQI 2018). Sharpe (2019) asserts it's the exacting application of policy as much as the policy itself that defines the outcomes. This viewpoint again provoked critical reflection on the juncture between prescribed external quality assurance policy and the subsequent interpretation and application of such to create internal quality assurance policy

and subsequent practices. This context dependent implementation makes for a diverse application of quality assurance systems across FE, ensuring a rich culture and environment in which to carry out research of this kind.

Supporting this position, in my professional practice I have identified varied and contrasting perceptions and experiences of quality assurance in FE among relevant stakeholders. Being involved across all levels of quality assurance implementation in FE, I decided to take advantage of this inclusive viewpoint to interrogate the rationale behind the variance in experiences and perceptions. Supporting this viewpoint Twomey (2021) asserts due to the complex nature of quality assurance, definitions of academic quality based on single stakeholder views are often contested. The novel approach applied in this research study of grouping research participants depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation, is intended to establish the perceptions and experiences of quality assurance that may depend on level of involvement. Tensions, left unaddressed, have the potential to undermine an authentic collective approach to quality assurance in FE.

The coexistence of accelerated change both in the FE sector and in quality assurance in FE created an inherent precondition within me to remain cognisant of promoting change for the sake of change. The neoliberal managerialist philosophy of promoting constant change, without contemplation of exactly what fundamental objectives that change will serve, must be avoided. Therefore, the research origin of this study rests in the context of informing an evidence-based approach towards an integrated quality assurance system in FE.

## *Research Purpose*

It is anticipated this research will make some key contributions to knowledge in this field. The existence of a diversity of views depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation will be investigated. The extent to which diversity might exist and

where diversity might exist will also be interrogated and supported with the application of statistical analysis. Viewpoints, perceptions and experiences reflecting each group depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation will be explicated, and extant tensions revealed. This research promotes the objective of finding a nexus between groups, divided depending on level of involvement in quality assurance, to effectively inform future implementation in FE via an evidence-based approach.

The overarching objective is to make recommendations for a more integrated approach to quality assurance in FE that authentically and effectively represents the actors involved at varying levels of implementation. According to Twomey (2021) quality assurance is positively integrated when the different role groups impacted by policy decisions are included in policy development. By examining the rhetoric around quality assurance in FE and the extant perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders, it is hoped to incite the condition of disjuncture, viewed as a critical catalyst for the transformation of habitus asserts Bourdieu (1998).

To achieve these research aims and objectives, a fitting research design was executed. The principal phase of data collection is via an anonymised survey (see Appendix A) designed to probe the experiences of key actors involved in quality assurance implementation in FE. The survey questions are mixed and the purpose of this concurrent, intramethod mixing is to facilitate the gathering of multidimensional results.

Participant details will initially be analysed to illustrate the characteristics of the sample. Analysis will progress with quantitative results being graphed and analysed using descriptive statistics. Following this, a comparative analysis will be performed applying inferential statistics to determine any statistically significant differences between participant

groupings. Subsequently, data generated from open-ended survey questions will be analysed using Braun and Clarkes Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

An integrative data analysis will then be carried out. To explain, integration will be executed with common threads from the quantitative data and data from the open-ended questions being identified and explored. By applying integrated data analysis in this manner, it is envisaged findings realised will be richer than the independent sum of their parts. The process of data analysis will tend to internal validity, where quantitative results are triangulated with other quantitative results, and themes emerging from the open-ended questions will be triangulated with findings from the quantitative data. External validity will also be tended to by correlating emerging themes and results against existing applicable research.

As participants for this research study span across all three levels of quality assurance implementation in FE, different lenses will be availed of through which to view experiences and perceptions. The scrutiny of the intersection between espoused theories and principles of quality assurance held by those more involved in implementation and the theory-in-action by those least involved in implementation, should prove interesting. Highlighting the importance of this study, experiences and perceptions of quality assurance in FE is an under-represented area in research, but extensively under-represented is research on experiences and perceptions depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation.

Panwhar et al. (2017) assert educational research has been dominated by constructivist or interpretivist approaches favouring qualitative approaches, and scientific investigations favouring quantitative approaches are less common. The lack of scientific research approaches in educational research provides justification for the research design in this study. Further supporting the research design, quality assurance implementation in FE is

context specific and diverse. Quantitative approaches are deemed suitable to gain an understanding on the breadth of the topic, and to promote transferability.

## *Outline of Dissertation*

This dissertation is organised into five chapters. Following from this introduction, a critical review of contextual and relevant literature is presented. This chapter acknowledges the influence and importance of organisational context and perceptions as key drivers of quality assurance systems and processes. This review chapter concludes with the statement of the central research question. The third chapter outlines the research design and provides clear rationale for the methodological approach conscripted. Research participant details and sampling procedures are then explicated. The methodology also distinguishes between distinct staff role groupings that are responsible for the implementation of quality assurance in FE.

Findings from the survey are outlined and discussed in the fourth chapter, beginning with the sample characteristics, then results of the application of descriptive and inferential statistics, organised thematically. The discussion includes a comparative analysis of experiences and perceptions of participants by group, organised depending on level of involvement in quality assurance in FE. The comparative analysis of participant groupings paired with data triangulation techniques provides a richer transaction and deeper insight into experiences and perceptions. It is a useful lens through which to reflect on how perceptions and experiences may be impacted by level of involvement. This chapter identifies varying and contrasting experiences and perceptions extant among participant groupings, impacting on organisational quality assurance processes and procedures, and thus the functioning of quality assurance in FE. In the fifth and final chapter, the overarching findings are evaluated against the research question posed. This final chapter also includes the statement of study

limitations and outlines key areas where future research should focus. Finally, the fifth chapter outlines evidence-based implications for practice and policy that are aligned with the optimal objectives of authentically integrated, transformative quality assurance and learner-centric education.

## *Conclusion*

This chapter has provided a succinct overview of the background and rationale for this study. Details on how the research will be approached, managed, and presented have been provided. A contextual overview has been explicated placing this research study against sectoral developments, current policy, current practices, and extant literature. My own positionality to the research has been posited. The aims and objectives of this research study have been presented, alongside the potential value and anticipated impact. Finally, the structure of the dissertation is outlined, providing a mechanism for navigating each section.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## *Introduction*

The FE sector in Ireland is currently undergoing intensive structural reform. Within the last ten years, this has included the establishment of the Education and Training Boards (ETB's), a new Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) and Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland (QQI). This period of rapid change has precipitated the opportunity for transformative change.

Concurrent to this theme, in 2014, the first national FET Strategy was published, in 2020 a consecutive FET Strategy was launched, and the department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was newly established. The 2020 FET Strategy identifies quality assurance processes as "fundamental to developing curricula, teaching and learning, assessment, maintaining standards and enhancing quality" (SOLAS, 2020, p. 56). Acknowledging considerable progress, the strategy also states quality assurance practices "must continue to be prioritised" (SOLAS, 2020, p. 56).

This period of accelerated change has been a significant part of my daily experience as an FE teacher of 15 years. In this time, I have gained substantial exposure to quality assurance systems and processes. Quality assurance roles assumed in my own context range from working with the internal quality assurance team, quality assurance co-ordination and management for diverse awarding bodies both national and international, and creation of internal quality assurance policy for an international awarding body. I also act as Internal Authenticator for Pearson programmes in Sport, perform standard Internal Verification for QQI, and over the past four years I have assumed the additional role of External Authenticator for QQI programmes, working nationally within the FE sector.

Quality assurance has become a major authority in the evolution of practice in FE. The FE sector published its first Professional Development Strategy in 2017, with provoking findings. Results of an extensive survey outlined quality assurance as one area educators in FE were least confident about (SOLAS, 2017). The objective of this study is to promote optimal implementation of quality assurance in FE. Considering the findings reported in the Professional Development Strategy it is important to examine the reality of how the processes governing quality assurance are experienced and perceived in the context of FE. Fundamental to any quality assurance system in education is assessment, and one cannot be considered without the other.

This literature review aims to comprehensively examine experiences and perceptions of the implementation of quality assurance in FE. As part of this, it will be crucial to examine how, as a sector, we arrived at this juncture, before probing the discourse currently surrounding quality assurance policy and practices in FE.

## *Background and Context*

Hogan (1986) posits in the late nineteenth century a Commission on Intermediate Education recognised a lack of appropriate vocational skills among the Irish population. This resulted in technical education coming under the control of the Department of Education in 1924, after being transferred from the Department of Agriculture (McGuinness et al., 2014).

In the 1930's the 'Vocational Education Act' established the 38 Vocational Education Committees, to provide and manage technical education. The 'Apprenticeship Act' also set up apprenticeship committees to oversee training (Lewis & Kellaghan, 1987). Concurrently, Ireland's new membership of the European Economic Commission played a critical role in shaping the FE sector (O'Sullivan, 2005).

In the late 1970's, the European Social Fund provided funding for post-junior certificate courses to provide social, general and technical education that incorporated an applicable work experience component. These courses evolved to become what are now referred to as Post Leaving Certificate courses. In a bid to tackle high unemployment during the 1980's, programmes developed included Youthreach and the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme. In 1987, FÁS was established as Irelands Training and Employment Authority. FÁS were given responsibility for the offering and management of training courses and apprenticeships.

In 1995, plans were approved for the establishment of both a Further Education Authority and a National Certification Authority (Department of Education and Science, 1995). Due to the haphazard way the vocational sector evolved, courses often fell outside the system of established qualifications (Granville, 2003). As a result, consistency and standardisation of assessment and certification was deemed inadequate, provoking increased regulation and specification to assessment processes. Responding to this, in 1991, the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was established to provide certification. The NCVA was later subsumed by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) along with FÁS and CERT certification systems established in 1999 under the National Qualifications Act (McGuinness et al., 2014).

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act was passed into law in 2012, after a particularly turbulent decade for the FET sector, including scandals relating to assessment practices resulting in FETAC refusing to issue certificates to students (Fetac Awards on Hold until Audit, 2010). FETAC was disbanded, and the remit was subsequently transferred to the new statutory awarding body for further and higher education called QQI.

The FET sector now serves a diverse cohort of learners with a range of courses from National Framework of Qualifications Level 1-6. The sector includes a divergent range of educational programmes and training services including Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Community and Adult Education, Post Leaving Cert courses, Prison Education, Youthreach and Literacy and Numeracy Services. FET courses are primarily delivered by the remaining consolidated sixteen ETB's, meaning it is superbly positioned to serve individual, local and regional needs.

In the FE sector, internal quality assurance policies are devised by local programme providers. Despite this principled autonomy, external guidelines developed and published by QQI must be adhered to when developing internal quality assurance procedures (QQI, 2016; QQI 2018). The specific quality assurance measures applying to FE will be discussed in detail later in this review. Before this, it is important to explore the underpinning assessment practices in the FE sector and the current discourse surrounding them.

## *Assessment in a Contemporary Further Education System*

Rowntree (2015, p.1) asserts, ''If we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must first look to its assessment procedures''. Considering this statement, assessment in FE in Ireland is grounded on principles and purposes of assessment that support a learner-centred, constructivist model of education (CEDEFOP, 2015). This constructivist model, specifically a criterion-referenced assessment model, determines a learner's demonstration of knowledge, skill and competence, as opposed to their relative performance in norm-referenced assessment (Burkett, 2018). Criterion-referenced assessment of learning outcomes is the sole framework used for judging learner evidence in FE. Compared to norm-referenced assessment, criterion-referenced assessment allows a grade to

more authentically reflect a student's learning, distinct from the relative performance of others (Biggs, 2011).

Certification of FE programmes is based on achievement of externally established, stated learning outcomes as opposed to a centrally devised syllabus. Crucially, this requires the FE sector to cultivate "the capacity to analyse learners' needs, to develop a programme of study in response to those needs and to assess learner progress" (Teaching Council, 2011, p. 9). Accurately perceiving learner needs and progress, and providing subsequent appropriate responses is an important and relatively unique feature of assessment in FE, when compared to other educational models. But this versatility does raise the question of reliability of assessment. The question of reliability is further compounded if criteria are ambiguously stated, and thus open to various interpretations (Burton, 2006). Affirming this position, a consultation paper published in 2018 by QQI acknowledged under the current system, the responsibilities on FE providers to provide assessment that is consistently valid and reliable, may be unrealistic (QQI, 2018). This is a fundamental issue when it comes to quality assuring assessment in FE (QQI, 2018).

## *Quality Assuring Assessment*

On defining quality assurance QQI (2016) assert it encompasses the procedures and processes that seek to ensure the learning environment, including teaching and assessment, reach an acceptable threshold of quality. QQI (2016) also advocate quality assurance is the enhancement of education and training provision, and the standards attained by learners.

In relation to the implementation and internal monitoring of quality assurance systems, colleges of FE can exercise their own autonomy, where primary responsibility lies with the provider (QQI, 2016). This context dependent implementation makes for a diverse application of quality assurance systems across FE, ensuring a rich environment to carry out

research of this kind. However, QQI provide best practice guidelines informing the composition and design of internal quality assurance policies for providers, to mitigate discrepancy and safeguard effective implementation (QQI, 2018).

This autonomy around implementation and internal monitoring of quality assurance systems in FE attracts the externality principle (QQI, 2016). This means quality assurance systems in FE must make appropriate use of independent external authenticators who are expertly qualified to make national and international comparisons in standards, consistency, validity and reliability across assessment processes.

QQI (2013; 2018, p. 24) advance the authentication process takes place, "to ensure fairness, consistency and validity of assessment". The authentication process has a two-tier approach and includes internal verification and external authentication. In FE it is acutely common for teachers / assessors to assume standard internal verification duties for QQI. Additionally, programmes from Level 1-6 on the National Framework of Qualifications in FE are internally assessed by the teachers / assessors who deliver the programme modules, further affirming the vital role of teachers / assessors in quality assurance processes.

The role of QQI internal verification processes is to complete an agreed sampling process, to check the provider's assessment policies have been applied, to verify the existence of learner evidence, to verify the accuracy of results and to ensure accurate recording of results (QQI, 2018). These objectives may be fostered and supported by college management and an internal quality assurance team or quality assurance personnel in an FE setting.

Conversely, internal verification processes for QQI are not concerned with the moderation of learner grades, and succeeding this, assessors' judgments and grading decisions are not verified through the internal verification process. This responsibility lies

with the external authenticator, who determines if assessment material presented is in line with national standards.

QQI (2013; 2018, p. 25) state the external authenticator "provides independent authoritative confirmation of fair and consistent assessment of learners in accordance with national standards" and "ensures that assessment results have been marked in a valid and reliable way". External authentication establishes the credibility of providers assessment processes. An overview of quality assurance processes in FE, as described has been visualised in *'Figure 2.1'*.



**Key:**

- Assessment
- Authentication
- Approval - Certification

Learner

Teacher / Assessor

Internal Verification / Internal Verifier

External Authentication

Results Approval

Appeals

Certification
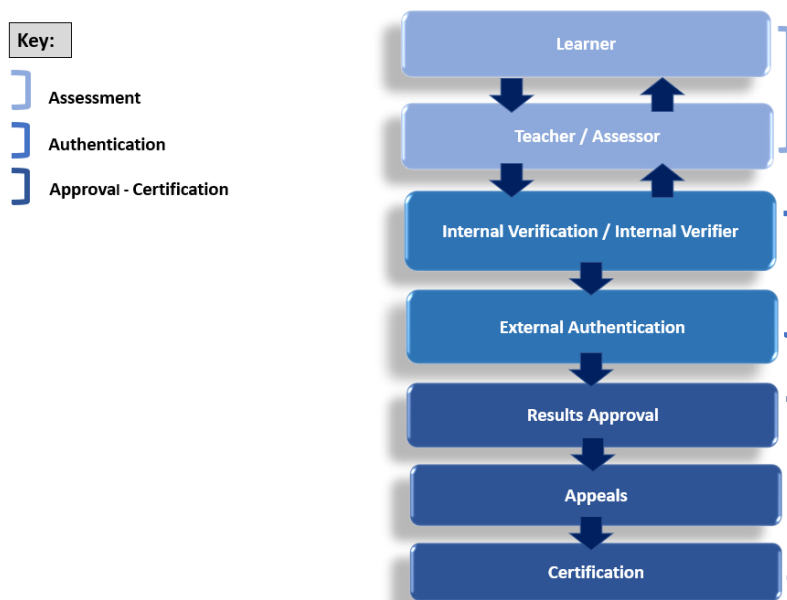
*Figure 2.1: 'An Overview of QA Processes in the FE Sector'.*

The QQI Policy on QA Guidelines document (QQI, 2016) states the principle of continuous improvement must be the goal of a quality assurance system in education. Additionally, quality assurance systems should enhance transparency by demonstrating accountability (QQI, 2016), including accountability for the investment of public money in the case of FE colleges. Assuring these principles, and meeting the externality principle, requires significant effort and resources, challenging the providers internal quality assurance

system to proactively develop as a tangible resource and become an explicit part of the educational infrastructure.

Concurrent to this theme, education has the ability to equip learners with agency, a sense of purpose, and the competencies required to shape their own lives and contribute to those of others. Holding this idea central, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development launched 'The Future of Education and Skills 2030' project, aiming to answer two far-reaching questions. Specifically, what knowledge, skills, attitudes and values will today's learners need to thrive and positively shape their world and how can instructional systems develop these effectively? This inspires a follow-up question, specifically, what could this mean for what and how we assess? This position first provokes the theoretical underpinning of Bloxham and Boyd (2006) on the purposes of assessment and it subsequently provokes John Biggs' theory of outcomes-based teaching and learning (OBTL); the model of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2015).

## *Purposes and Alignment of Assessment*

According to Bloxham and Boyd (2006) there are two main purposes of assessment, specifically, assessment *of* learning and assessment *as / for* learning. Assessment *of* learning focuses on measurement and provides evidence to accurately judge the appropriateness of standards against the national framework. This purpose is increasingly internally driven through local quality assurance procedures and externally driven by awarding bodies through external authentication processes. As assessment *of* learning is largely an evidence driven standardisation process, it does not necessarily demonstrate the value of the process of learning and teaching. Assessment *of* learning functions to differentiate different levels of achievement between learners. As assessment *of* learning also allows the provision of certification it can often be industry and external stakeholder driven.

Assessment *as / for* learning is informative, allowing students to identify gaps in their own learning, and facilitating the teacher to identify gaps in teaching, informing subsequent learning activities. Assessment *as / for* learning shapes students to develop lifelong learning skills and dispositions such as self-regulation of learning and self-directed learning. Crucially, Bloxham and Boyd (2006) assert these purposes of assessment may seem independent, but often conflict.

On examining the purposes of assessment and associated principles, Bloxham and Boyd (2006) demonstrate assessment for certification and quality assurance primarily emphasise the principles of 'validity' and 'reliability'. Enhancing the assessment principles of validity and reliability is often to the detriment of the principle of 'effectiveness', or assessment that emphasises an immersive deep learning process and instils lifelong learning capacities (Bloxham & Boyd, 2006). Earl and Katz (2006) support the theories put forward by Bloxham and Boyd (2006), reinforcing it is purpose dictating how assessment is constructed and utilised. Earl and Katz (2006) conclude it is important for educators to understand the purposes of assessment and recognise the need to balance them.

Jimenez et al. (2018) state the topic of 'Labour Force Mobility' has become central in the EU with educational providers. Crucially, focusing on labour force mobility simultaneously provokes accountability (Jimenez et al., 2018). An increasing drive for accountability is palpable within FE in Ireland (QQI, 2016) and resultingly, reporting on learner progression pathways has become more scrupulous.

Bloxham and Boyd (2006) suggest the theory of 'predictive validity' could go some way to resolving this conflict. Highly authentic assessments incite predictive validity. Therefore, with predictably valid assessments teachers are equipped to make better judgements on how the learner would actually perform beyond assessment, in the industry

(Bloxham & Boyd, 2006). As educators we must continually question the purpose and rationale for assessment and be prudent of the paradigm of assessment as an evidence driven quality measure, and concern ourselves principally with learners as the primary benefactors.

Coinciding with the theme of effective learner-centered assessment, according to Biggs (2003) on constructive alignment, there is an essential coherence between assessment, teaching methodologies, teaching and learning activities, and intended learning outcomes (ILO's) in an educational programme. Ultimately, this allows for accurate judgments to be made about how a learner's level of performance in assessment meets the ILO's. Because all aspects access the same action verbs at the same order, students will engage with appropriate learning activities at the appropriate order or level. This is, by definition, a deep approach to learning asserts Biggs (1999).

OBTL and the model of constructive alignment came in to being in 1994 when John Biggs implemented assessment portfolios in the Batchelor of Education programme he was delivering. The programme was aimed at professional teachers looking to improve their practice by applying knowledge of psychology in their teaching. He decided the teachers (his students) would compile a portfolio demonstrating examples of how psychology had been influencing their teaching (Biggs & Tang, 2011). One excerpt of student feedback on the process summarises the objective of the portfolios:

> We have to ponder, reflect and project the theories we have learnt into our own teaching . . . If it had only been an exam or an essay, we would have probably just repeated his ideas to him and continued to teach the same way as we always do! (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 96)

If learners are to learn ILO's effectively, then the teacher's fundamental task is to get learners to engage in learning activities likely to result in achieving those outcomes (Biggs &

Tang, 2011). Biggs (1999) affirms, to students, the assessment *is* the curriculum, so the key is to make sure the immersive assessment tasks mirror the ILO's.

From the teacher's perspective, assessment is at the end of the teaching-learning sequence, but to the learner it is at the beginning according to Biggs and Tang (2011). If the ILO's are reflected in the assessment tasks, as indicated by the grey downward arrow on '***Figure 2.2***', the teaching and learning activities the student engages in are both directed towards the same goal. In essence, students will be learning the ILO's, from the beginning, at the correct order or level, by preparing for assessments. An overview of teacher and learner perspectives, described by Biggs and Tang (2011) has been visualised in ***'Figure 2.2'***.
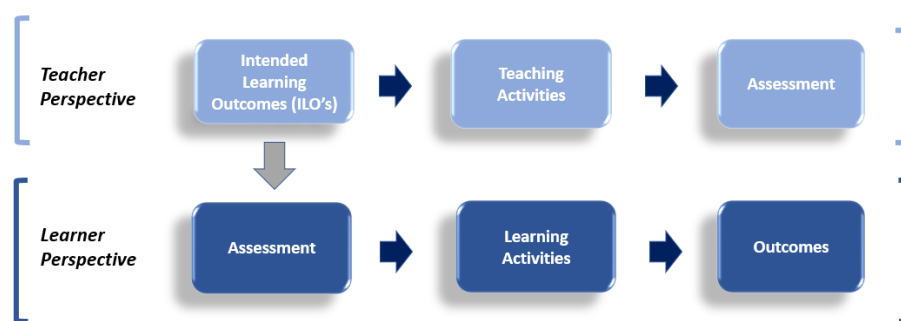


*Figure 2.2:* *'Teacher and Learner Perspectives on Assessment, Biggs and Tang (2011)'.*

Coinciding with the idea of optimal assessment approaches, this challenge has also been recognised by Boud (2014, p. 11) when stating "we must prepare students to cope with the unknown and build their capacity to learn when the props of a course – curriculum, assignments, teachers, academic resources – are withdrawn". This is suggestive of the theoretical underpinning of Jack Mezirow's self-directed learning. Garrison (1992) poses the interesting concept that the theoretical frameworks of Mezirow's self-directed learning and Dewey's critical thinking are integral to each other, with learner responsibility and control fundamental to both frameworks. Garrison (1992) deduces a reasonable conceptualisation of

self-directed learning and critical thinking must include learners assuming responsibility for learning while sharing control of the learning process. Garrison (1992) purports assuming responsibility for learning is an intrinsic element of critical thinking. The process of sharing control through discourse with an educator, or others, provides the learner with an external method of affirming meaning and understanding gained (Garrison, 1992). Nevertheless, the challenge remains to integrate individual responsibility and shared control as part of an effective learning process (Garrison, 1992).

Complete quality assurance structures, with their essential proximity to assessment, are critical to execute the aims of 'The Future of Education and Skills 2030' report and encompass the theories of Bloxham and Boyd, Biggs and Tang, Mezirow and Dewey. This points to a learner-centric quality assurance system focusing on purposes of assessment that serve to enhance teaching and learning, promote critical thinking and foster self-directed autonomous learners. The system must be integrated, generate quality feedforward and be capable of reflexive innovation. Equally as important as reaching this objective, is sustaining it. Sustainability is an essential aspect of assessment (Boud & Soler, 2015) and related processes such as quality assurance in an educational system, and it becomes more important against the backdrop of a rapidly changing landscape in FE and significant recent reform in quality assurance in adult education in Ireland (Aontas, 2018).

Boud and Soler (2015, p. 2) proposed the theory of sustainable assessment as ''the contribution of assessment to learning beyond the time scale of a given course'', which meets the needs of the present but also ''prepares students to meet their own future learning needs''. This aligns with supporting theories already proposed in this review and is further validated by the idea that education comes increasingly to be judged on its ''outcomes and consequences'' (Boud & Soler, 2015, p. 2). Boud and Soler (2015) conclude sustainability is

about the sustainability of any educational practices with the potential to be too resource intensive, not just assessment.

## *Contemporary Issues in Quality Assuring Assessment*

Accountability and maintenance of standards are critical aspects of quality assurance in education, with accountability fundamental to ensuring defensible quality assurance systems that assure credibility (El-Khawas, 2007). Scrutinising this, Jessop et al. (2012) deduce integrated approaches to quality assurance are intrinsic to safeguard potential conflict with the promotion of quality teaching, learning and assessment practices, and a balance must be found when assuring accountability.

Recent studies have concluded perceptions held by those interacting with quality assurance systems and processes are vital for the commitment of these personnel and vital for the overarching perceived effectiveness of quality assurance (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). Senior centre management play a crucial role, where definitive support has been correlated with greater perceptions of quality assurance effectiveness in the eyes of quality personnel (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). Contrasting this, negative correlations were found when quality assurance was perceived as either an administrative burden or as a mechanism associated with the sanctioning of staff (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). Empowerment and engagement of educators in activities embracing the culture of quality can cultivate more positive attitudes for these groups, according to Jones and Saram (2005). Supporting this, McInnis (2000) found, in the absence of empowerment and engagement of educators in activities embracing the culture of quality, the resultant environment gives rise to educators feeling other stakeholders are not concerned about 'on the ground' practices, which may hinder essential teaching and learning.

Reinforcing this potential conflict research by Teelken and Lomas (2009) on third level institutions in the UK and Netherlands reported a perceived malalignment between the quality assurance systems and educators' essential teaching and learning practices. Numerous recent studies revealed an additional distinct theme, where quality assurance systems were viewed as rigid, regulatory and bureaucratic, educators were also found to be concerned about the use of quality assurance systems to elicit control over them and their work (Cardoso et al., 2019; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018; Tavares et al., 2016).

Attempting to capture the multiple realities of quality assurance implementation, Biggs (2001), Cardoso et al. (2015) and Goff (2017) have described various conceptions of quality assurance in the literature. Biggs (2001) referred to two opposing approaches, specifically, retrospective, and prospective models of quality assurance. According to Biggs (2001), a quality assurance model that is retrospective looks back at what has already been done, while moderating and measuring quality against externally imposed standards. A retrospective quality assurance model has been described as a system of one-way accountability according to Hoecht (2006), conducted with a managerial agenda that can damage trust with the potential to be detrimental to innovation in teaching and learning (Biggs, 2001). By comparison, a prospective model is forward-looking, integrated, progressive and based on a culture of enhancement, via reflective self-assessment and action (Biggs, 2001).

## *Transformative Quality Assurance*

QQI (2018) purport, through their lens, education is viewed as transformational, and they are interested not just in learners' absolute achievements but how learners are enabled to achieve. QQI (2018) insist programmes cannot be defined by standards observed in quality assurance processes but are transformational processes which take a learner from one

standard to another. QQI (2018) assert programmes cannot be defined by the start and end points, rather the focus should be on the routes between the start and end points, and precisely the causes of change.

For a quality assurance system to truly address the transformational process of a programme, address how learners are enabled to achieve and address the precise cause of changes, it is implied those directly involved in the transformational process should be consulted. This points to encompassing the experiences of learners and educators as part of quality assurance process.

Concurrent to this theme, diverse research by Robertson and Barber (2016) aimed to account for learner experiences as part of quality reviews, posing an integrated take on building an understanding of quality indicators in HE in Canada. This was executed in response to suggestions in previous research that quality assurance reviews can be somewhat ''staged'' (Robertson & Barber, 2016, p. 2) when completed without the input of learners. Factors such as the compliance nature of quality assurance and the designated audience for which it is presented are thought to promote this apparent staging (Robertson & Barber, 2016). With these tensions in mind, extensive research was carried out to determine how quality learning is defined and three key areas were determined as the theoretical framework to organise the research (Robertson & Barber, 2016).

These essential elements set education within a community of inquiry and are termed: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. Cognitive presence is defined as the extent which learners can construct meaning and it is crucial to critical thinking. Social presence is defined as the degree which learners project their authentic selves to others and is viewed as a support for cognitive presence. The teaching presence element has two functions,

learning activities and the facilitation of teaching. An overview of these indicators of quality in as described by Robertson and Barber (2016) has been visualised in *'Figure 2.3'*.
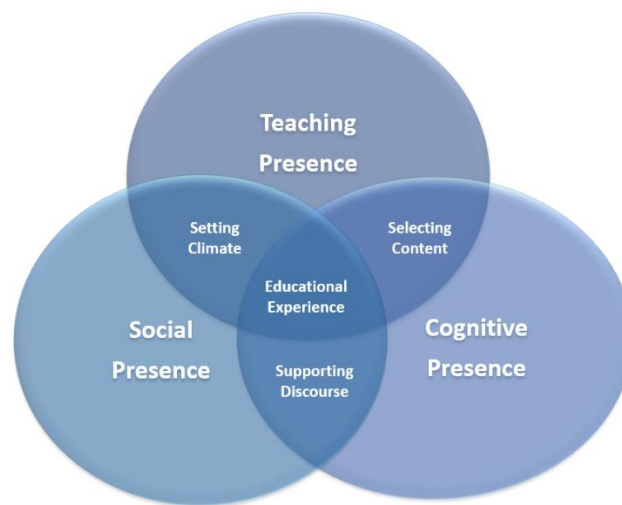


*Figure 2.3:* *'Elements of Quality in Adult Education, Robertson and Barber (2016)*'.

Robertson and Barber (2016) argue these three elements must be considered from a learner perspective to truly measure programme quality in an integrated manner. Robertson and Barber (2016) concluded there are additional dimensions to quality learning they may not have considered, specifically, critical reflection and transformative learning. In other words, seeking evidence deeper learning has occurred through critical, reflective practice and evidence the learner acts as a consequence of deeper learning.

Research by Gill et al. (2022) and Kolb and Kolb (2005) concur with Robertson and Barber (2016) and propose transformative quality is rooted in the idea of transforming learners by ''empowering them to take charge of their learning and, at the same time, preparing them to be reflective and critical thinkers'' (Gill et al., 2022, p. 277). Gill et al. (2022) concur with QQI (2018) and conclude focusing on the process of education, as opposed to its outcomes is ''transformative quality'' (Gill et al., 2022, p. 277). The principles

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of transformative quality assurance and transformative quality align with the prospective model of quality assurance as described by Biggs (2001).

In a study by Zachariah (2007) regarding the conception of quality in Oman, three key stakeholders, specifically, students, faculty and employers, identified transformative learning as the optimal definition of quality in HE. In a study conducted across eight European countries by Jungblut et al. (2015) learner preferences for transformative quality were unanimous. Most crucially, consistent conceptions of quality as transformative have the potential to address the concerns of and satisfy the objectives of all key stakeholders in education (Gill et al., 2022).

To ensure programmes are authentically transformative and to observe, interpret or illustrate the transformative aspects of a programme, all stakeholders must be in a position to learn and change or to reflect and act (Gill et al., 2022). This position is suggestive of the theoretical underpinning of John Dewey on reflection and action. According to Smith (2003) the term reflective practice describes the nexus between reflection and practice, but it must be preceded with a disposition to be reflective. Smith (2003) explains a reflective practitioner must have the inclination to be reflective, have an awareness of their personal stance, be able to recognise opportunities when reflection is required, and follow through to develop practice. Crucially, Smith (2003) concludes reflective practice can lead to the reframing of personal theories, that assimilate public theories, and thus inform future actions.

Mewborn (1999, p. 317) suggests reflection and action can be seen as a ''bridge across the chasm between educational theory and practice''. Mewborn (1999) also highlights the importance of both individual and shared reflection. The idea of shared reflection is also promoted by Dewey advocating reflection needs to happen in community and in interaction

with others (Rodgers, 2002). Dewey also submits reflection is a meaning-making process and requires an appreciation for intellectual growth (Rodgers, 2002).

## *Review of Key Literature*

To date, research exploring the experiences of Irish educators with quality assurance implementation in FE is sparse. At the time of drafting, the only published research where the opinions of Irish educators have been explored in relation to quality assurance in FE was published in 2017. This research featured the voices of adult educators in Ireland working in the FE and HE sectors (Fitzsimons, 2017). To emphasise the relevance of this 2017 research, it is important to note most research respondents worked in FE. The investigation took the form of an anonymised intramethod online survey.

Fitzsimons (2017) approaches the research with a hypothesis, that instead of being politically neutral, quality assurance cannot be detached from a wider neoliberal agenda. Research results identified negative experiences of quality assurance, with two-thirds of respondents identifying with a retrospective, top-down, closed, managerialist model of quality assurance. These respondents also expressed strong sentiment to move to a prospective model. Contention was also identified, claiming whilst a retrospective model is imposed externally by QQI, in practice a prospective model is carried out before the retrospective model is applied, retrospectively. These findings demonstrate quality assurance is perceived largely negatively by Irish adult educators working in FE and HE. These findings also identify how imposed external models of quality assurance are deemed inconsistent with and inconsequential to devised internal quality assurance practices in FE and HE.

Respondents were asked if quality assurance enhanced the quality of their teaching practice, and while 65% answered 'yes', the 35% that answered 'no' or 'don't know'

contributed the vast majority of the comments provided. Reasons cited for respondents that answered 'no' or 'don't know' were time constraints of quality assurance conflicting with teaching and the bureaucratic nature of quality assurance. Some respondents offered more paradoxical perspectives claiming examining assumptions behind managerialist approaches to quality assurance has helped them to be more critically reflective in their work. These findings shed some light on the negative perceptions reported but most interestingly suggest two key perceived conflicts. One between quality assurance demands and teaching and learning, and another between quality assurance objectives and the essential practice of Irish adult educators in FE and HE.

Respondents were asked to share experiences of quality assurance and only 20% were positive. Positive experiences were mostly linked to the benefits of constructive feedback provided by external authenticators. Of the overwhelmingly negative experiences shared, contradictory and inconsistent encounters with internal verifiers and external authenticators were reported that undermined educator confidence and created feelings of mistrust in quality assurance. These findings suggest that high quality constructive feedback from quality assurance processes that leads to improvement in practice is both sought and valued by educators. These findings also amplify the detrimental impact of inconsistent quality assurance practices and poor-quality feedback.

Respondents were asked to share any further thoughts about quality assurance and results demonstrated four main themes. Firstly, support was shown for the focus of quality assurance on measurability and standardisation. Secondly, concern was expressed as respondents perceived an absence of unified standards being achieved. A third theme opposes uniform standards, believing these to be incompatible with the heterogeneity of adult education, placing restrictions on the opportunity for adults to set their own agenda in education. The fourth theme, reoccurring throughout, is dissatisfaction with administrative

demands of quality assurance, claiming it's an ineffective "tick box" (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 26) exercise, that's under-resourced, serving externally imposed standards and overlooks learner needs. Many contributions captured the experiences of hierarchical power-relationships surrounding quality assurance, describing it as a one-way process, further contributing to the emotional and laborious dimensions of quality assurance for educators. These findings shed further light on the negative perceptions reported and concerningly suggest a perceived ineffectiveness of quality assurance processes, an incompatibility of quality assurance and the objectives of adult education, and a non-inclusive system that fails learners.

In conclusion, Fitzsimons' (2017) research uncovered philosophical tensions in how quality assurance should be approached, viewing a standardised uniform approach as antagonistic to a contextualised approach integral to dynamic learner-centered adult education. Fitzsimons' (2017) findings are exceptionally relevant to this research as they support my understanding of how quality assurance is perceived and experienced by teachers and assessors in my practice. Fitzsimons (2017) also suggests as a symptom of these tensions, experiences with quality assurance were varied among educators. Fitzsimons (2017) concludes quality assurance has the capacity to support local and divergent philosophies but the inability to extract themselves from the neoliberal utilitarian agenda denies this possibility.

An apparent constraint of Fitzsimons' (2017) study is the limited number of survey questions. However, some respondents elaborated in excellent detail and if a higher number of questions were posed, this may have deterred the detail provided. Reviewing the diversity of themes uncovered by Fitzsimons' (2017) study it was decided to include questions in the survey designed for this study that thoroughly interrogated the current and future approach of quality assurance in FE. It was also decided to include questions that explore the main themes

revealed in Fitzsimons' (2017) research such as the perceived agenda of quality assurance, perceptions of effectiveness of quality assurance and the capacity of quality assurance to meet learner needs.

Another limitation of Fitzsimons' (2017) study is that contributors were likely to be educators with the strongest views regarding quality assurance. As a scoping study, the findings uncovered raise acute and relevant questions about the system upon which assessment integrity is built, standards are verified, and certification is authorised. These questions are particularly acute given the perceived impact on teaching and learning practices.

More recent research by Twomey (2021) relating to perceptions of quality assurance in an Irish HE context is a welcome addition to the sparse academic literature concerning quality assurance experiences nationally. The investigation included rigorous research methods, including an initial survey, and subsequent semi-structured in-depth interviews. In congruence with international studies on this topic, such as those by Cardoso et al. (2019) and Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018), Twomey (2021) acknowledged varied and subjective perceptions of quality assurance in an Irish HE context. Most compelling, the variation in perceptions was often explained by the specific roles played by respondents.

The main findings revealed contrasting views on quality assurance, where quality assurance personnel and centre management views differ from the views of academic staff. These findings substantiate the need for inclusivity and wider collaboration in quality assurance processes, and specifically, authenticate the need for acknowledging the centrality of academic staff to quality assurance implementation and evolution (Twomey, 2021). Variation in perceptions of quality assurance depending on roles assumed is exceptionally relevant to this research as it supports my understanding of how quality assurance is often

perceived differently by educators compared to other relevant stakeholders such as centre management and quality assurance personnel.

Consistent with Fitzsimons' (2017) findings, Twomey (2021) found while the majority of survey respondents had mostly positive views of quality assurance, 54% viewed it as being associated with accountability rather than improvement. This formed another of the study's main findings, suggesting the need for an integrated approach to quality assurance capable of balancing both the requirement for managerial accountability and academic quality (Twomey, 2021). Associating quality assurance with accountability rather than improvement is again exceptionally relevant to this research as this association supports my understanding of how quality assurance is perceived and experienced, particularly by educators in my context.

Despite rigorous research methods, Twomey's (2021) study presents limitations. As it was carried out in one institution the findings cannot accurately represent perceptions across the wider HE network in Ireland. Additionally, the in-depth interviews were conducted with a small group of experts of varying roles. Interviews complemented with role-based focus groups would allow for the gathering of the role-group feedback and reinforce validity, but this was not done as part of the study.

Considering the lack of representativeness in Twomey's (2021) research findings it became imperative to alleviate this limitation and optimise representativeness, truth value and authenticity in this study. The resultant anonymised online survey provided the essential tool to access multiple FE colleges across multiple ETB's, essential Communities of Practice and key stakeholders across all levels of quality assurance implementation.

## *Research Question*

In my professional practice I have identified variance in perceptions and experiences of quality assurance implementation in FE among relevant stakeholders. As I am involved across all levels of quality assurance implementation, I advantaged this inclusive viewpoint to interrogate the rationale behind this variance.

Concerning the risks of variance, Bendermacher et al. (2017) and Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018) demonstrated how perceptions held by those interacting with quality assurance processes are vital for the commitment of these personnel and crucial to the perceived effectiveness of quality assurance. This research aims to provide insights towards an integrated quality assurance system in FE. If left unaddressed, extant tensions between relevant stakeholders could undermine a collective approach to quality assurance in FE. Considering this position, this research poses the following question: *Concerning experiences and perceptions of quality assurance implementation in Further Education (FE), to what extent does diversity exist among stakeholders, grouped depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation.*

## *Conclusion*

This review examined relevant literature and highlighted gaps among extant research. The literature will inform the planning and development of the methodology for this research study, and it will form a base of reference for the results of data analysis.

While this review has provided an appreciation of the current context, the field of quality assurance in FE in Ireland is rapidly developing and in a state of constant flux. The following chapter will outline the methodology of this research project, as I strive to understand and learn from various stakeholder experiences of quality assurance implementation in FE in Ireland.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## *Introduction*

The research origin for this study was realised following the identification of varying and conflicting perceptions and experiences of quality assurance implementation in FE among relevant stakeholders. By principally establishing the fundamental perceptions and experiences at play, the objective of this study can be informed. The objective of this study is to promote optimal implementation of quality assurance systems and processes in FE informed by an evidence-based approach. The research methodology aims to capture data to inform this objective. By seeking to discern the diversity and range of experiences and perceptions of quality assurance in FE and investigating the extent to which participants concur or conflict, a starting point for improvement can be established.

In this chapter I will begin by discussing how the research methodology for this study has been shaped as well as the prominent research paradigm from which the research design evolved. The research method implemented will then be discussed, including details on participant sampling, data collection and data analysis.

For the purpose of this research study a framework was visualised to assist the analysis of the implementation of quality assurance systems and processes in FE. This process began with consulting the CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) model described in the 'Green Paper on Assessment of Learners and Learning' published by QQI (2018). The process of visualising the model utilised to assist analysis will be outlined in this chapter.

A supporting rationale will be provided for the chosen methodological approach, shortcomings will be acknowledged and any issues which arose will be outlined. My

positionality in relation to the methodological approach will be identified and the methods applied which assured quality, will be addressed. Finally, any relevant ethical considerations considered will be discussed.

## *Research Paradigms in Social and Educational Research*

In social and educational research, the term paradigm is used to describe a researcher's 'worldview' (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). It is the lens through which a researcher approaches the methodological features of their research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Scotland (2012) asserts a research paradigm consists initially of an ontology and epistemology, then subsequent and appropriate methodologies and methods are employed.

Ontology can be defined as the study of what exists and the ways of understanding what exists. The central question posed by ontology is if social entities should be perceived as objective, also known as positivism, or subjective. Objectivism and subjectivism are competing positions of ontology (O' Leary, 2017) and they argue for the existence of single versus multiple realities (Crotty, 2020). A true positivist approach was considered incompatible for this study due to its argument for a single reality. Opposing a single reality of quality assurance implementation in FE, consider again the diversity of application of quality assurance and the breadth of actors involved in implementation. Further opposing a single reality, Twomeys' (2021) research and Fitzsimons' (2017) research revealed variance in perceptions and experiences of quality assurance among Irish educators, and this has also been observed in my own practice.

O' Leary (2017) purports epistemology can be defined as the rules of knowing or how we come to understand a phenomenon, and what it means to know. Epistemology has competing views of empiricism and interpretivism. Empiricism is the view all knowledge is observable, and this is the essence of positivist approaches (O' Leary, 2017), whereas

interpretivism aims to bring into consciousness imperceptible social forces and structures (Scotland, 2012). Providing support for an interpretivist approach it is recognised social and contextual influences may shape knowledge uncovered in this study. Therefore, any knowledge uncovered in this research may be considered fallible. This position is reinforced by the diversity of application of quality assurance in FE, the breadth of actors involved in implementation and the variance in perceptions and experiences revealed in key research and in my own practice.

To combat fallibility of knowledge Levers (2013) submits an objective investigation will promote truth value. The epistemological position of positivism advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences and follows the principle of objectivism (Outhwaite, 2015). This position provides support for a scientific approach, but a true positivist approach has already been outlined as incompatible for this study. This provoked the juncture of requiring a fitting approach, that promotes objectivity and most crucially, flexibility. One such example is the post-positivist paradigm (Asghar, 2013). The post-positivist paradigm is the lens through which the methodology in this research project emerges. The post-positivist positioning of this research is discussed in detail in the next section.

## *The Post-positivist Paradigm*

Panwhar et al. (2017) explain post-positivism came into being when researchers realised the limitations of positivism as a paradigm in educational and social research. A mixed paradigm was created in response, that combined positivism and interpretivism and this is what we know as post-positivism (Panwhar et al., 2017). Post-positivism does not simply reject scientific methods for educational and social research, rather it gives them new life by combining them with other disciplines' methods allowing for more fruitful approaches

(Panwhar et al., 2017). This principle of promoting objectivity whilst accommodating flexibility advocates for the appropriateness of post-positivism as the approach to this study.

Levers (2013) asserts the post-positivist paradigm is conceptualised as having an objectivist epistemology and a critical realist ontology. Critical implies, like positivism, the requirement for rigour, logical reasoning and precise attention to evidence is required but unlike positivism, findings are not confined to what can be observed physically. Levers (2013) purports post-positivists expect when progressing closer to the truth, discoveries are only partial segments or approximations of truth. Post-positivists view knowledge as fallible because it is shaped by contextual influences but trust objective investigation will bring the truth closer (Levers, 2013).

On critical realism Levers (2013) submits critical realists believe in a world that exists independent of the human mind, but it cannot be accessed in its entirety, rather we access glimpses. The purpose of science from this perspective is to identify phenomena and develop agreement regarding the description of the whole from the glimpses gained (Levers, 2013). Levers (2013) concludes truth is reached through reasoning rather than solely observation because only the results of causal forces may be observed, not the causal forces themselves.

The critical realism position is decidedly applicable to this research study as the data gathering method is intended to encompass responses from actors in the implementation of the various levels of quality assurance in FE. The aim of which was to identify broad perceptions and experiences and develop agreement regarding the description of the whole from the glimpses gained. Concluding the truth through reasoning will be bolstered by the processes of data triangulation alongside the internal and external validation of findings.

An objective investigation is essential to this research study, providing further support for a post-positivist approach. Considering my high exposure and involvement with quality

assurance, there exists the possibility of an unintentional power dynamic between researcher and participants, particularly among participants less involved with quality assurance. By employing an anonymised research survey as the principal method of data gathering the potential impact of any power imbalance was negated. Staying with the theme of objectivity, my heavy involvement in quality assurance has contributed to my own views. The anonymised survey as the principal method of data gathering, negated the potential of my own bias leading participants.

It is however recognised in an effort to promote objectivity, the nature of employing a survey in isolation means an irrefutable detachment from the immersive socio-historic context and a lack of researcher – participant interactions, important to understanding a phenomenon. Interviews were considered as the primary data gathering method for this research study, but interviews used in isolation in phenomenographic-based research have demonstrated limitations.

This position is supported by Murray and MacDonald (1997) in Reimann and Sadler (2017) where differentiation was exhibited between theory-in-use and espoused theory, exhibiting a disjointed relationship between experience and descriptions. However, these findings were largely based on studies utilising interviews as their sole method, and it is possible findings may be an artefact of the method used.

## *The Post-positivist Paradigm and Educational Research*

According to Panwhar et al. (2017) post-positivism is a rich paradigm for educational research. Panwhar et al. (2017) assert educational research has been dominated by constructivist or interpretivist approaches favouring qualitative approaches, and scientific investigations favouring quantitative approaches are under-represented. Panwhar et al. (2017) suggest post-positivism could address the lack of scientific research approaches in

educational research. Panwhar et al. (2017) advance post-positivism focuses on researching issues involving experiences of the majority and purports the results of what the majority says is acceptable.

This position is exceptionally applicable to this research as quality assurance implementation in FE is context specific and diverse. To explain, QQI (2016) assert in relation to the implementation and internal monitoring of quality assurance systems, colleges of FE can exercise their own autonomy, where the primary responsibility lies with the provider. Considering this diversity of implementation and considering the breadth of quality related roles, researching the experiences of the majority was deemed necessary to adequately address the research question posed. The anonymised research survey as the principal method of data gathering was deemed apt to capture the breadth of the matter. Concurring with this position, Panwhar et al. (2017) assert post-positivist research strives to explore phenomena scientifically and believes the absolute truth is nowhere to be found, emphasising an understanding from multi-dimensions.

Panwhar et al. (2017) conclude the post-positivist paradigm promotes the triangulation of data and the variety of findings that can be realised, and it accepts, respects, and values all findings as essential to the development of knowledge. In other words, it is a flexible research perspective which allows the researcher to use methods that best apply to the nature of the research question. Essential to this idea Panwhar et al. (2017) explain the flexibility in methods in post-positivist research can defend against the personal bias and prejudice of researcher to favouring specific research methods. This position notably applies to this research study. To explain, there is a possibility conducting qualitative methods in isolation, such as interviews, might reveal the issues to be investigated in depth, but by investigating in this way in isolation, the breadth of the topic would not be explored. It is

recognised by employing a mixed methods approach, both methods could act on their own merits, but this was deemed not feasible against the timeframe of this research study.

From a post-positivist viewpoint, objectivity is taken as relative, and it aims to understand the biases that exist in all studies. By understanding biases and making efforts to minimise them, objectivity comes closer (Panwhar et al., 2017). The research methods employed in this study promote objectivity and reduce the possibility of my personal bias. The chosen research methods also serve generalisability according to Creswell (2007; 2014) in Pham (2018). This promotes the application of findings to a wider context, thus simultaneously promoting transferability (O' Leary, 2017). Considering transferability, it is somewhat limited as the findings could be applied across the wider context of FE but simultaneously the findings may not be applicable to other adult educational contexts.

## *Visualisation of Framework of Analysis*

A framework was visualised to assist critical analysis of the implementation of quality assurance in FE. This resulted in the 'MMM-IEO model' as termed and described by QQI (2018, p. 11), being visualised. QQI (2018) assert the MMM-IEO model provides a framework for thinking about cause and effect at different levels in the context of educational policies and procedures. Panwhar et al. (2017) suggest from a post-positivist position there is a need to investigate the causes affecting results. This alignment of objectives reinforces the compatibility of this framework of analysis. The following section documents the process of the visualisation of this framework of analysis.

The MMM-IEO model was developed as a tool to help identify what QQI, providers of education and training and others can do to improve assessment of, for and as learning. Viewing assessment in context as integral to the curriculum, to teaching and to learning, this

model formed a basis on which to examine quality assurance implementation in FE systematically.

The model has two main perspectives, which overlap and align. One perspective involves input, environment, and output (IEO). This perspective comes from Alexander Astin's IEO assessment model (Astin, 1991 sourced in QQI, 2018). Astin's model is "designed to generate information on how outcomes are affected by different educational policies and practices" (Astin, 1991 sourced in QQI, 2018, p. 10). The model conception is determined by the recognition when evaluating a system, it is crucial to understand how the resultant outcomes are caused. The inclusion of 'input' and 'environment' address this function.

The other perspective involves activity levels, specifically macro, meso and micro levels (MMM) and has been outlined in Chapter 1. The MMM perspective helps to distinguish the roles of actors across the three levels of quality assurance implementation (QQI, 2018). The IEO and MMM models have been combined and visualised in *'Figure 3.1'*.
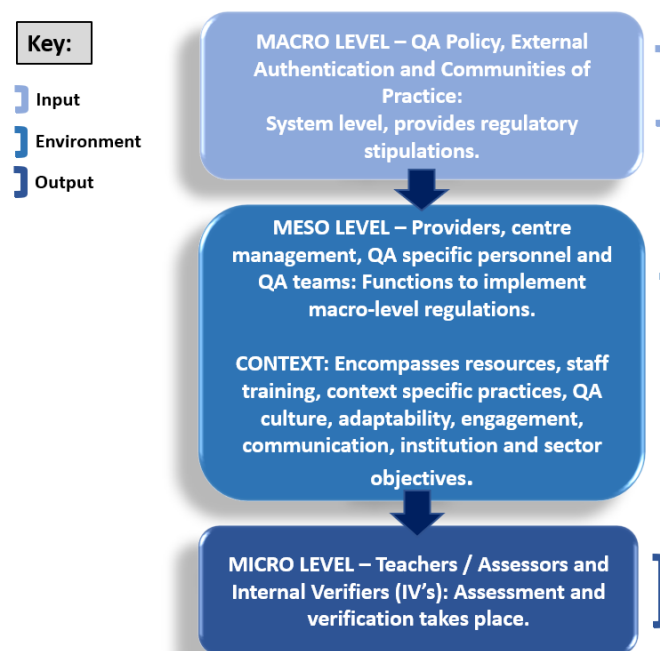


*Figure 3.1: 'IEO and MMM Model Visualised'.*

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Considering the 'environment', variance is provoked as providers have the capacity to act autonomously, adapting and implementing internal quality assurance policy within the external regulations and recommendations stipulated (QQI, 2016). Additionally, each centre is responsible for allocating resources to quality assurance, monitoring and developing quality assurance practices and building quality assurance culture within the organisation (QQI, 2016). This context specific implementation provoked the explicit inclusion of 'context' on '*Figure 3.1*' as a new addition to the meso level. The 'environment' also recognises the roles of dynamically interacting individuals shape the quality assurance environment, practices, and culture, and conclusively, shape the overall outcomes (QQI, 2018).

To summarise, the MMM-IEO model as termed by QQI (2018, p. 11) is a combination of the MMM and the IEO perspectives described by QQI (2018) and it provides a framework for thinking about cause and effect at different levels in the context of educational policies and procedures. It is deemed a fitting framework to analyse the implementation of quality assurance processes in FE, particularly justifying the grouping of participants according to level of involvement.

## *Research Design*

The research design employed in this study can be described as a principal phase of data collection via an anonymised intramethod survey (see Appendix A) probing experiences of key actors in quality assurance implementation in FE. The survey consisted of two main strands, exploring the current experiences of assessment and quality assurance and the future direction of assessment and quality assurance. This specific research design was applied for several reasons. As outlined, the post-positivist paradigm can address the lack of scientific approaches to educational research (Panhwar et al. 2017), indicating the compatibility of this

paradigm and quantitative methods. Quantitative research methods also allow the researcher to gain breadth of understanding as they strive to answer the research question from multiple positions (Johnson et al., 2017), deemed appropriate due to the diversified nature of quality assurance implementation in FE and the breadth of quality assurance roles.

The survey employed contained open and closed questions allowing for the process of inter-method data triangulation. Data triangulation has the capacity to further reinforce findings and enhance validity (O'Cathain et al., 2010). Quantitative data analysis and triangulation is meticulous and must be considered in terms of resource implications but is justified as it provides the optimal opportunity to address the research question, particularly against the backdrop of an underrepresented, diverse and fluid field of study, where quantitative approaches are in the minority.

**Research Survey Design**

The research strategy employed for this study involved data collection via an anonymised online survey (see Appendix A). The survey was designed via Microsoft Forms, chosen due to its familiarity to staff in FE. The survey was published in the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) Library Newsletter which subsequently circulated to quality assurance specific personnel across the City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB), FE quality assurance networks and across CDETB FE colleges. The survey was circulated in my own FE institution, and to FE colleges in other major ETB's outside of the ETB of the host institution. The survey was also circulated within relevant professional networks for FE teachers in Ireland.

This method provided a greater catchment of potential participants than other methods due to its online format. It was also logistically feasible at a time when target personnel in the sector were still working remotely to some degree due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-

19 pandemic. The format allowed for fully anonymised responses and increased the probability respondents could answer uninhibited (Ward et al., 2014).

Key publications influenced the design of the survey questions. The QQI (2018) Green Paper on Assessment of Learners and Learning document promoted the inclusion of the question relating to participant roles, the stage of development and approach of quality assurance and the impact of data from quality assurance. The QQI (2016) QQI Policy on QA Guidelines document promoted the inclusion of questions relating to timing and flexibility of quality assurance, quality assurance practices, influences on quality assurance and resources available. The OECD (2018) The Future of Education and Skills, Education 2030, document promoted the inclusion of questions relating to learner outcomes and the alignment of the objectives of quality assurance and practice. The Biggs, J. (2003) Aligning teaching for constructing learning document promoted the inclusion of questions relating to constructive and conceptual alignment and the purposes of assessment. The research articles 'Rhetoric and reality: The Irish experience of Quality Assurance' Fitzsimons, C. (2017) and 'Exploring perceptions, tensions and possibilities of an integrated approach to quality assurance in Higher Education: A Case Study in an Institute of Technology in Ireland' Twomey, T. (2021) were central influences and promoted questions relating to the perceptions, experiences and effectiveness of quality assurance. Finally, the survey design was influenced throughout by my own extensive experience in quality assurance in FE.

Before official publishing the survey was piloted with my supervisor and key colleagues. Feedback from the pilot proved crucial. One excerpt of feedback prompted the creation of three distinct sections which included 'about you', 'experience of assessment and quality assurance in organisation' and 'future direction of assessment and quality assurance in organisation'. These sections assisted further organisation of questions in a more logical sequence. Another excerpt of feedback prompted the inclusion of 'assessment' alongside

'quality assurance' where plausible to promote increased inclusion and accessibility of the survey, particularly to those less involved in quality assurance implementation. Final excerpts of feedback promoted the usability of the survey as question wording and styles were simplified, reducing the labour required from respondents and ensuring each question produced valid, quantifiable results capable of answering the research question.

Most of the survey questions were closed (22 out of 24), with a mixture of answering styles. Two open questions were included for participants to share experiences. The purpose of this concurrent, intramethod mixing was to facilitate the collection of multidimensional results. It also ensured some results were highly quantifiable, but the open-ended questions provided an opportunity to further interpret the data provided whilst providing opportunity to participants to provide richer insights regarding their experiences.

**Participation and Ethical Considerations**

Inclusion criteria included respondents work in FE, have experience in assessment, and interact with quality assurance processes as part of their role. The sampling approach was one of convenience, where respondents self-selected in response to a circulated invitation. The research instrument was shared via the researcher, via centre management of the host institution, via the CDU Library Newsletter and via management of other colleges of FE in ETB's outside of the host institution. Written details about the research, its purpose and potential impact were included with the survey correspondence. Voluntary and informed consent was obtained digitally. Ethical risk associated with this study is low as participants are adults answering questions specifically relating to their professional practice. In addition, data was collected anonymously, respondents' identity was not visible to the researcher, and no identifiable data was gathered.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The survey remained open for four weeks and a total of 83 participants responded. Participant details were initially analysed to illustrate the characteristics of the sample. The majority of participants proved highly experienced in the FE sector, with 40% employed for more than 20 years, 20% employed for 16-20 years and 14% employed for 11-15 years. The vast majority of participants in the past 5 years assumed 'Teacher / Assessor' roles (74 out of 83) and 'Internal Verifier' roles (69 out of 83). Other roles well represented included 'Contributing to or creating QA policy' (25 out of 83) and 'External Authentication' (22 out of 83). Crucially, the sample represented all areas of quality assurance implementation across the macro, meso and micro levels.

Analysis progressed with the application of descriptive statistics. Following this, a comparative analysis was performed applying inferential statistics, specifically Fisher's exact test, to determine any statistically significant differences between participants. Fisher's exact test is a non-parametric test used for contingency tables when count frequencies are low and is exact in that the *p*-value is calculated exactly from the hypergeometric distribution (SAGE Research Methods Datasets, 2019). A *p*-value is a measure of the probability an observed difference could have occurred by chance (O' Leary, 2017). For this research study an alpha level of .05 was used to identify any significant differences between participant groupings.

For the process of analysis data was arranged for all themes for the three participant groups, divided depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation in FE as informed by the MMM-IEO model (QQI, 2018, p.11). The syntax used for analysis was HYPGEOM.DIST (sample_s, number_sample, population_s, number_pop, cumulative) and this presents the following arguments as detailed in SAGE Research Methods Datasets (2019). The sample_s is the number of successes in the sample. The number_sample is the

size of the sample. The population_s is the number of successes in the population. The number_pop is the total population size. The cumulative determines the form of the function. The following table displays the results under the theme 'How QA systems and processes impact practice'. For illustration purposes the syntax HYPGEOM.DIST has been applied for the 'Detractor (0-6)' option for 'Group 3: Micro Meso Macro Group'. This syntax was applied for all elements, under each theme, for each group to determine any statistically significant differences between participants. See *'Table 3.1: Data Analysis'*.

| Table 3.1:<br>Data Analysis | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group | Detractor (0-6) | Passive (7-8) | Promoter (9-10) | Total |
| Group 1: Micro Group | 32 | 6 | 0 | 38 |
| Group 2: Micro with Meso or Macro Group | 18 | 8 | 4 | 30 |
| Group 3: Micro Meso Macro Group | 4 | 9 | 2 | 15 |
| Total | 54 | 23 | 6 | 83 |

Data generated from the open-ended survey questions was analysed using Braun and Clarkes Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was selected for its transparency and flexibility, and the fact it is not coupled with any particular epistemological perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Integrated Data Analysis**

O' Cathain (2010) purports one approach to integration of data at the analysis phase is to simply follow a thread. This approach aptly describes the integrative analysis carried out in this research study. By applying integrated data analysis, findings realised were richer than the independent sum of their parts. This process tended to internal validity, where quantitative results were triangulated with other quantitative results, and themes emerging from the open-ended questions were triangulated with findings from the quantitative data. External validity was tended to by correlating emerging themes and results with existing applicable research. An overview of the research design as outlined in this section, has been visualised in *'Figure 3.2'*.
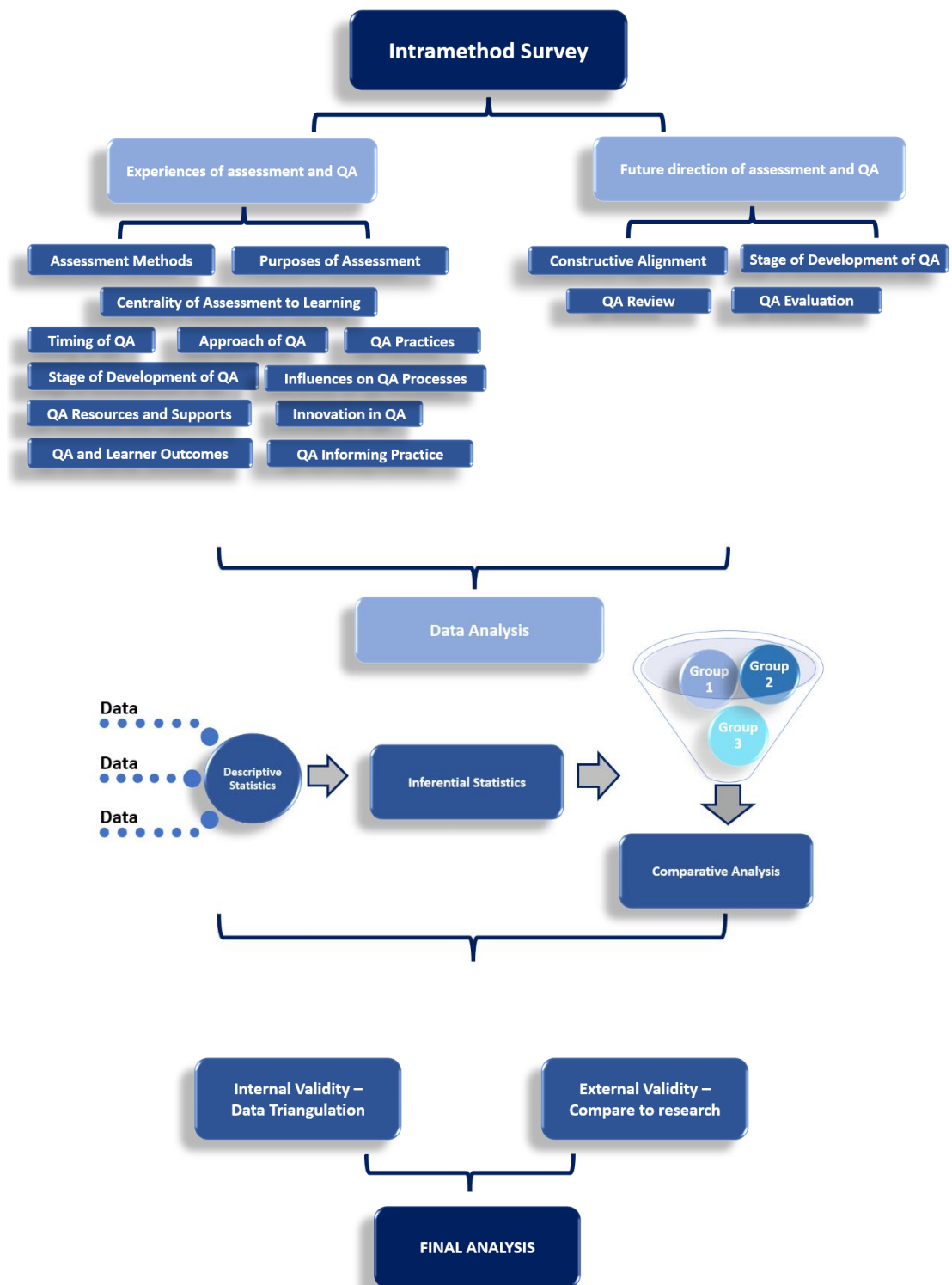
**Figure 3.2:** *'Overview of Research Design'.*

## *Methodological Impact on Research Quality*

### *Quality in Research*

Optimising quality in research is often defined by the different paradigms utilised suggests Bryman (1988) in Jansen (2010). For this reason, Bryman (1988) in Jansen (2010) promotes assuring separate quality criteria for the quantitative and qualitative components and the paradigm. O'Cathain et al. (2017) argues the research design itself determines the methods applied to assure quality. For the purpose of this research study, quality has been assured for the method utilised, for the integrated analysis of data and for the paradigm. The next section outlines the quality measures taken in more detail.

### *Quality in Quantitative Research*

This study tended to quality by ensuring the principles of truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality were promoted. To ensure truth value and internal validity the survey remained open for four weeks and was continually promoted to ensure a large sample size to serve sufficient statistical power. Further ensuring internal validity the sample was collected from actors across all levels of quality assurance implementation, specifically the macro, meso and micro level, following purposeful sharing and promotion. Ultimately, this ensured applicability of data and external validity, or the extent to which the findings can be transferred to the FE sector in Ireland.

However, it is recognised quality assurance implementation in FE is rife with complexities. Due to the specific assessment processes applying to FE only and the principled autonomy of the FE sector concerning internal quality assurance implementation and monitoring (QQI, 2016) experiences are likely to be highly contextualised. Combatting this, the method chosen for this research study serves generalisability according to Pham (2018) promoting the application of findings to a wider context, thus promoting transferability (O'

Leary, 2017). This position resonates with the objective of this research study as by gaining a high response rate statistical power was served and the research question was answered. This approach increased the likelihood findings resonate with actors involved in quality assurance implementation in FE, regardless of role or level of involvement. Further reinforcing neutrality and objectivity, through all stages of data analysis it was ensured the findings spoke for themselves, and I consistently challenged the robustness of emerging categories, patterns and themes with the objective of reaching a more reasoned and complete interpretation.

Continuing to ensure truth value and internal validity, all survey responses were analysed with no participant responses unaccounted. These actions also ensured attribution. To promote consistency and reliability the survey has been documented in full in Appendix A, the strategy for sharing the survey has been explained and the process of analysing the data has been made transparent.

O' Leary (2017) asserts outcomes can be influenced by the researcher's own interpretations, values and beliefs, thus breeding bias. To counter this, in the latter section of this chapter, I have outlined my positionality and examined how my own beliefs and values may impact the methodology, methods and interpretation. To further improve credibility, I have also made explicit my own subjectivity and pre-suppositions in relation to quality assurance implementation in the FE sector.

### *Validity, Reliability and Rigour in Quantitative Research*

Validity and reliability are key considerations in research of any type and are accepted requirements of quality control (Heale & Twycross, 2015). They are especially applicable to the design of the survey purposed for this study. Validity measures vary and are dependent on the instrument and measurements made according to Taherdoost (2016). For the survey

design, content validity was an important consideration. The language and terminology were carefully refined to ensure accessibility, dichotomies were avoided, and efforts were made to provide additional explanations as required. This ensured representativeness, and subsequently the credibility indicator of authenticity. As discussed, a widespread sample of survey participants was a key factor in ensuring external validity where respondents were representative of the study population.

The post-positivist credibility indicator of authenticity was promoted by the recognition of multiple truths. Specifically, inputs were sought from actors involved across all levels of quality assurance implementation in FE, across all roles, and across multiple ETB's, collectively promoting truth-value.

### *Challenges and Limitations*

Transparency regarding study limitations are crucial to quality in research. The main methodological challenges encountered in this study are outlined in the next sections.

### Survey Sampling

Self-selection bias is a common limitation of online survey research. Respondents have the potential to have stronger views on issues being explored, which may subsequently impact external validity. The survey sample of 83 participants are more likely to be digital residents assert White and Cornu (2011). As technology is not the topic under investigation this is not considered an issue, but it has been considered the presentation of evidence for quality assurance processes are almost exclusively online activities in the FE sector due to the impact of COVID-19. Resultantly, it is possible the survey sample may over represent respondents more immersed in the world of technology, who may be more positive about the recent requirements to complete and present quality assurance work online. The survey was completed at a time when target personnel in the sector were still working remotely to some

degree due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly increasing access to this group. A limitation common to all research is self-reported data, where it is assumed all participants answer honestly.

**Paradigm**

To address the research question posed in a qualitative manner, interviews would need to be held with actors at all levels of quality assurance implementation, across various FE contexts, various roles, and levels of responsibility. Due to the context specific implementation of quality assurance in FE (QQI, 2016) and the variance in quality assurance specific roles, qualitative methods were not deemed feasible for this study. Investigating the breadth of the topic via quantitative methods or the online survey was deemed practical and feasible against the research question posed after giving the context to be investigated full consideration. Faced with executing a principally quantitative study I ensured measures promoting validity, reliability, credibility, authenticity, transparency and truth value, as discussed. I also ensured depth and rigour in data analysis techniques and promoted internal and external validity as far as practicable.

**Prior Research**

As discussed in the Literature Review chapter the FE sector in Ireland is underrepresented in terms of research on experiences or perceptions of quality assurance implementation. A general lack of scientific research approaches in educational research was also noted by Panwhar et al. (2017). These issues limited the possibility to compare research results with other similar studies and can hinder the possible scope of the study.

**Constraints**

The extensive data analysis techniques applied in this research contributed to limitations on time and resources. Careful management and additional investment of time,

particularly at the analysis stage, was essential. In addition, to maximise the potential of the research, it was decided to wait until quality assurance was timely and topical in the FE sector to gather data, during the month of May. This created an additional constraint on time.

## *Researcher Positionality*

I have been teaching in the FE sector for the past 15 years and alongside my teaching duties I have been extensively exposed to expansive quality assurance roles. The quality assurance roles I am involved with have been steadily gaining significance and with this my interest in creating a positive impact through quality assurance has been motivated.

Before finding my vocation in education, my background was in the field of the Biomedical Science and Sport and Exercise Rehabilitation. As a result, I have had a high exposure to positivism as the dominant epistemological position behind research I encounter and have executed. For me positivism was largely unquestioned and unchallenged as my epistemological position.

My understanding of ways of knowing and how to seek out new knowledge in the field of education was something I had to completely revaluate and reflect upon when designing this research project and honing the methodology. After more than 20 years of being immersed in a world where empiricism and objectivity were held in a position of privilege, I needed to reassess some of my own axiological and epistemological assumptions. Central to this idea Berger (2013) states the researcher's position may be fluid, meaning reflexivity must be a continuous process, and positionality should be a key consideration when approaching research.

Embarking on this research, my professional experiences in teaching and quality assurance became key drivers in shaping my research question. On one hand I witness the transformative impact of education for learners and how this propels educators to consistently

work to optimise learner outcomes. On the other hand, being involved at all levels of quality assurance implementation I have observed stark contrast in perceptions and experiences of quality assurance depending on role assumed. Most notably, a perceived lack of connection between quality assurance processes and teaching and learning practices among educators. I considered what might encourage educators to buy into quality assurance with the same spirit they buy in to education and from this idea, the notion quality assurance could work harder to be transformative flourished.

Berger (2013) purports reflexivity is a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of a researchers' positionality. It is a key feature of rigour in research according to Cypress (2017), allowing for interrogation of the choices we make regarding our own situatedness. Reflexivity is a crucial element in the context of this research study where my interwoven positions at all levels of quality assurance implementation alongside researcher and student had to be carefully contemplated.

While my professional position enables me to locate areas specific to quality assurance practices in FE underrepresented in the academic literature, it is important to acknowledge the subjectivity that comes with this position. It is crucial my own bias did not negatively influence the research design and I have outlined measures taken to safeguard objectivity. Ensuring objectivity in this study does not necessarily mean subjectivity is ultimately unfavourable. Subjectivity in a research study can be positive, particularly when a research aim is to understand people and how they externalise their experiences. My experience to date and ongoing commitment to quality assurance has motivated me to be receptive, to fully appreciate the experiences of others involved in quality assurance implementation, and to aim to interpret their experiences accurately.

## *Conclusion*

This chapter has documented the methodological approach underpinning this research study and provided supporting rationale. The research design has been outlined and justified from its paradigmatic foundations to methods, and various analysis techniques employed. The research strategy employed was identified as the most effective to address the objective of the study and answer the research question posed. Each methodological decision has been approached with the aim of ensuring rigour. Researcher reflexivity and study limitations have been documented to promote transparency and validity. Findings resulting from extensive data analysis are presented and discussed in the following chapter.

# Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

## *Introduction*

This chapter documents findings from the survey created for this research study. Findings are presented thematically and include quantitative data and data from the open-ended questions relating to the experiences of key stakeholders involved in quality assurance implementation in FE.

Analysis began with quantitative results being graphed and analysed using descriptive statistics. A comparative analysis was then performed applying inferential statistics to determine any significant differences between participant groupings. Findings from the open-ended survey questions were discussed and internal validity measures applied, specifically, the triangulation of quantitative data and data from the open-ended survey questions. External validity measures were then applied, where data was triangulated with existing applicable research.

In terms of chapter structure, the survey analysis demonstrates three main stages as follows. The initial stage presents the sample characteristics and includes length of time in organisation, roles fulfilled in past 5 years, and the level of quality assurance implementation assumed by participants. The second stage of analysis explores extensive themes relating to participant experiences of current assessment and quality assurance processes in their organisation. This section discusses themes such as the purposes of assessment, quality assurance resources and practices, the approach and stage of development of quality assurance processes, and the impact of quality assurance on practice. Themes explored in the third section relate to the future direction of assessment and quality assurance in participant organisations and includes discussion on the evaluation and review of quality assurance

processes. Findings from the open-ended survey questions have been integrated throughout. Participants were asked two open-ended questions as follows:

☐ State the main way current quality assurance systems and processes impact your practice.

☐ Share any thoughts you have concerning assessment and quality assurance processes as a result of taking this survey.

## *Sample Characteristics*

A total of 83 participants responded to the survey and responses were initially analysed to establish the sample characteristics. Sample characteristics in terms of how long each participant has been employed in their organisation / sector are illustrated in *'Figure 4.1'*.
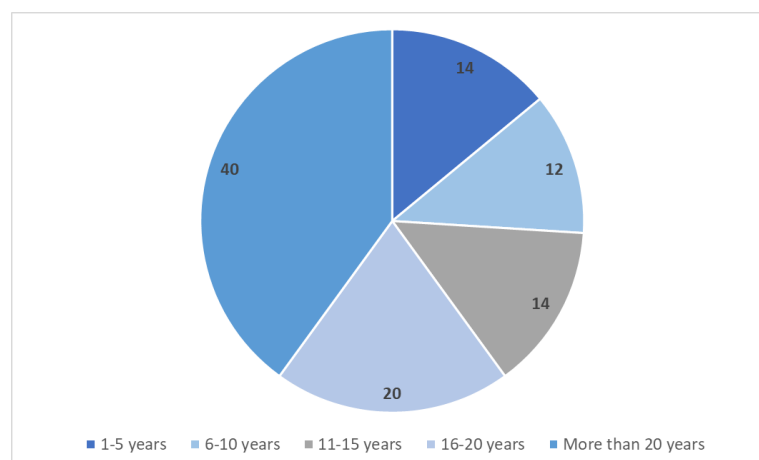


*Figure 4.1:* *'Overview of Sample Characteristics_Length of Time in Organisation / Sector'.*

Analysis demonstrated the majority of participants are highly experienced in the FE sector, with 40% employed for more than 20 years, 20% employed for 16-20 years and 14% employed for 11-15 years. Sample characteristics in terms of roles fulfilled in the past 5 years are illustrated in *'Figure 4.2'*.
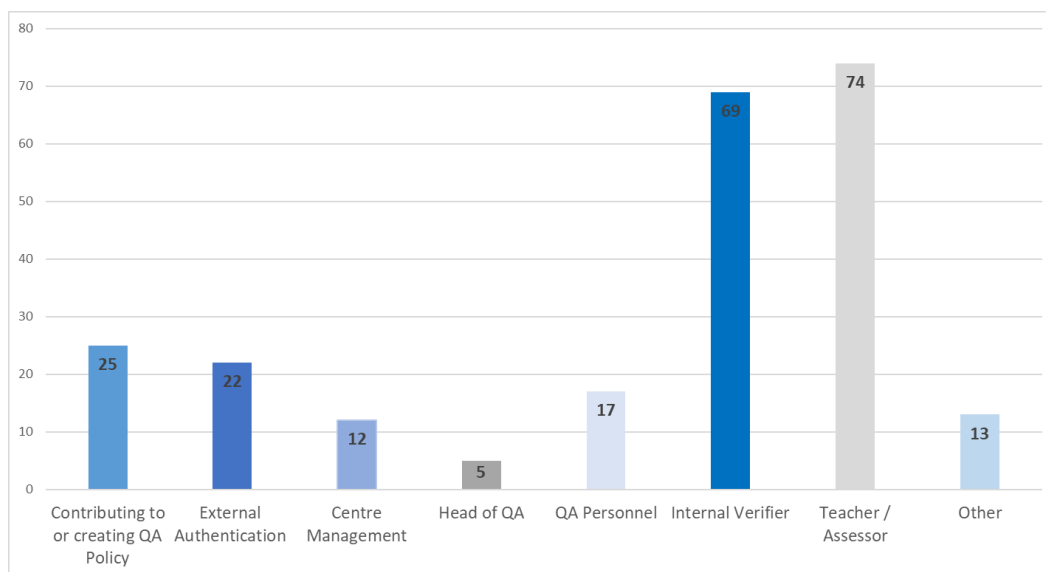
*Figure 4.2: 'Overview of Sample Characteristics_Roles Fulfilled in Past 5 Years'.*

Analysis of **'Figure: 4.2'** demonstrated the vast majority of participants have in the past 5 years assumed 'Teacher / Assessor' roles (74 out of 83) and 'Internal Verifier' roles (69 out of 83). Other roles well represented among participants include 'Contributing to or creating QA policy' (25 out of 83) and 'External Authentication' (22 out of 83). Most notably, the sample represented all areas of quality assurance implementation across the macro, meso and micro level.

A common occurrence was for participants to represent more than one level of implementation, with some participants representing all three. Participants representing the micro level (76 out of 83) assumed roles such as 'Internal Verifier' or 'Teacher / Assessor' or both these roles. Considering research investigating the experiences of quality assurance processes among teachers in FE in Ireland is underrepresented, the volume of responses gathered from participants that are teachers or have been engaged in teaching in the sector in the past 5 years is considered significant. Of the 12 participants that chose the role 'Other', each of these chose subsequent roles and were included in the grouping representing

subsequent role(s) chosen. Sample characteristics in terms of how each level of quality

assurance implementation is represented by participants has been illustrated in *'Figure 4.3'*.
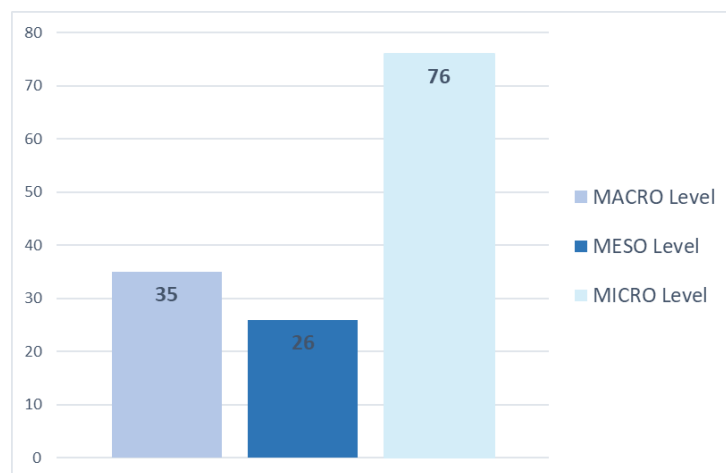


*Figure 4.3: 'Overview of Sample Characteristics_Levels of QA Implementation'.*

## *Experiences of Assessment and Quality Assurance in Organisation*

This second stage of analysis explores extensive themes relating to participant

experiences of current assessment and quality assurance processes in their organisation.

**Prominent Assessment Methods Encountered in Practice**

Participants indicated LDA (Locally Devised Assessment) was most commonly

encountered in practice, both LDA and AIS (Assessment Instrument Specification) was the

next most prominent, and the least encountered was AIS. These results have been illustrated

in *'Figure 4.4'*.
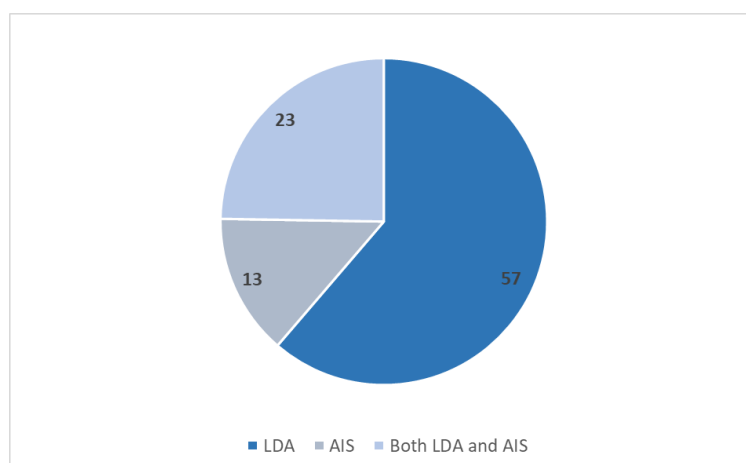
*Figure 4.4: 'Assessment Methods Prominent in Practice'.*

**Centrality of Assessment to Student Learning**

Participants indicated the extent they agreed with the following statement; *'In education, 'assessment methods and requirements probably have a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other factor'* (Boud, 1988, p. 39). The theme of this statement is the perceived centrality of assessment to student learning. Results were correlated against the assessment methods participants indicated as most prominent in their practice. Findings suggest where participants encounter AIS they are highly likely to view it as influential to student learning. Where participants encounter LDA, they are also likely to view it as influential to student learning. However, where participants encounter both LDA and AIS they are the least likely to view it as influential to student learning. This merits further investigation, specifically in what incidence would LDA be viewed as less influential to student learning than AIS, and why encountering a mixture of assessment methods (both LDA and AIS) can be viewed as significantly less influential to student learning than LDA or AIS alone. Assessment methods are tethered to specific awarding bodies in FE, each with their own specific quality assurance procedures, which may go some way to explaining these findings.

**Purposes of Assessment**

Participants were asked to rank order the purposes of assessment in relation to how important they felt each was to address in their practice. The results were correlated against the assessment methods most prominent in practice. Results suggest where participants encounter locally devised assessment (LDA), they are more likely to agree assessment *as / for* learning are important to address in their practice when compared to participants that encounter AIS or both LDA and AIS. This merits further investigation, specifically the reasons why externally specified assessment (AIS), and mixed assessment methods (both LDA and AIS), appear to reduce the focus on assessment *as / for* learning compared to assessment that is locally devised (LDA). Again, assessment methods are tethered to specific awarding bodies, each with their own specific quality assurance procedures, which may go some way to explaining these findings. LDA and AIS have contrasting requirements in terms of teacher / assessor engagement in assessment design, where teachers / assessors experience increased autonomy regarding assessment design where LDA is concerned. This may offer further explanation.

Also warranting further investigation is how assessment *as / for* learning are seemingly overwhelmed by other competing purposes of assessment such as assessment *of* learning, certification and quality assurance. This is observed particularly where AIS or both LDA and AIS are encountered in practice. On the benefits of assessment *as / for* learning Hattie (2008) purports formative assessment methodologies encompass assessment *as / for* learning and the provision of such has been demonstrated to be a highly effective teaching strategy for optimising learner achievement.

**Participant Groupings**

For the purpose of deeper analysis grouping participants as illustrated in *'Figure 4.3'* was not deemed appropriate as multiple participant responses would be represented more than once. This is because it was common for participants to represent more than one level of quality assurance implementation, with some participants representing all three. Therefore, to ascertain any significant differences between participant experiences, it was necessary to categorise participants according to their level of involvement in quality assurance processes. This grouping arrangement is reflective of the MMM-IEO model described in Chapter 3 and by QQI (2018, p. 11).

The MMM-IEO model provides a framework for thinking about cause and effect at different levels in the context of educational policies and procedures (QQI, 2018). It is a fitting framework to analyse the implementation of quality assurance processes in the FE context for the purpose of this research study and it justifies the grouping of participants according to level of involvement. Details on participant groupings have been summarised in *'Table 4.1: Participant Grouping Table_Referencing the MMM-IEO Model (QQI, 2018, p. 11)'* and have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.5'*.

| Table 4.1: | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Participant Grouping Table_Referencing the MMM-IEO Model (QQI, 2018, p. 11)* | | | |
| *Group* | *Abbreviation* | *Number of Participants* | *Description of Participants* |
| *Group 1:* *Micro Group* | G1 | 38 | Those involved in **ONE LEVEL** of implementation – specifically the micro level only as 'Teacher / Assessor' or 'IV' or both these roles in the past 5 years. |
| *Group 2:* *Micro with Meso OR Macro Group* | G2 | 30 | Those involved across **TWO LEVELS** of implementation to include the micro level, specifically 'Teacher / Assessor' or 'IV' or both these roles and roles in the meso or macro level in the past 5 years. |
| *Group 3:* *Micro Meso Macro Group* | G3 | 15 | Those involved across all **THREE LEVELS** of implementation in the past 5 years. |
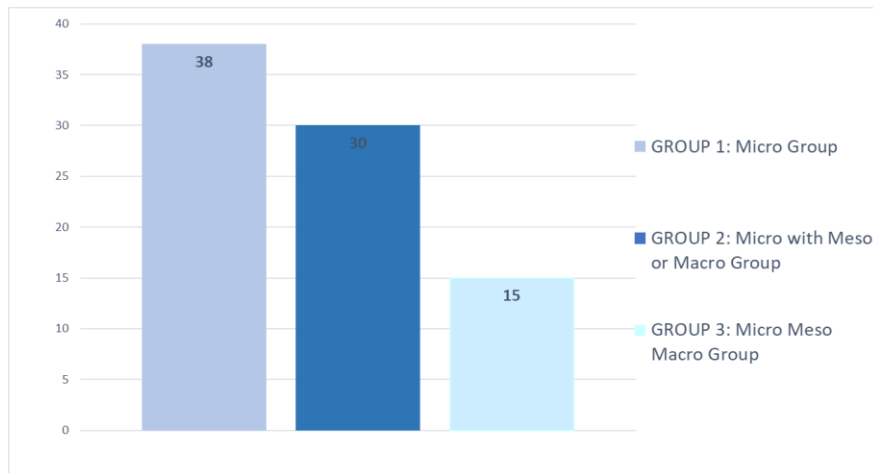
*Figure 4.5: 'Participant Groupings_Level of Involvement in QA Processes'.*

**Stage of Academic Year Quality Assurance Processes are Prominent**

Participants were asked by rank order question what stage of the academic year quality assurance processes are most prominent in their practice. For 'G1' and 'G3' results indicate quality assurance processes are most prominent at the end of the year. For 'G2' results suggest quality assurance timing has more variance, which was an unexpected outcome. To investigate this, Fishers exact tests were carried out and the frequencies were significantly different (p = .023) for 'G2' meaning 'G2' are significantly less likely than 'G1' or 'G3' to submit quality assurance processes are most prominent at the end of the year.

As 'G2' have common roles to 'G1' and 'G3', of interest to understand this difference would be the nature of the roles 'G2' are involved with that are seemingly perceived differently to those 'G1' and 'G3' are involved with at the same levels, in terms of what stage of the academic year they are prominent. In general, an overall consistency is observed across all three groups, where the end of the year ranks as the dominant stage quality assurance processes are perceived as most prominent. The grouping of participants is strongly justified in this instance, as in the absence of groupings, the complexity of differences between groups would not be revealed. These results have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.6'*.
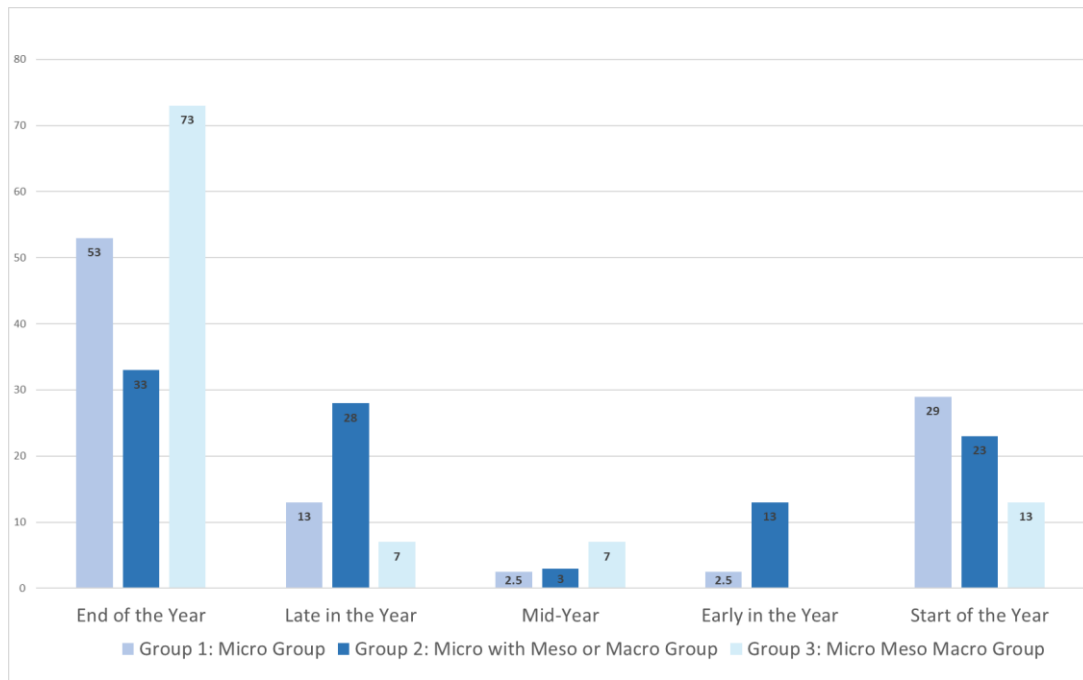
*Figure 4.6: 'Stage of the Academic Year QA Processes are Prominent'.*

The idea quality assurance is perceived by the majority as end-loaded is suggestive of Biggs description of a retrospective quality assurance model that looks back at what has already been done and has the potential to be detrimental to innovation in teaching and learning (Biggs, 2001). It is reasonable to then suggest perceptions of a quality assurance model as end-loaded could impact perceptions and experiences of quality assurance. Supporting this position, issues of quality assurance timing and its substantial time demands have been explicitly reported in a critical manner by participants for the open-ended questions in this research study.

These results are provoking, if a quality assurance model is perceived as more front-loaded or balanced throughout the year, this does not necessarily make it a prospective model, and considering the significant difference outlined for 'G2' one must consider some existing quality assurance roles in FE are already deemed prospective, or at least more balanced throughout the year.

**Accessible Quality Assurance Resources and Supports**

Participants were asked by multiple choice question what information, resources and supports concerning quality assurance processes were accessible in their organisation. Analysis also showed 'G3' were much more likely than other groups to have access to information, resources and supports, as observed in 8 out of 10 categories. Interestingly, analysis of the open-ended questions revealed 'G3' strongly associate quality assurance with benefitting learners. A relationship between both result sets is plausible where increased access to resources may inform perceptions of quality assurance effectiveness towards improving learner outcomes. Specifically, as 'G3' were much more likely to have access to information, resources and supports concerning quality assurance processes, including those directly related to teaching and learning and learner outcomes.

To investigate this, Fishers exact tests were carried out and the frequencies were significantly different (p = .043) for 'G3' specifically concerning their access to 'Communities of Practice in QA'. Whilst it may seem expected those more involved in quality assurance would have increased access to resources, information and supports, quality assurance is integral to every role across the three levels of implementation in FE. Thus, equitable access is deemed integral to all participants' daily duties, regardless of role or grouping.

The information, resources and supports perceived as least available are difficult to justify. Starting from the least accessible, results demonstrated 'Guidance on the relationship between QA and learner outcomes', then 'Communities of practice in QA', 'Job descriptions and role objectives of QA personnel' and finally 'Guidance on the relationship between QA and teaching and learning practices'. These results have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.7'*.
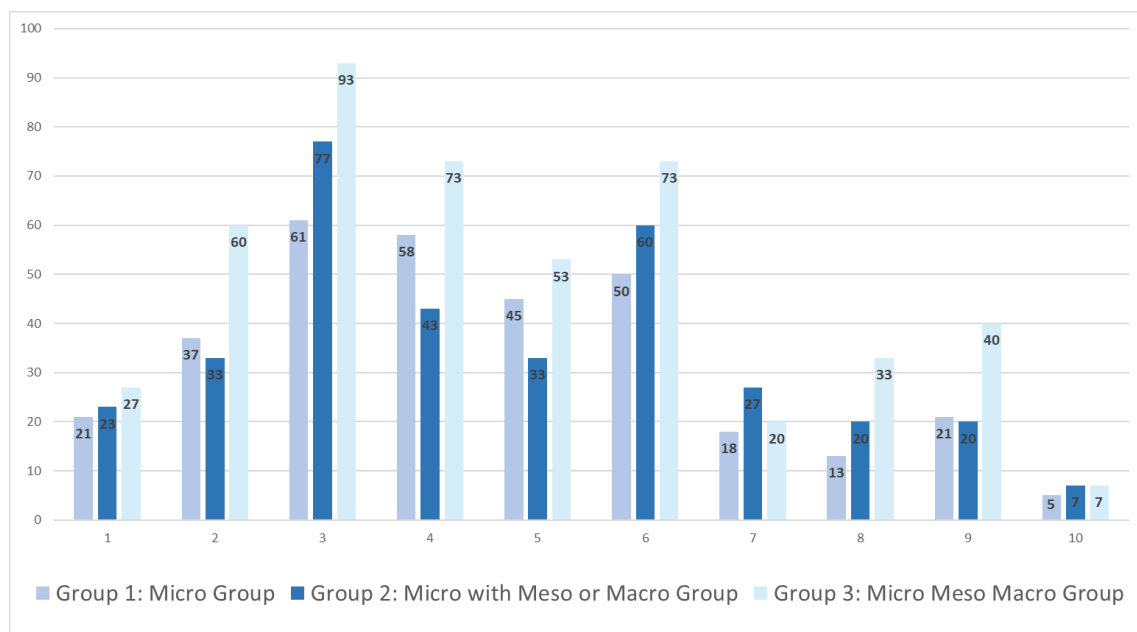
| Key: | |
|------|------|
| 1 | Job Descriptions and role objectives of QA personnel in your organisation. |
| 2 | Description of performance standards / criteria in relation to QA processes. |
| 3 | Access to current policies and practices in QA. |
| 4 | Detailed guide to implementation of QA processes. |
| 5 | Access to feedback / feed-forward from QA processes. |
| 6 | Staff training on QA processes. |
| 7 | Communities of practice in QA. |
| 8 | Guidance on the relationship between QA and learner outcomes. |
| 9 | Guidance on the relationship between QA and teaching and learning practices. |
| 10 | Other. |

*Figure 4.7: 'Accessible QA Resources and Supports'.*

These results raise the question, what might be the potential impact of a perceived lack of information, resources and supports in these specific areas and particularly the impact on 'G1' who are least involved with quality assurance processes. Considering two of these resources are directly related to teaching, learning and learner outcomes one can assume this

information would be particularly valuable to those working closest to learners or 'G1'. Jones and Saram (2005) purport empowerment and engagement of educators in activities embracing the culture of quality can cultivate more positive attitudes for these groups. This suggests improving access to communities of practice in quality assurance may have benefits. The statistical significance of this result again strongly justifies the grouping of participants.

**Internal Quality Assurance Practices Consistently Applied**

Participants were asked what internal quality assurance practices are applied consistently in their organisation. Analysis shows agreement among all groups. Interestingly the least applied internal practice is 'Evaluation of Teaching and Learning' followed closely by 'Internal Quality Audits'. These results have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.8'*.
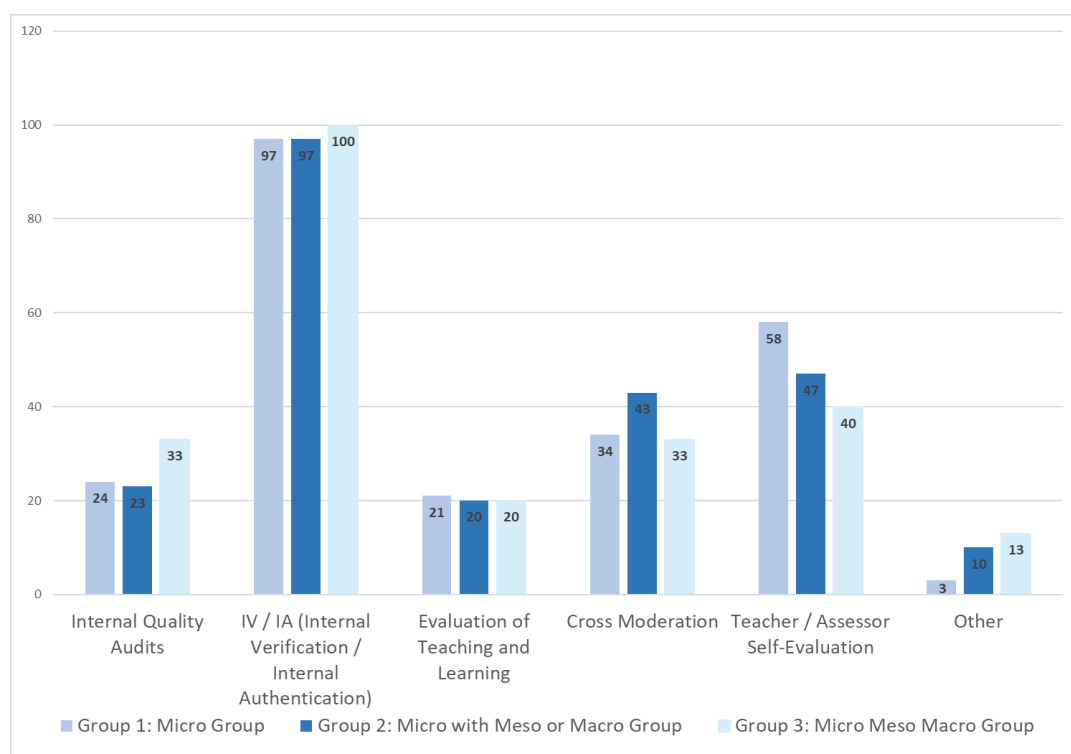


*Figure 4.8: 'Internal QA Practices Consistently Applied'.*

Looking at *'Figure 4.8'* the successful embedding of Internal Verification / Internal Authentication processes across the FE sector is apparent. This is viewed as a successful

outcome for those acting at the meso level to implement these processes locally. These results provoke the idea if meso level personnel were to support other lacking internal practices with such vigour, it could be assumed the chance of them being implemented increases. Supporting this idea research from Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018) found positive contributions of quality assurance could be maximised if the strategy was firmly embedded with clear support from senior managers.

**Purposes of Assessment Important to Address in Practice**

Participants were asked by rank order question what purposes of assessment are important to address in their practice. Analysis showed a gentle downward slope, and the most important purposes were 'Assessment *for* Learning' and 'Assessment *as* Learning' respectively. These results have been illustrated in **'*Figure 4.9'*** and are discussed further in the next section.
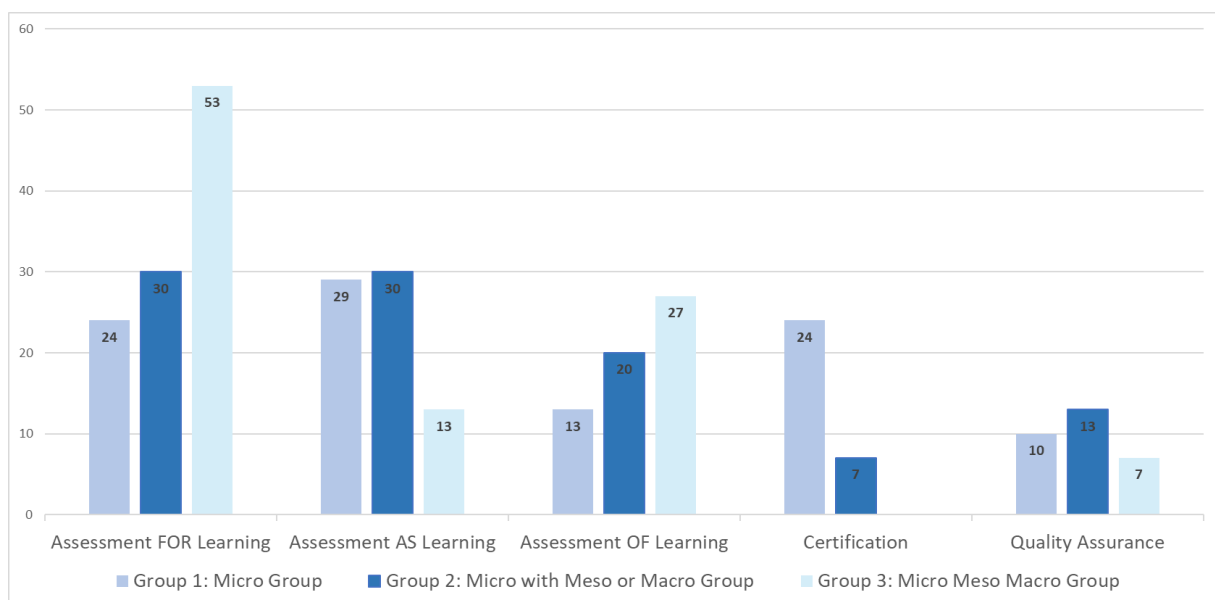


*Figure 4.9: 'Purposes of Assessment Important to Address in Participant Practice'.*

**Purposes of Assessment Quality Assurance Processes Prioritise**

Participants were asked by rank order question what purposes of assessment quality

assurance processes in their organisation prioritise. Interestingly the results demonstrated the

exact opposite pattern to those represented in *'Figure 4.9'*. In other words, analysis

demonstrated a sharp upward slope where 'Quality Assurance' followed by 'Certification'

respectively were deemed prioritised. These results have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.10'*.
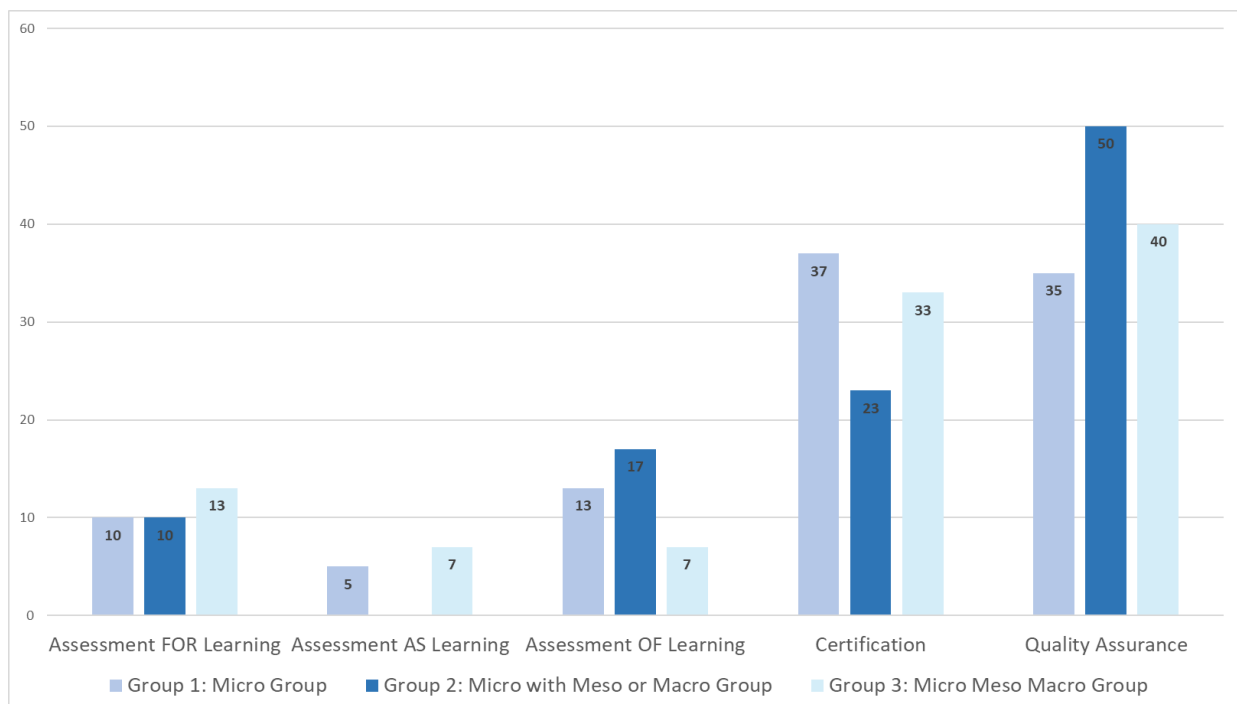


*Figure 4.10: 'Purposes of Assessment QA Processes Prioritise'.*

These results raise an important question, if the purposes of assessment important to

participants are not the purposes of assessment perceived as prioritised by quality assurance

in their organisation, what might be the potential impact of such a malalignment. Research by

Teelken and Lomas (2009) examined lecturers' experiences of quality assurance in third level

institutions the UK and Netherlands. The findings correlate with those in this study,

demonstrating an identified malalignment between the quality assurance system and their

essential work. With a disparity of this magnitude identified in this study it is difficult to

imagine how these opposing purposes could be reconciled. However, any migration of purposes should be a proactive process, governed by regular, constructive, two-way feedback promoting an intentional acquisition of explicitly aligned objectives, holding central learner outcomes submit Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006).

**Influences Shaping Quality Assurance Processes**

Participants were asked by rank order question what influences shape quality assurance systems and processes in their organisation. 'External QA policy and External Authentication requirements' were perceived as the overwhelming influence by all groups. These results have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.11'*.
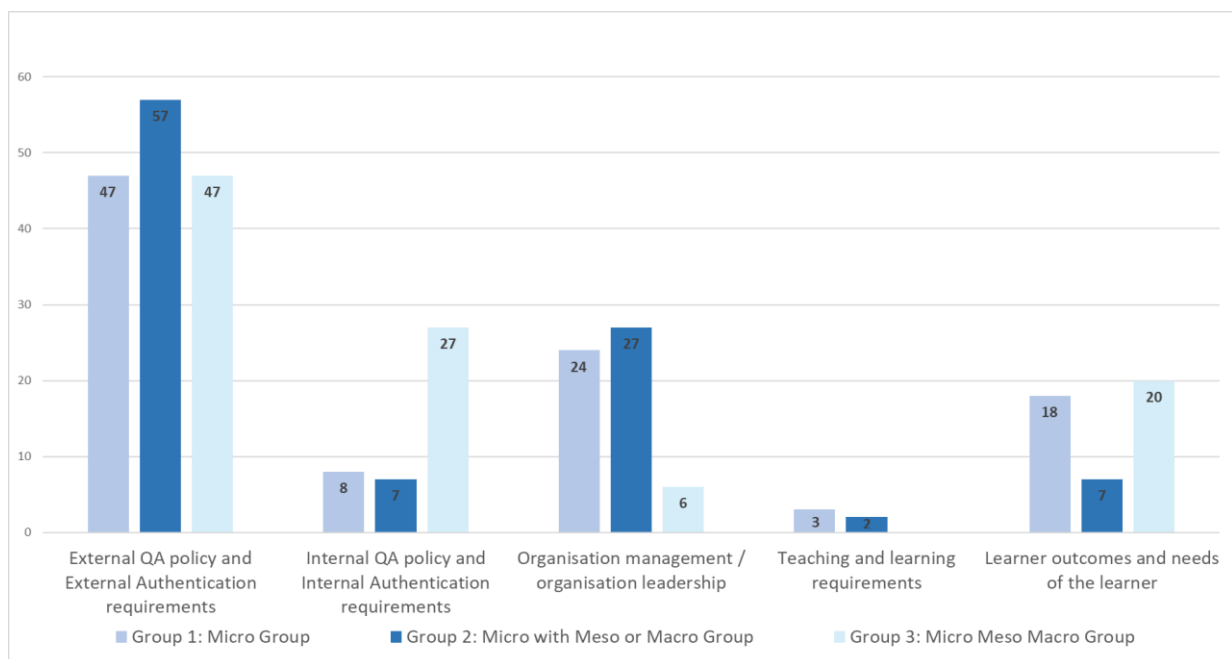


*Figure 4.11: 'Influences Shaping QA Processes'.*

Crucial research from Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018) demonstrated when quality assurance processes are perceived to be applied to satisfy external demands, perceptions of effectiveness were significantly negatively correlated. Additionally, a system perceived as externally led is indicative of a retrospective quality assurance model according to Biggs

(2001) and has been described as a system of one-way accountability conducted with a managerial agenda that can damage trust according to Hoecht (2006).

It is important to also highlight the influence in the minority or 'Teaching and learning requirements'. If we consider this against the results of *'Figure 4.8'* where the least applied internal quality assurance practices were 'Evaluation of Teaching and Learning' followed by 'Internal Quality Audits' the evidence continues to point to a quality assurance system perceived as retrospective. These results hold theoretical significance in terms of their potential impact on experiences and perceptions of quality assurance in FE.

**Approach of Quality Assurance Processes in Organisation**

Participants were asked to describe the approach of quality assurance processes in their organisation. Agreement was seen among all groups with a 'Compliance Approach' most commonly cited. For the purpose of this study a compliance approach is defined as one with standardisation being reinforced, focusing on accountability. Harrison and Lockwood (2001) assert an approach to quality assurance strongly associated with accountability and a system perceived as compliance based is not viewed as an authentic environment for true quality to evolve.

A 'Convergence Approach' was the next most common, and the least common was a 'Resistance Approach'. For the purpose of this study a convergence approach is defined as one which recognises the benefits of quality assurance and the risks of standardisation, practices are analysed and refined on reflection, and innovation is fostered with a genuine, supportive organisational culture of quality and self-improvement. Interestingly, 'G3' exclusively selected either a 'Compliance Approach' or 'Convergence Approach' and did not select 'Resistance Approach' in any incidence. For the purpose of this study a resistance approach is defined as one which hinders innovation by imposing standards without allowing

space for creating a genuine organisational culture of quality and self-improvement. To investigate this, Fishers exact tests were carried out and the frequencies were significantly different ($p = .046$) for 'G3' concerning the fact no 'G3' participant selected a 'Resistance Approach'.

Most crucially, these results strongly suggest the more involved a participant is in quality assurance implementation the more likely they are to perceive it positively, in this case concerning the approach. The grouping of participants is again justified, as without it statistical differences would not be realised. These results have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.12'*.
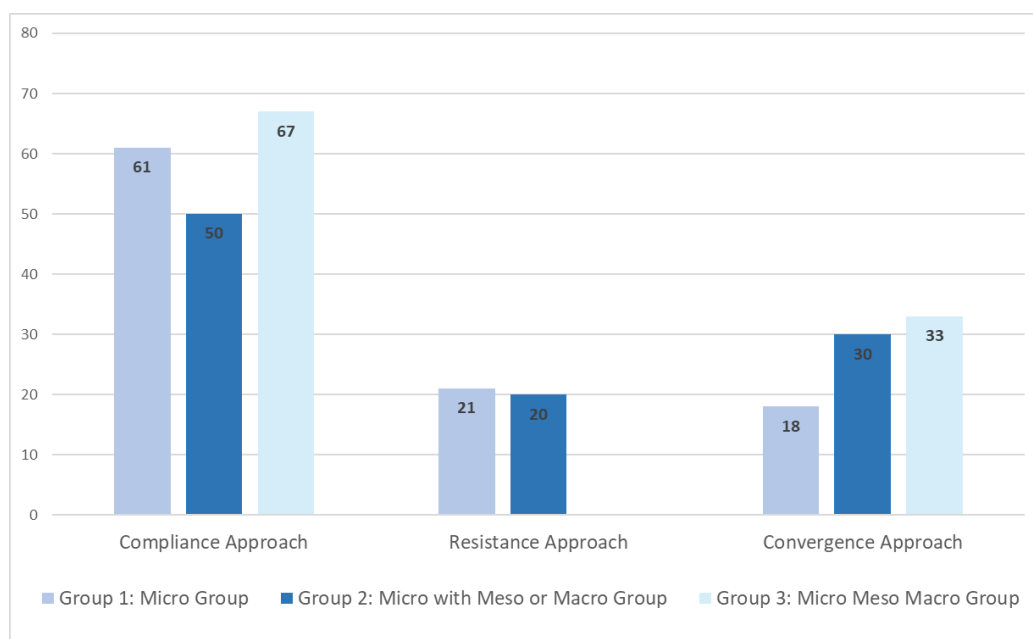


*Figure 4.12: 'Approach of QA Processes in Organisation'.*

A quality assurance system perceived by the majority as having a 'Compliance Approach' has implications. Fitzsimons' (2017) research revealed a compliance approach was viewed as antagonistic to a contextualised approach, that is dynamic and integral to learner-centered adult education. This dynamic, contextualised approach as discussed by

Fitzsimons (2017) closely reflects the principles and objectives of the 'Convergence Approach' described in this study.

**Stage of Development of Quality Assurance Processes in Organisation**

Participants were asked to describe the stage of development of quality assurance processes in their organisation. Analysis of all groups shows the most commonly cited as 'Verification and Standardisation Stage'. Interestingly on analysis of individual groups, 'G3' were much more likely to cite 'Transformative Stage' than any other group. To investigate this, Fishers exact tests were carried out and the frequencies were significantly different ($p = .046$) for 'G1' reflecting they were the least likely group to describe the stage of development as the 'Transformative Stage'. Crucial to this research study, these results strongly suggest the less involved a participant is in quality assurance, the less likely they are to positively describe the stage of development. This outcome further affirms the grouping of participants for this study. These results have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.13'*.
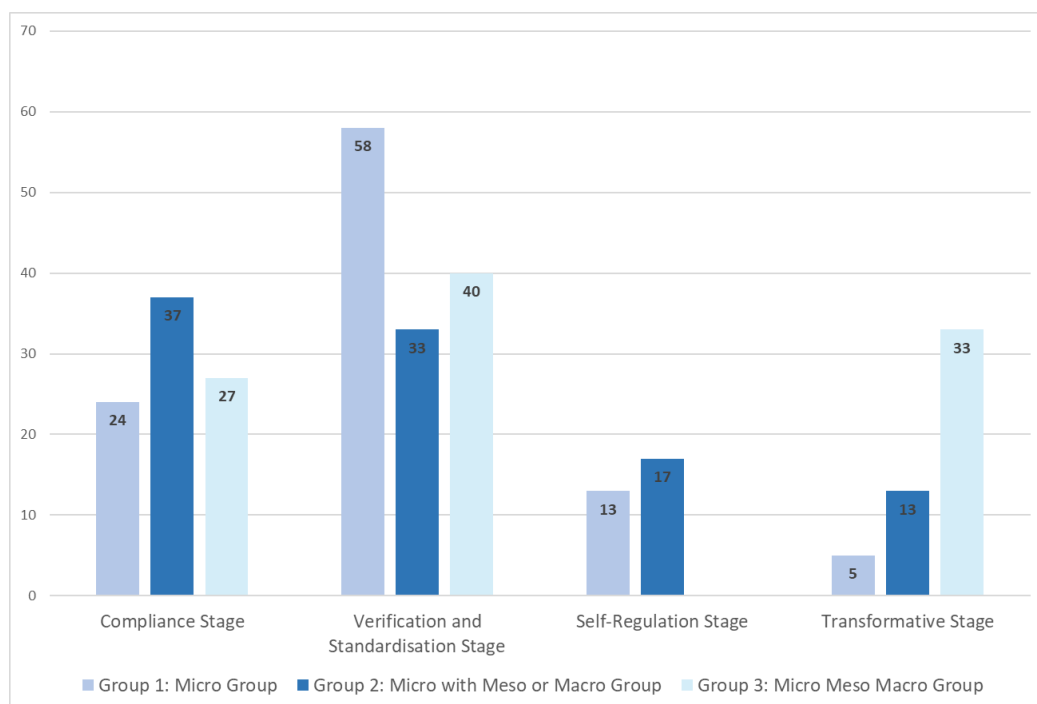


***Figure 4.13:*** *'Stage of Development of QA Processes in Organisation'.*

These results again bring in to focus the topic of accountability as the vast majority indicated the stage of development as 'Verification and Standardisation Stage', which for the purpose of this study is one focusing on accountability. These findings align with Twomey (2021) where the majority of academics in an Irish HE institute viewed quality assurance as being associated with accountability, rather than improvement. This dichotomy further reinforces the need for an integrated approach to quality assurance in FE that is capable of balancing both the requirement for managerial accountability and academic quality.

**Quality Assurance Processes Open to Adaptation, Development and Innovation**

Participants were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement; 'QA processes in your organisation are open to adaptation, development and innovation'. On initial analysis of all groups the most common selection is 'Agree'. On closer analysis of each group 26% of 'G1', 30% of 'G2' and 60% of 'G3' selected 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree'. Crucially, these results correlate with preceding findings suggesting the more involved a participant is with quality assurance the more likely they are to experience it positively and thus cite it as open to adaption, development, and innovation. These results have been illustrated in ***'Figure 4.14'***.
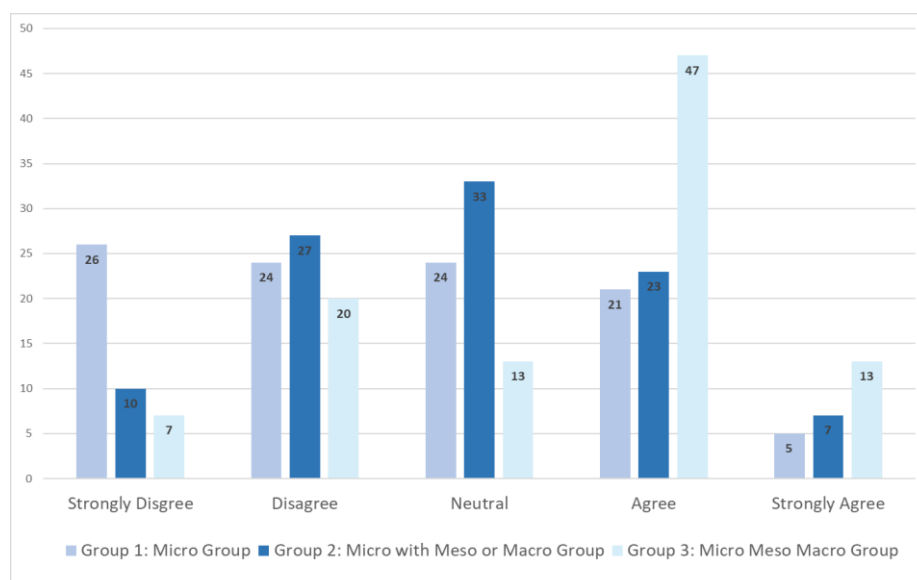


***Figure 4.14:*** *'QA Processes Open to Adaptation, Development and Innovation'.*

These results reaffirm the grouping of participants and are considered theoretically significant in terms of the potential impact on experiences and perceptions of quality assurance in FE. Analysis of the open-ended questions attempt to shed some light on the fact 60% of 'G3' agree quality assurance processes in their organisation are open to adaptation, development and innovation. Specifically, in the open-ended questions 'G3' responses echoed a perceived autonomy in relation to quality assurance. In contrast, multiple 'G1' participant citations suggested a perceived lack of autonomy concerning quality assurance processes.

A quality assurance model perceived as open to adaptation, development and innovation is reflective of a prospective model as described by Biggs (2001). A prospective model is described as forward-looking, holistic, progressive and based on a culture of enhancement, via reflective self-assessment and action (Biggs, 2001). As level of involvement is associated with increased perceptions of adaptation, development and innovation in quality assurance one might be open to the suggestion higher levels of involvement may also be associated with increased feelings of autonomy concerning quality assurance processes.

The concept of autonomy is multidimensional and beyond the scope of this study. However, research from Wermke and Salokangas (2015) concerning autonomy in education in Sweden, Finland, Germany and Ireland illustrates how, in educational settings where numerous actors with a multitude of interests operate, the autonomy of one individual or group has consequences for that of others. This provokes thoughts of where autonomy currently lies and where it should lie or be prioritised to optimise the effectiveness of an integrated, authentically transformative quality assurance system in FE.

On analysis of the open-ended questions multiple 'G1' participants suggest a perceived lack of flexibility in quality assurance, providing further explanation for the fact just 26% of 'G1' agreed quality assurance processes are open to adaptation, development, and innovation. Supporting this position, key research from Teelken and Lomas (2009) outlines how an audit culture can stifle innovation for educators and consume academic time in what is perceived as trivialities. Additionally, Teelken and Lomas (2009) warn quality assurance is mostly about surveillance and control and is a key element of a command economy in education threatening opportunities for self-agency.

Concerning the perceived lack of flexibility, Rust (2004) associates the concept of flexibility with the assessment principle of validity. Rust (2004) suggests validity can be promoted in one way by the application of varied assessment techniques, where learners can more authentically demonstrate the required vocational competencies. Considering the strong vocational ethos of FE valid assessments are fundamental to preparing learners for the world of work. If quality assurance is perceived as limiting flexibility, and subsequently validity, it may go some way to explaining the persistent reporting of a perceived disconnect from teaching and learning by participants in this research study.

**Current Quality Assurance Processes Improve Learner Outcomes**

Participants were asked to what extent they agree with the statement 'Current QA processes in your organisation improves outcomes for learners'. On initial analysis of all groups the most common selection is 'Neutral'. On deeper analysis of each group a similar pattern appears when compared to the results of the preceding topics. Specifically, 13% of 'G1', 33% of 'G2' and 54% of 'G3' selected 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree'. To investigate this, Fishers exact tests were carried out and the frequencies were significantly different (p = .007) for 'G1' strongly reflecting their distinct lack of agreement current quality assurance

processes improve outcomes for learners. These results again provide strong justification for the grouping of participants as in the absence of this, the distinct differences between groups would not be realised. These results have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.15'*.
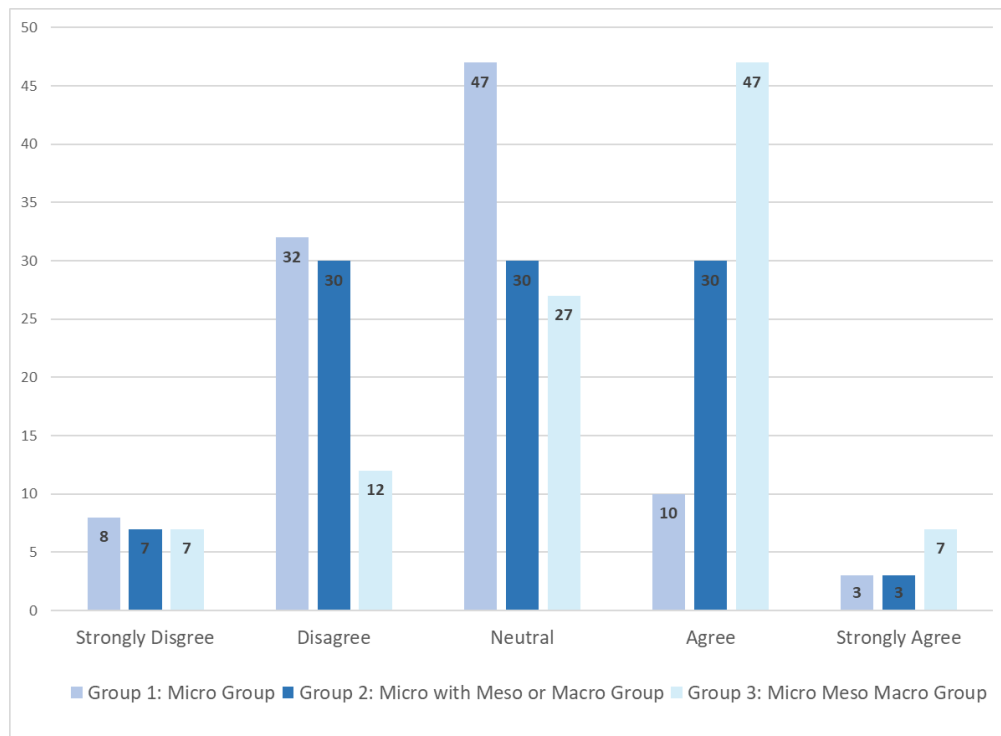


*Figure 4.15:* *'Current QA Processes Improve Learner Outcomes'*.

What cannot be overlooked is the fact just 13% of 'G1' selected either 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' current quality assurance processes improve learner outcomes. This is addressed in research by Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018) which outlines when overly dominant quality assurance systems are implemented which require participants to respond to external monitoring, educator motivations can depreciate as their core role of teaching and supporting learners is diluted. Supporting this idea *'Figure 4.11'*, results demonstrated 'External QA policy and External Authentication requirements' were perceived by all groups as the overwhelming influence shaping quality assurance processes in practice.

Considering other possible contributors to these results it is worth recalling *'Figure 4.7'* where results demonstrated the information, resources and supports perceived as least available to all groups included 'Guidance on the relationship between QA and learner outcomes' and 'Guidance on the relationship between QA and teaching and learning practices'. Considering these resources are directly related to teaching, learning and learner outcomes it is reasonable to suggest increased access may improve perceptions around quality assurance impacting learner outcomes, particularly for 'G1'. Findings revealed from analysis of the open-ended questions offer further explanation where the retrospective timing of quality assurance processes has been implicated in disadvantaging learner outcomes.

Offering further explanation findings from the open-ended questions revealed 'G1' perceived quality assurance systems and processes as conflicting with teaching and learning, disconnected from teaching and learning and learner needs and unsupportive of teaching and learning. Multiple suggestions were made by 'G1' that quality assurance currently fails to address the individual needs of learners and in its current form is not learner-centric. 'G1' participants are critical of current assessment processes suggesting they 'could be enhanced to support individual student needs', they need to incorporate UDL and allow for 'more creative ways to assess student learning'. The promotion of UDL aligns with the strategic priorities relating to increasing accessibility for learners in FE (SOLAS, 2020). Despite UDL being prioritised at policy level the evidence from this research suggests this priority is not deemed compatible with quality assurance systems in FE as they are currently perceived.

Compounding the contrast between groups and supporting the fact 33% of 'G2' and 54% of 'G3' agree current quality assurance processes improve learner outcomes, analysis of the open-ended questions revealed 'G2' and 'G3' strongly associate quality assurance with benefitting learners. Specifically, 'G2' and 'G3' reported positive aspects in relation to quality assurance improving learner experiences and the positive inter-relationship of quality

assurance and teaching and learning. Additionally, as documented in *'Figure 4.7'*, 'G3' were much more likely to have access to information, resources and supports concerning quality assurance processes, including those directly related to teaching and learning and learner outcomes, offering further explanation for the stark contrast in perceptions between groups.

**Data Generated from Quality Assurance Processes Informs Practice**

Participants were asked to what extent they agree with the statement 'Data generated from QA processes / feed-forward from QA processes informs your practice'. On initial analysis of all groups the most common selection is 'Agree'. On deeper analysis of each group a similar pattern appears when compared to the results of the preceding topics. Specifically, 31% of 'G1', 64% of 'G2' and 54% of 'G3' selected 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree'. Again, this suggests the more involved a participant is with quality assurance the more likely they are to have positive perceptions, in this case regarding quality assurance data informing practice. These results provide further justification for the grouping of participants and are considered theoretically significant in terms of the potential impact on experiences on perceptions of quality assurance in FE. Results have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.16'*.
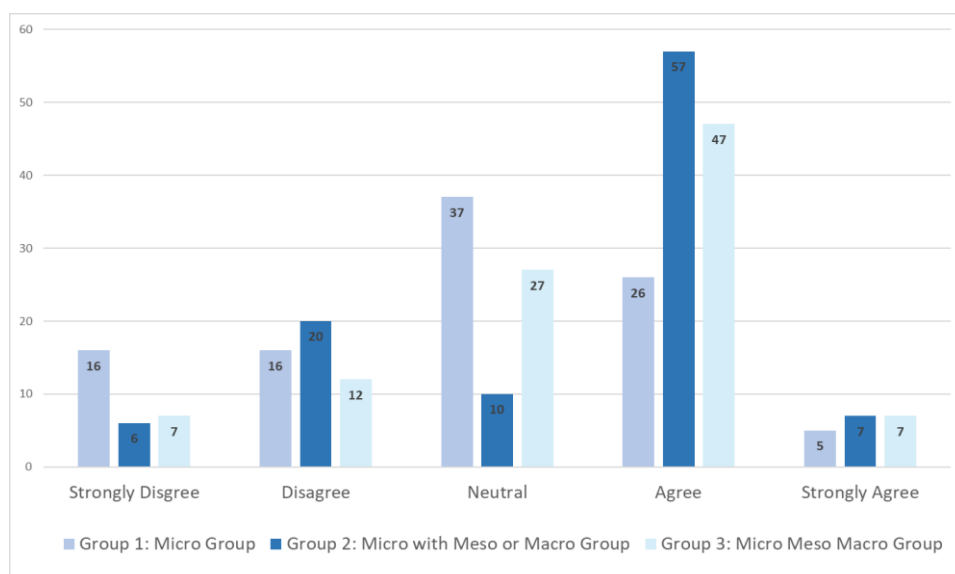


*Figure 4.16:* *'Data Generated from QA Processes Informs Practice'.*

It is difficult to overlook the fact just 31% of 'G1' either 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' quality assurance data informs their practice. In terms of the importance of quality assurance data, Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018) advocate barriers to motivation present when the quality assurance system does not identify best and poor practice in a reliable manner. In the absence of this, the quality assurance system is devoid of meaning and engagement with it is deemed fruitless. Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2017) advocate feedback is fundamental for educators own academic development. Reinforcing this position, Fitzsimons (2017) research demonstrated of the positive experiences with quality assurance reported, they were mostly linked to the benefits of constructive feedback provided by external authenticators that leads to improvement in practice.

**How Quality Assurance Systems and Processes Impact Practice**

Participants were asked via a numerical Likert scale to indicate what way quality assurance systems and processes impact their practice. The scale ranged from 1-10 with '0' correlating with the term 'Very Negatively' and '10' correlating with the term 'Very Positively'. For the purpose of analysis any ratings from 0-6 were classified as 'Detractor' results, ratings from 7-8 were classified as 'Passive' results and ratings from 9-10 were classified as 'Promoter' results. On initial analysis of all groups the vast majority selected the 'Detractor' option.

On deeper analysis of each group a similar pattern appears when compared to the results of the preceding topics. Only participants from 'G2' and 'G3' selected 'Promoter' ratings suggesting the more involved a participant is with quality assurance the more likely they are to have more positive experiences, in this case regarding impact practice. To investigate this, Fishers exact tests were carried out and the frequencies were significantly different (p = .022) for 'G1' indicating they were significantly least likely to select 'Passive'

compared to other groups. Additionally, the frequencies were significantly different (p = .021) for 'G1' indicating they were significantly least likely to select the 'Promoter' option compared to other groups.

To further bolster these results the frequencies were also significantly different (p = .001) for 'G3' indicating they were significantly least likely to select the 'Detractor' option compared to other groups. Considering the substantial statistical significance, these results are the strongest yet obtained. These results have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.17'*.
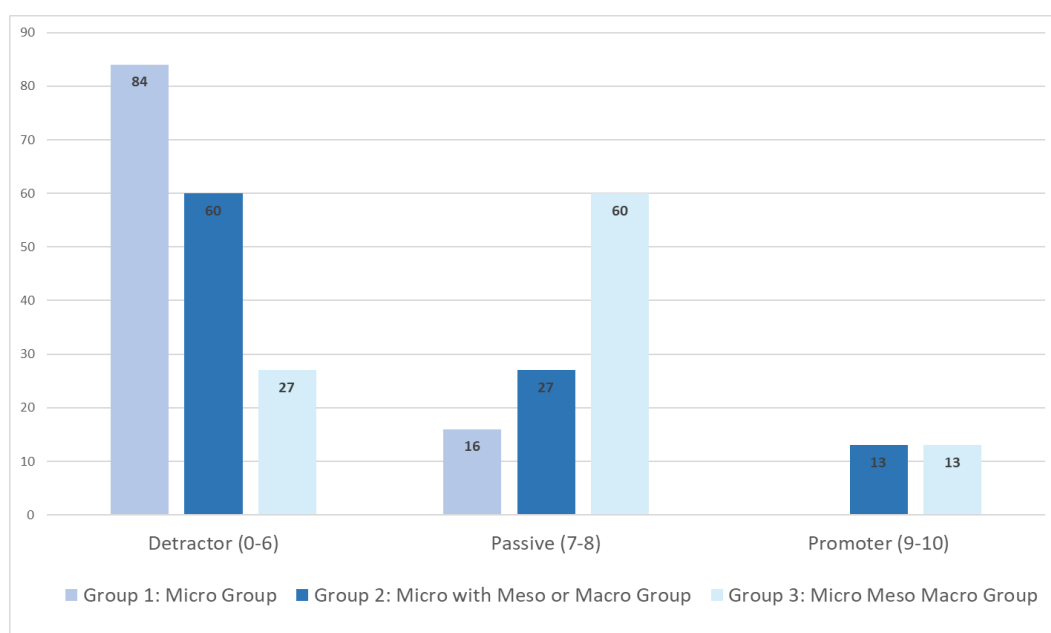


*Figure 4.17:* *'How QA Systems and Processes Impact Practice'.*

What cannot be discounted is the fact the vast majority selected the 'Detractor' option. This points to a palpable futility regarding the perceived effectiveness of quality assurance systems in their current form in terms of impact on practice. This is echoed in research by Fitzsimons (2017) and Lucas (2014) where similar frustrations were reported by the majority of participants regarding quality assurance in both Higher and Further Education. However, the contribution of this research is seen as particularly valuable as it is specific to FE, and in the absence of grouping participants, it would not be possible to

distinguish any difference in perceptions and experiences depending on level of involvement in quality assurance.

Offering some explanation for these findings, analysis of the open-ended questions revealed quality assurance systems and processes were perceived negatively, particularly by 'G1', with multiple participants citing quality assurance processes as a box ticking activity. Research by Fitzsimons (2017) concerning Irish educators in FE, and HE also surfaced this idea. Concerning the potential impact of a system perceived in this way, research by Stephenson (2004) concluded a quality assurance system that cultivates a tick box mentality, even unintentionally, can promote minimum thresholds of quality, leading to drops in academic motivation and thus quality. Ensuring administrative tasks relating to quality assurance are purposeful is not a new concept, as the increased administrative burden has been recently and extensively documented according to Dittrich (2019), Gaber et al. (2011) and Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018).

Analysis of the open-ended questions offered further explanation where quality assurance systems and processes were cited as increasing accountability among teachers. Interestingly, accountability was not a major theme for 'G2' or 'G3' suggesting it impacts 'G1' principally and most severely. Most crucially, accountability was perceived negatively by 'G1'. Compelling research from Ehren et al. (2019) inextricably links trust and accountability. This research on the HE sector describes how bureaucratic accountability can burden educators in administration which does not contribute to improvements in inherent quality. For change to occur educators must be trusted to fulfil their core duties in the absence of superficial monitoring and they must be active participants in inclusive and meaningful processes around optimising inherent quality according to Ehren et al (2019).

Further criticisms resulting from the open-ended questions that offer explanation for the overwhelmingly negative experiences of 'G1' criticise quality assurance for being unreceptive to feedback, and for a lack of inclusivity. In terms of inclusivity, or lack thereof, Sadler (2010) explains moderation activities fall under the remit of external authenticators, and teachers / assessors do not participate in moderating activities. According to Sadler (2010) moderation is a cornerstone of criterion-referenced assessment and in an inclusive quality assurance system assessors would be provided the opportunity to moderate or benchmark their work.

Findings from a recent Swedish study by Lucander and Christersson (2020) provoke a partial solution. Lucander and Christersson (2020) found by involving teachers in the process of producing the documentation for quality assurance an important benefit was realised. Specifically, the development of an improved understanding of each other's roles, resulting in stronger collaboration and collegiality and ultimately, a more inclusive quality culture.

Final citations from the open-ended questions that support the negative experiences reported by 'G1' cite timing and lack of meaning around quality assurance processes and one participant outlines the perceived impact this has on professional development and learning. An extensive citation was provided in this regard;

> QA is shoe-horned into the end of the year to appease the EA's and the administrative requirements of CDETB. The notion of my teaching practice being enhanced by QA processes is not made clear by management. Rather, I see it as a chore because of where and why it occurs during the year. The rationale for QA to support me and my learners is never made explicit at a deeper and more transformative level. This is a shame as it stunts my ongoing professional development and does not enhance the learning experience of my students.

## *Future Direction of Assessment and Quality Assurance in Organisation*

Themes explored in this section relate to the future direction of assessment and quality assurance in participant organisations.

### Achieving Alignment as a Focus of Quality Assurance Processes

Participants were asked to what extent they agreed achieving constructive alignment should be a focus of quality assurance processes in their organisation. Results were overwhelmingly in favour of working to achieve constructive alignment and coherence was seen for all groups. These results have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.18'*.
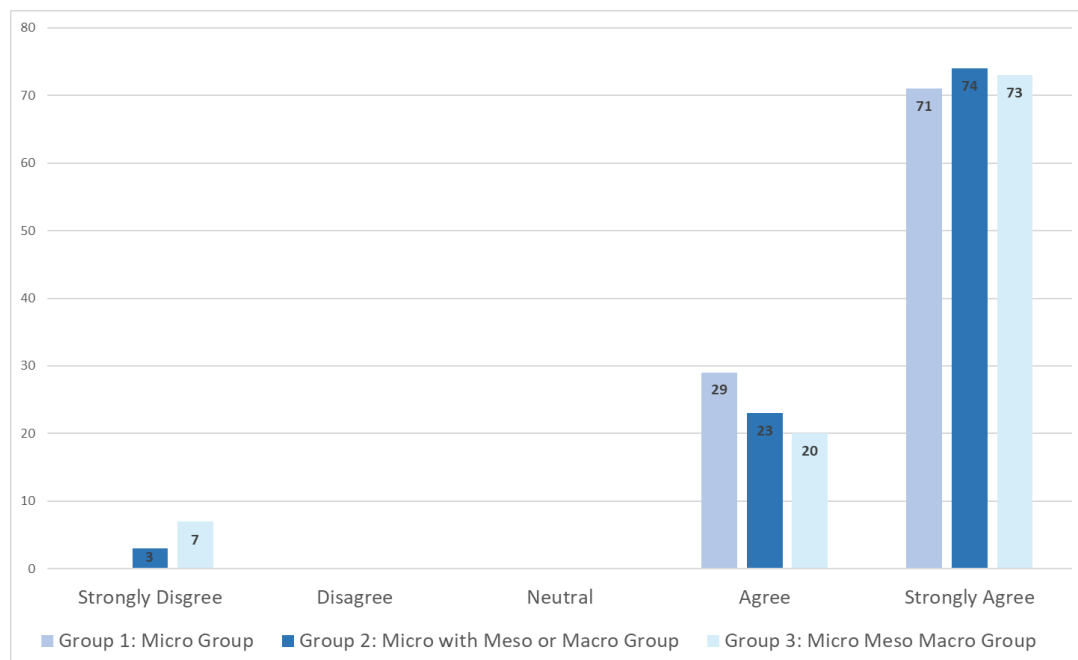


*Figure 4.18:* '*Achieving Alignment as a Focus of QA Processes*'.

These results highlight the perceived importance of John Biggs' theory of outcomes-based teaching and learning (OBTL); the model of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2015) among all groups. These results hold theoretical significance by provoking the concept that working to achieving constructive alignment could pose as an allie to synergising all groups towards a unified goal.

**Stage of Development QA Processes Should Move Towards**

Participants were asked what stage of development they would like to see quality assurance process move towards in their organisation. Results were overwhelmingly in favour of the 'Transformative' stage and coherence was seen for all groups. These results have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.19'*.
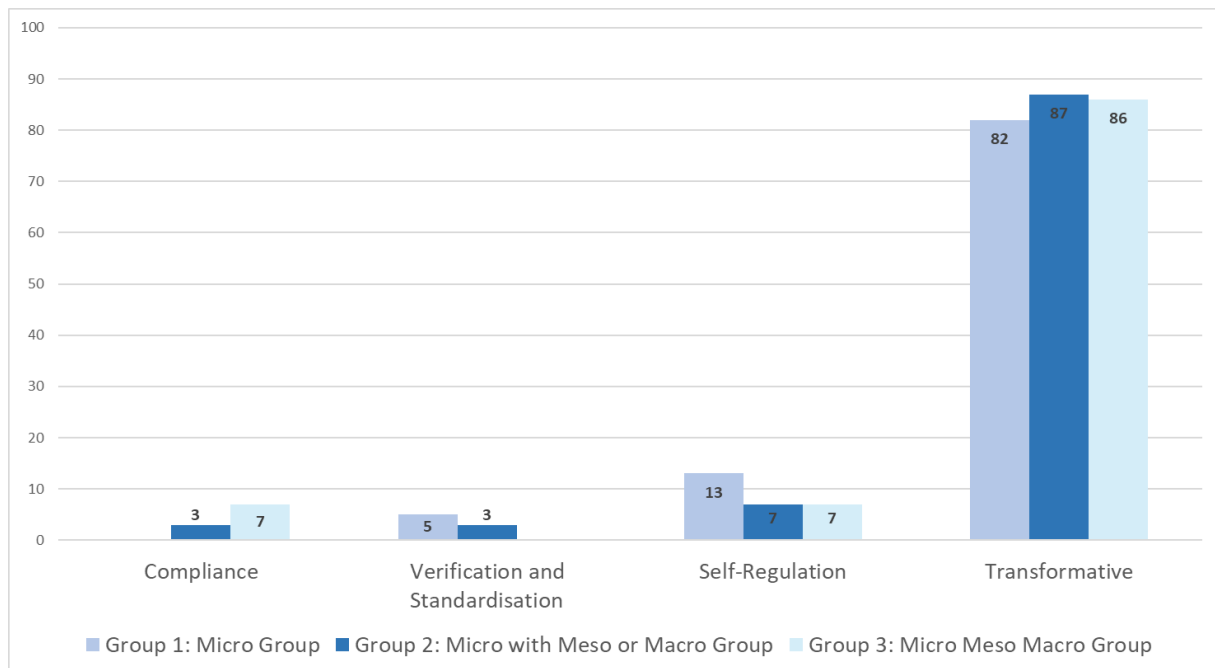


*Figure 4.19:* *'Stage of Development QA Processes Should Move Towards'.*

For the purpose of this study the 'Transformative' stage has been defined as a stage where innovation is prominent and gaps are actively addressed creating a meaningful system, with the aim to reach a sustainable quality culture. These results hold theoretical significance. The definitive synergy of all groups towards moving quality assurance to the transformative stage provides further evidence the future direction of quality assurance has the potential to unite and synergise groups.

**Evaluation of Quality Assurance Processes – Actions to Prioritise**

Participants were asked to consider how quality assurance processes were evaluated in their organisation and to indicate the extent they agreed specific actions presented should be prioritised. Options participants selected either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' for have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.20'*.

On analysis a trend is observed correlating with preceding findings. Findings suggest the more involved a participant is with quality assurance the more likely they are to support a range of evaluation processes. It is reasonable to suggest the more likely participants are to support evaluation processes, the more likely they are to view them positively and as beneficial. See *Figure 4.20: 'Evaluation of QA Processes – Actions to Prioritise'*.
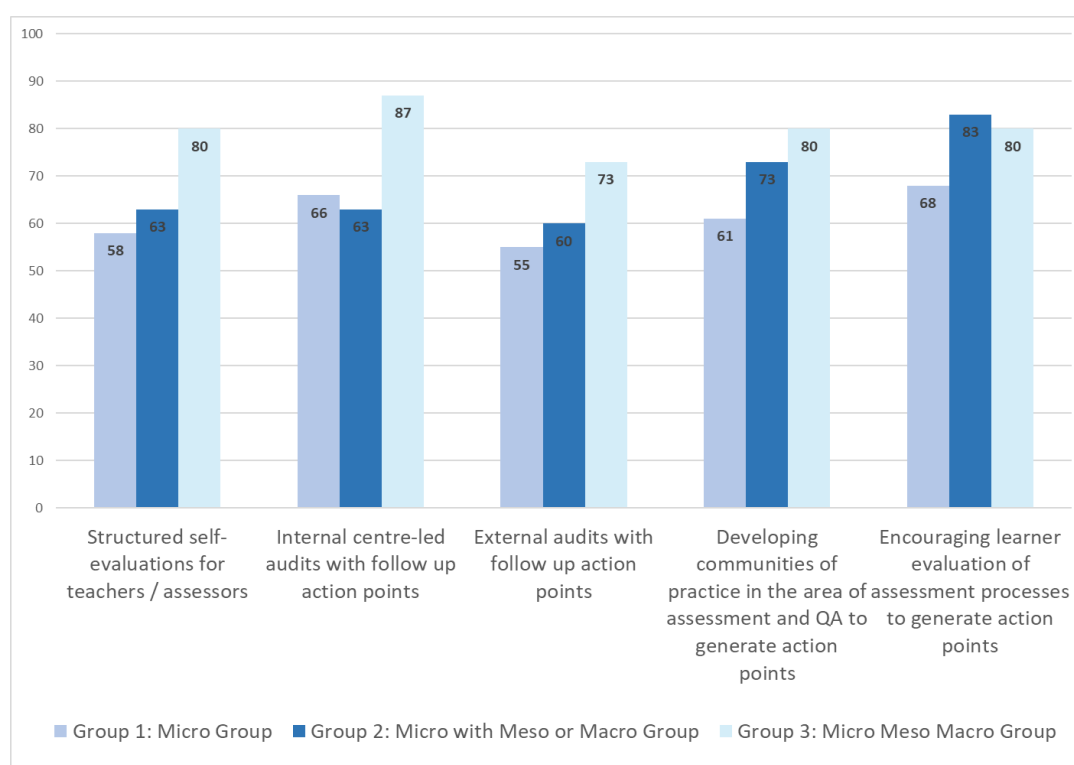


*Figure 4.20: 'Evaluation of QA Processes – Actions to Prioritise'*.

These results hold theoretical significance. Considering the most commonly cited actions to prioritise it is clear processes preferred for the evaluation of quality assurance are

encompassing, inclusive, must incorporate the learner voice, must look inwardly and must involve a dedicated supportive environment. These processes of evaluation align with the principles of transformative quality as described by Gill et al. (2022), the transformative stage of development as described, and with the prospective model of quality assurance as described by Biggs (2001).

**Reviewing Elements of Quality Assurance Processes**

Participants were asked to consider reviewing the elements of quality assurance processes in their organisation and to indicate the extent they agreed specific elements presented should be prioritised. Options participants selected either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' for have been illustrated in *'Figure 4.21'*.
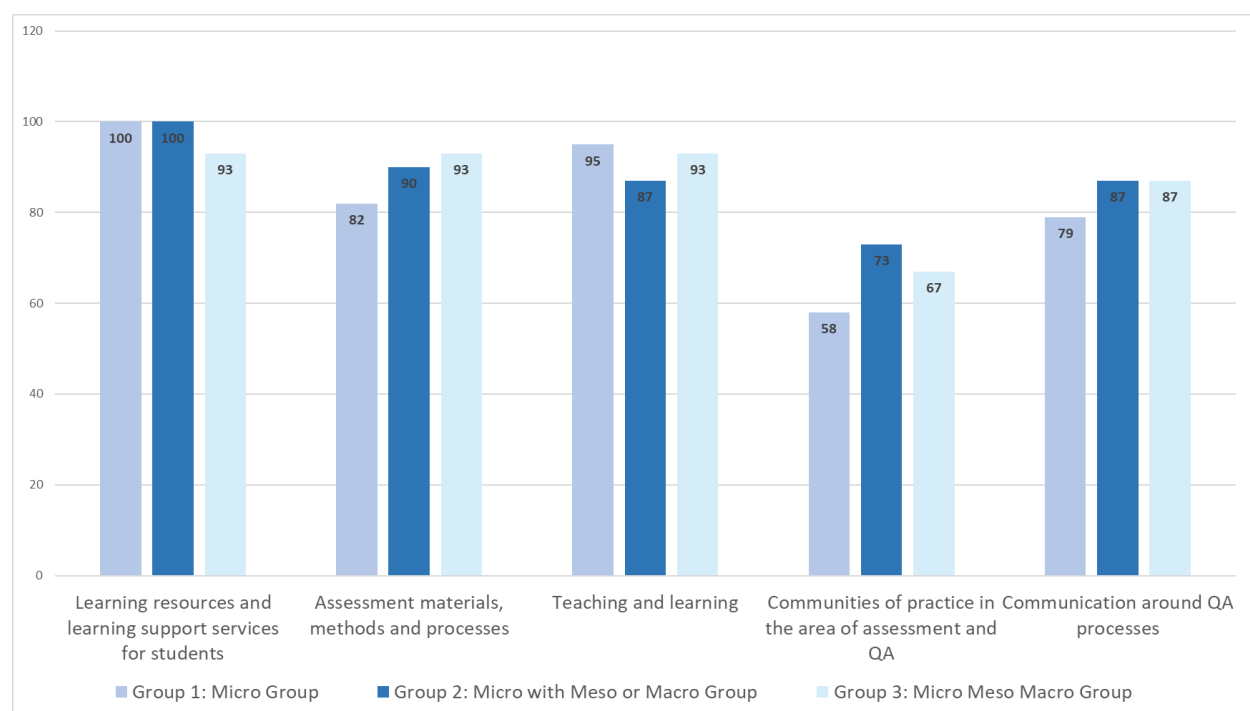


*Figure 4.21:* *'Reviewing Elements of Quality Assurance Processes'.*

Again, these results hold theoretical significance. To explain, observing the most common elements cited by participants to prioritise in *'Figure 4.21'*, three of these directly

relate to teaching, learning and learner outcomes. Recalling the results of *'Figure 4.7'* where results demonstrated the information, resources and supports perceived as least available to all groups were directly related to teaching, learning and learner outcomes, a possible observation begins to arise. If elements of quality assurance directly related to teaching, learning and learner outcomes are perceived as de-prioritised and under-resourced, could this negatively impact perceptions of quality assurance. These results also hold theoretical significance where recent studies concluded perceptions of quality assurance held by those interacting with the systems are vital for the ongoing commitment of these personnel to quality assurance and its processes (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018).

## *Conclusion*

This chapter has presented and discussed the findings of this research study. Key themes capturing the experiences of quality assurance implementation in FE have been explored. In terms of internal validity, quantitative results were triangulated with other quantitative results, and themes emerging from the open-ended survey questions were triangulated with findings from the quantitative data. The findings from the open-ended survey questions served successfully to illuminate the findings from the quantitative data. Additionally, any statistically significant differences realised for quantitative data were reported. In terms of external validity, emerging themes and results were correlated with existing applicable research. By applying integrated data analysis techniques in this manner, findings realised were richer than the independent sum of their parts.

In the absence of grouping participants, the inherent complexities of the experiences of quality assurance implementation in FE may have remained obscure. To be specific, the groupings revealed areas of statistical significance where those least involved in quality assurance implementation perceived and experienced quality assurance more negatively

compared to those more involved. It is therefore evident without grouping participants and instead working on averages of all participant submissions, there exists the possibility of over-representing the views of those least involved in quality assurance implementation, specifically teachers / assessors, and under-representing the views of those more involved. These findings provide a strong justification for further research specific to FE. Strong justification is also provided for the grouping of participants, to support findings authentic to and representative of each group and the roles they assume.

# Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future Perspectives

## *Introduction*

As participants for this research study spanned across all levels of quality assurance implementation in FE, different lenses were availed of through which to view experiences and perceptions. This was achieved by the essential grouping of participants according to level of involvement in quality assurance as informed by the MMM-IEO model (QQI, 2018, p. 11). The grouping of participants proved crucial to this study, and it is evidenced in several incidences in Chapter 4. Specifically, in the absence of grouping participants and instead working on averages of all participant submissions, there exists the possibility of over-representing the views of those least involved in quality assurance implementation, specifically teachers / assessors, and under-representing the views of those more involved.

This specific research design distinctively supported the exploration and explication of contrasting perceptions and experiences, depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation. This novel approach was intended to address tensions between groups, with the objective of finding a nexus to inform future implementation. This approach also scaffolded recommendations for a more integrated approach that authentically represents all roles and levels in quality assurance implementation in FE.

This contribution to the limited existing knowledge ensures quality assurance is more accessible for those involved in implementation in FE. The research question under investigation was: *Concerning experiences and perceptions of quality assurance implementation in Further Education (FE), to what extent does diversity exist among stakeholders, grouped depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation.*

This final chapter summarises the main findings of this research study, outlines important implications for the FE sector concerning quality assurance implementation, acknowledges the research limitations and suggests potential areas for further investigation. It is envisaged these contributions to the academic discourse can inform the optimal development of and future direction of quality assurance in FE.

## *Research Study Conclusions*

This research sought to discern the diversity and range of experiences and perceptions of quality assurance implementation in FE, and the extent to which participants concur or conflict. Many fundamental areas of convergence concerning experiences and perceptions of quality assurance implementation were observed. These provide potential for a shared understanding, collaboration, and synthesis between all actors in quality assurance implementation deemed central to an integrated approach. These key findings also provide a common infrastructure on which to support a response to the diversity observed.

Extant tensions were revealed when examining the perceived value placed by the different groups on the current approach and implementation of quality assurance in FE. Statistically significant differences in perceptions and experiences were discovered, and key areas of congruence emerged. The fundamental areas demonstrating statistically significant differences among groups were experienced more positively by those more involved in quality assurance implementation and / or more negatively by those least involved in quality assurance implementation. The resultant analysis illuminates further potential for improvement in quality assurance implementation in FE. Left unaddressed, these areas of congruence have the potential to undermine a collective approach that promotes institution-wide responsibility.

Key areas of convergence, key areas of congruence and areas demonstrating statistically significant differences are illustrated in *'Table 5.1: Key Areas of Convergence, Key Areas of Congruence and Areas of Statistical Significance'*.

*Table 5.1:*

*Key Areas of Convergence, Key Areas of Congruence and Areas of Statistical Significance*

| Areas of Convergence | Areas of Congruence | Areas of Statistical Significance |
|---|---|---|
| Managing the impact of specific assessment methods. | Need for collaboration to promote prospective quality assurance model. | Stage of the academic year quality assurance processes are prominent. |
| Call to look inwardly to authentically improve quality assurance. | Equity of access to serve learner-centric quality assurance systems. | Accessible quality assurance information, resources and supports. |
| Managing the risks of a quality assurance system perceived as retrospective. | Migration of purposes of assessment and quality assurance. | Approach of quality assurance processes in organisation. |
| Balancing managerial accountability and academic quality. | Balancing autonomy around quality assurance. | Stage of development of quality assurance processes in organisation. |
| Working towards constructive alignment. | Disconnect of quality assurance to teaching and learning and lack of inclusivity and receptivity of quality assurance. | Current quality assurance processes improving learner outcomes. |
| Working towards transformative quality assurance. | Dichotomy of external monitoring and quality teaching and learning. | How quality assurance systems and processes impact practice. |
| Reviewing methods of evaluation of quality assurance. | Administrative burden of quality assurance and feedforward concerning quality assurance. | |

## *Building on Areas of Convergence: Implications for Practice*

Key areas of convergence and the resulting implications for practice are identified and discussed in the following section.

### *Approach to assessment*

Findings from this research demonstrated assessment methods play an important role in promoting specific principles and purposes of assessment. This is considered an area

possibly overlooked against the backdrop of driving intricate quality assurance systems with the main objective of satisfying external requirements.

On the approach to assessment, achieving constructive alignment unites all groups. These results highlight the appetite for the centrality of John Biggs' theory of outcomes-based teaching and learning (OBTL); the model of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2015) to assessment and quality assurance processes.

### *Managing the risks of a retrospective quality assurance system*

Agreement among groups was observed concerning influences shaping quality assurance systems and processes in their current form with 'External QA policy and External Authentication requirements' perceived as the overwhelming influence. Crucial research from Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018) demonstrated when quality assurance systems and processes are perceived to be applied to satisfy external demands, perceptions of effectiveness were significantly negatively correlated. A system perceived as externally led is indicative of a retrospective quality assurance model according to Biggs (2001) and has been described as a system of one-way accountability conducted with a managerial agenda that can damage trust according to Hoecht (2006). Evidently, the research is compelling and demonstrates the multi-dimensional destructive potential of a quality assurance system perceived as externally led and retrospective.

### *Balancing managerial accountability and academic quality*

Confounding agreement was observed among all groups concerning major facets of quality assurance configuration, specifically the approach and stage of development. Alarmingly the approach and stage of development most cited are both inextricably linked with accountability. Associating quality assurance with accountability, rather than improvement reinforces the need for an integrated approach to quality assurance in FE

capable of balancing both the requirement for managerial accountability and academic quality.

Harrison and Lockwood (2001) warn an approach to quality assurance strongly associated with accountability is not viewed as an authentic environment for true quality to evolve. Concurring with this position, Fitzsimons' (2017) research found a compliance approach as antagonistic to a contextualised approach that is dynamic and integral to learner-centered adult education. This dynamic, contextualised approach as discussed by Fitzsimons (2017) will begin with working to recognise the benefits of quality assurance and the inherent risks of standardisation.

Findings from this research suggest accountability associated with quality assurance impacts teachers / assessors principally and most severely. Compelling research from Ehren et al. (2019) inextricably links trust and accountability. For change to occur educators must be trusted to fulfil their core duties in the absence of superficial monitoring and they must be active participants in inclusive and meaningful processes around optimising inherent quality according to Ehren et al (2019).

*Working towards transformative quality assurance*

All groups were overwhelmingly in favour of progressing to the 'Transformative' stage of development of quality assurance, characterised by innovation, active learning from the system, with meaningful inclusion and a sustainable culture. Recent research by Gill et al. (2022) concludes focusing on the process of education, as opposed to its outcomes is 'transformative quality' (Gill et al., 2022, p. 277). The principles of transformative quality and the transformative stage of development align with the prospective model of quality assurance as described by Biggs (2001). Most crucially, consistent conceptions of quality as 'transformative' have the potential to address the concerns of and meet the objectives of all

key stakeholders. Particularly those underrepresented and least autonomous in quality assurance, or teachers / assessors and learners (Gill et al., 2022).

### *Reviewing methods of evaluation of quality assurance*

Processes preferred by participants for the evaluation and review of quality assurance processes are integrative, inclusive of learners, inward-looking and must centre around a dedicated supportive environment. Prioritising these methods of evaluation does not inversely de-prioritise or devalue external methods of evaluation. With the marked growth of external stakeholders and increasing external demands on FE, there is potential to lose sight of the significance of internal stakeholders and their potential contribution to the field of knowledge in quality assurance. Collaborative and integrated methods of evaluation have the potential to legitimise internal stakeholder voices in FE concerning quality assurance.

Specific internal review practices identified as lacking include 'Evaluation of Teaching and Learning' and 'Internal Quality Audits'. These inward-looking review processes have powerful potential and align with the principles of transformative quality as described by Gill et al. (2022) and with the prospective model of quality assurance as described by Biggs (2001).

## *Diffusing Areas of Congruence: Implications for Practice*

Extant tensions were revealed when examining the perceived value placed by the different groups on the current approach and implementation of quality assurance in FE. Statistically significant differences in perceptions and experiences were discovered, and key areas of congruence emerged. The resultant analysis illuminates further potential for improvement in quality assurance implementation in FE.

The fundamental areas of statistical significance as listed in *'Table 5.1'* were experienced more positively by those more involved in quality assurance implementation and / or more negatively by those least involved in quality assurance implementation. Accounting for these fundamental areas demonstrating statistically significant differences, key areas of congruence and the resulting implications for practice are identified and discussed in the following section.

### *Need for collaboration to promote prospective quality assurance model*

Quality assurance timing or loading is a significant issue as a system perceived by the majority as end-loaded, as for this study, has the potential to be detrimental to innovation in teaching and learning (Biggs, 2001). However, variance did present in the findings, suggesting the same roles vary from centre to centre and perhaps even within centres, in terms of what stage of the academic year they are prominent and if they are deemed prospective. Structuring optimal opportunities for collaboration within and between centres would allow for best practices to be shared, building collegiality around quality assurance with the objective of scaffolding a prospective quality assurance model.

### *Equity of access to serve learner-centric quality assurance systems*

Inequity of access was observed concerning information, resources and supports related to quality assurance processes where those least involved in quality assurance cited least access. Equitable access is deemed integral to all participants' daily duties, regardless of roles assumed. The information, resources and supports perceived as least available to all groups are extraordinarily difficult to justify given the transformative potential of quality assurance and include 'Guidance on the relationship between QA and learner outcomes', 'Communities of practice in QA' and 'Guidance on the relationship between QA and

teaching and learning practices'. Priority must be given to forging equitable access to these lacking resources.

*Migration of purposes of assessment and quality assurance*

Findings revealed a fundamental malalignment between the current quality assurance system in FE and the essential work of participants. With a disparity of this magnitude identified, reconciling the opposing purposes cited must be prioritised. A pre-requisite to any migration of purposes should be an intentional acquisition of explicitly aligned objectives holding central learner outcomes submit Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006).

*Balancing autonomy around quality assurance*

Findings revealed increased level of involvement in quality assurance implementation was subsequently associated with increased feelings of autonomy concerning quality assurance, and the inverse was also found. Unless this disparity is addressed, only those most involved in quality assurance implementation will experience it as prospective. Key research from Wermke and Salokangas (2015) illustrates how, in educational settings the autonomy of one individual or group has consequences for that of others. Scrutinising where autonomy currently lies and where it should lie or be prioritised to optimise an authentically transformative quality assurance system in FE will prove challenging but necessary to preclude further inequity.

Those least involved with quality assurance implementation or teachers / assessors, cited quality assurance systems and processes as profoundly conflicting with teaching and learning and disconnected from teaching and learning and learner needs. These findings resulted from the open-ended questions and emerged concurrently with citations relating to a perceived lack of autonomy. It is fair to suggest any autonomy awarded to this group would

be directed to improving this perceived disconnect, and thus forge authentically integrated quality assurance processes.

*Dichotomy of external monitoring and quality teaching and learning*

Findings revealed the more involved a participant is with quality assurance implementation the more likely they are to have positive perceptions regarding quality assurance improving learner outcomes. Critically just 13% of teachers / assessors agreed quality assurances processes in FE in their current form improve learner outcomes. This is addressed in research by Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018) which outlines when overly dominant quality assurance systems are implemented which require participants to respond to external monitoring, educator motivations can depreciate as their core role of teaching and supporting learners is diluted.

Orientating methods of evaluation towards internal, inclusive, meaningful, integrated methods as outlined have the potential to legitimise underrepresented internal stakeholder voices in FE concerning quality assurance. Research by Robertson and Barber (2016) argues internal review processes should not be part of a compulsory external review, because when carried out in isolation internal review processes can be a powerful instrument for improvement. This is because external review processes that seek evidence external standards are simply met, may not be perceived as profoundly beneficial.

*Administrative burden of quality assurance*

Participants made many submissions citing quality assurance processes as a 'box ticking activity'. Concerning the potential impact of a quality assurance system perceived in this way, research by Stephenson (2004) concluded a quality assurance system that cultivates a tick box mentality, even unintentionally, can promote minimum thresholds of quality. Ensuring administrative tasks relating to quality assurance are meaningful is not a new

concept (Dittrich, 2019; Gaber et al. 2011; Seyfried and Pohlenz, 2018). However, this research firmly suggests those least involved in quality assurance implementation, or teachers / assessors are impacted most severely by the administrative burden of quality assurance. Therefore, this group would chiefly benefit from engaging in purposeful, immersive quality assurance tasks.

*Lack of inclusivity and receptivity of quality assurance*

'G1' and 'G2' participants expressed distinct discontent concerning the lack of inclusivity and receptivity of quality assurance processes and emanated strong advocations for the inclusion of the learner voice. Findings from a recent Swedish study by Lucander and Christersson (2020) found by involving teachers in the process of producing the documentation for quality assurance an important benefit was realised. Specifically, the development of an improved understanding of each other's roles, resulting in stronger collaboration and collegiality and ultimately, a more inclusive quality culture. To ensure success, any measure to improve inclusion must be negotiated, purposeful and be preceded by an increased receptivity and permeability of quality assurance systems and processes.

Concerning an integrated approach to quality assurance Winn and Green recommend key principles for quality in education. Concerning organisation leadership Winn and Green (1998, p. 26) assert ''Everyone at the university has a leadership role of some sort''. This is provocative as it has the potential to address issues around perceived lack of inclusivity and autonomy for those least involved in quality assurance implementation. Further submissions from Winn and Green on breaking down barriers states ''Encourage the forming of cross-function teams to address problems and process improvements. A team made up of faculty, staff and students will have a broader perspective in addressing issues than a more narrowly composed committee'' (Winn & Green, 1998, p. 27).

Continuing with the theme of inclusive quality assurance the strong advocations for the inclusion of learner voice cannot be ignored. Robertson and Barber (2016) argue from a learner perspective to truly measure programme quality, three essential elements set education within a community of inquiry must be investigated. These are termed: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. An overview of measuring programme quality by consulting the learner perspective as described by Robertson and Barber (2016) has been discussed in Chapter 2 and visualised in *'Figure 2.3'*.

Scaffolding legitimate inclusivity in quality assurance can pave the way to realising the authentic transformative potential of quality assurance. This position is evocative of a bottom-up, integrated approach to quality assurance.

### *Feedforward concerning quality assurance*

Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2017) advocate feedback is fundamental for educators own academic development. Analysis demonstrated for participants directly involved with and closest to assessment, data from quality assurance processes was deemed least likely to inform their practice compared to other groups. These findings suggest whilst quality assurance processes may generate extensive data, this data does not inform teaching and learning practices to the extent that teachers / assessors would expect. This position suggests resultant quality assurance data as a major force to improve teaching and learning, is generally overlooked. Quality assurance may be viewed principally as a unilateral judgement in this regard, with a secondary role of generating information that may hopefully be useful for teachers / assessors to inform practice.

To avoid this stark projection, quality assurance processes must have designated processes enabling the occurrence of data generation. Subsequently the data generated must be part of a resolute feedforward process directed at areas perceived as underrepresented.

This process must include promoting an emphasis on the building of capacity towards the application of feedforward and allow space for teachers / assessors to actualise resultant feedforward. Achieving sustainable quality assurance involves a devotion to the creation and integration of meaningful feedforward, but most crucially, it involves the building of capacity for all involved to make increasingly meaningful judgements.

## *Transformative Quality Assurance*

Reflecting on the findings from this research study the MMM-IEO model (QQI, 2018) can be commended as it bolstered the idea for grouping participants, which was extensively justified considering the significance of the research findings. However, the MMM-IEO model can also be criticised for its antecedence and immaturity. The model was employed to provide a framework for thinking about cause and effect at different levels in the context of educational policies and procedures (QQI, 2018) and to analyse the implementation of quality assurance processes in the FE context. However, it neglects to accommodate measures that would authentically precipitate a prospective, integrated approach to quality assurance that has the potential to amalgamate quality assurance practices and inherent quality.

Considering the collective, the proposal of the purposeful creation and integration of the 'Transformative' level of quality assurance implementation as an addendum to the MMM-IEO model is compelling. The transformative level of implementation is proposed to form the foundation on which the fundamental principle of continuous improvement can be harboured, and change can be realised through collaboration and reflection. In this reclaimed space, the scrutiny of the intersection between the espoused theories and principles of quality assurance held by those more involved, and the theory-in-action by those least involved but closest to learners and assessment, can begin. The transformative level is characterised by

being prospective, inclusive, integrative and permeable. By stimulating the conscientisation of actors in quality assurance implementation regarding the perceived impact of current systems and processes, it is envisaged change may be realised through praxis.

Integrated quality assurance structures, constructively and conceptually aligned and capable of generating meaningful feedforward, would serve to developing existing curricula, enhance teaching and learning and learner outcomes, maintain standards and promote the principles of authentic quality. High quality feedforward could have practical implications for academic development, in terms of supporting the institution to examine existing practices and provoke reflection on the relationship between these and optimal learner-centric approaches.

Another factor promoting the inclusion of the transformative level of implementation is the debate of tacit versus explicit practices and how this research study brought this to the fore. It is realised difficulties can arise in investigating perceptions and experiences of quality assurance systems, as often inherited practices are founded on tacit rather than explicit bases (QQI, 2018). This can make it more difficult to realise and understand one's own practices and evaluate them critically (QQI, 2018). The absence of critical evaluation may endanger the ability to realise change (QQI, 2018). Further contesting the notion of change, it is appreciated the adaptation of innovations in high stakes quality assurance procedures may carry more risk compared to innovations in any other area of education (Looney, 2009).

The MMM-IEO model to include the transformative level has been visualised in *'Figure 5.1'*. The inclusion of the transformative level is visually impactful as it resonates with a prospective, bottom-up model of quality assurance that consults with groups identified as underrepresented in this study, or teachers / assessors and learners, in a dedicated space.

To further reinforce this idea, a revised concentrically layered presentation of the model has also been visualised in *'Figure 5.1'*.

The concentric model was chosen as it demonstrates a relationship between the layers and implies the actions of each level implicate the next. As teaching, learning and assessment take place at the micro level, it is fair to suggest the consequence of quality assurance processes can be abundantly perceived by teachers / assessors and learners, as theory turns to practice. Placing the transformative level as the innermost layer is representative of the proposed centrality of learners and learning to quality assurance in FE. If the transformative layer was to be authentically realised it must be in a position to inform the approach currently perceived as retrospective, towards a more prospective approach. To depict this, directional arrows were added to '*Figure 5.1'* to represent optimal feedforward loops.

Ultimately the suggested feedforward loops would fully integrate the quality assurance system and equip it to achieve authentic transformative quality. It is envisaged teachers / assessors and learners inform the transformative level, capturing integral bottom-up feedforward. The resultant feedforward loops can be seen connecting the transformative level and the micro level, and the micro level to the macro level. Bringing the literature together, '*Figure 5.1'* was created as a visual aid to represent the optimal implementation of an integrated quality assurance system in a FE setting, capable of authentic transformative quality.

*Figure 5.1:* *'Representation of Optimal Implementation of an Integrated QA System in a FE Setting'.*

By implementing integrated quality assurance systems as outlined in **'Figure 5.1'** it is more likely the perceived shortfalls of current quality assurance systems in FE, as evidenced in this study, will be addressed. This inclusive quality assurance system has the potential to legitimise internal stakeholder voices in FE by consulting with groups identified as underrepresented in this study, or teachers / assessors and learners, resulting in a system that is impactful and owned with vigour.

Quality assurance systems should be designed to provide ample opportunities for faculty to reflect on their practice, but engagement of faculty in reflection processes are not necessarily common outputs of traditional quality assurance systems with mandated external reviews. Nonetheless, the appetite for conceptual alignment is palpable, principally from those less involved in quality assurance implementation. On conceptual alignment or practicing what you preach, Biggs (1996, p. 360) submits ''Faculties of education should not be advocating things for teachers or schools that they are not capable of practising themselves''.

### Research Limitations and Implications for Further Investigation

#### QQI Inaugural Review of QA in ETB's

It must be acknowledged many policies and procedures in motion reflect the evolving nature of quality assurance in FE. In early 2021, QQI began their landmark Inaugural Review of QA in ETB's in Ireland, the first of its kind. It is reasonable to say in anticipation of this review providers have already galvanised change, and subsequent change will be compelled following the review recommendations. This landmark period of propelled change is an important context in which to view this research, and it is recommended future research is carefully designed to capture the evolution of quality assurance policy and practice.

#### Further Integration and Inclusiveness of Research

At the time of drafting the survey applied for this study, it was very much aimed at those actors directly involved in quality assurance implementation, and the learner voice was not considered critical. Considering the proposed addition of the transformative level of implementation, which integrates learner voice, it is recommended for future research mechanisms be included that aim to capture and integrate learner experiences and perceptions of quality assurance implementation, in a way that is accessible and fitting.

#### Qualitative Research Methods

This research study employed a survey as the principal method of data collection. For future research the convening of a focus group or utilising participant interviews would maximise the potential to capture deeper and richer experiences of quality assurance implementation and may further promote validity. Finally, future research should focus on measures towards an integrated quality assurance system that is authentically transformative, and the impact this may have on the experiences and perceptions of those involved, but in

particular, those evidenced as underrepresented in quality assurance authority in FE, or teachers / assessors and learners.

## *Conclusion*

This research makes some key contributions and fills gaps in knowledge in this field. A distinct and measurable diversity of views depending on level of involvement in quality assurance implementation has been revealed. The extent to which this diversity exists and where this diversity exists has also been confirmed and supported with the application of statistical analysis. Viewpoints, perceptions and experiences reflecting each group depending on level of involvement have been discussed and existing tensions revealed. This research and the subsequent implications for practice demonstrates through discourse and reflection, a path to a stronger and shared understanding can be constructed. This path has the potential to positively impact the individual, the organisation, and the overarching impact of quality assurance in FE. Acknowledging there may be challenges, this research provides insights for an evidence-based approach towards an integrated, authentically transformative quality assurance system. According to Twomey (2021) quality assurance is positively integrated when the different role groups impacted by policy decisions are included in policy development.

The essential grouping of participants for this study is also a useful lens through which to reflect on one's own perceptions and experiences of quality assurance, and how these may be impacted by level of involvement. It was extensively encouraging participants persist to view Further Education as much more than a utility towards labour force mobility with a neoliberal agenda. Any FE institution should be cognisant of the conscious or unconscious dividing of staff groups that seemingly antagonise each other to the detriment of academic quality. Any FE institution referring to its staff as its greatest asset and subsequently yields no meaningful inclusion of these staff in its quality assurance processes

and systems must be prepared to recognise a disconnect between their rhetoric around quality assurance and their extant processes and systems. Concerning this position, the condition of disjuncture may provoke ''reflexive critique'' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 55) and this is viewed as a critical catalyst for the awakening of ''deeply buried corporeal dispositions'', and the subsequent transformation of habitus asserts Bourdieu (1998, p. 55).

This research study has proven internal stakeholders are well placed to understand the multi dimensions of quality assurance in FE, situated in context. Recent studies by Lucander and Christersson (2020) support this idea, where involving teaching staff in quality assurance has supported the development of authentic quality culture. A compelling perspective from Wermke and Salokangas (2015) is that authentic learner autonomy is the most desirable educational objective, but only possible if the teacher is also autonomous in their role. Further compounding this idea, international studies have demonstrated the way educators view and value quality assurance is dependent on the culture and climate in which they work. Usefulness of quality assurance for educators was dependent on strong relationships between all actors in implementation, highlighting again the significance of collaboration and collegiality (Aamodt et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, we must remain cognisant of the neoliberal managerialist philosophy of promoting constant change and action, even when that change and action serves no obvious fundamental objective. Reflecting and critiquing may not commonly sit well with neoliberal managerialism, yet it is paramount to academic culture. Hamalainen, Pehu-Voima and Wahlen (2001) assert evaluations do not have a value in themselves and are futile unless the process and findings leads to improvements in practice.

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# *Appendices*

## *Appendix A: Survey Design*

Below is '*Figure A.1*' showing a static image of the promotional email circulated inviting

participants to contribute to the survey.



**Research Survey Details**

Dear colleague,

*I would greatly appreciate your input for my research. This research is for my current studies as part of my Master of Arts in Educational Practice.*

**Please see the details below:**

You are being invited to participate in a Research Survey.

The study you are being invited to participate in aims to gain insights in to the implementation of Quality Assurance (QA) systems and processes in the FET Sector.

*You have been invited to participate in this study because you work in the FET Sector, have experience in assessment, and / or interact with QA processes as part of your role.*

This study is being undertaken by Rachel Donlon as part of a Master of Arts in Educational Practice in National College of Ireland. Your contribution will help address gaps in knowledge and advance understanding of QA implementation in the FET Sector.

Please allow 20 minutes to complete this survey.

You can access the survey by clicking on the link below;
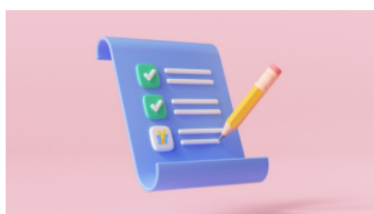
**Survey Link:** https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=UJXlIWT2TkKdiMXUjtqqI1DN-GHAiztFool_P-fxYDhUQVZXNkZCVVRVRjBEUUxKTlEzUUJJVEtaVi4u

Thank you in advance for giving your time and consideration to this survey.

**Figure A.1:** *'Static Image of Promotional Email'.*

**Click the link below to view the online survey:**

Survey Link**:**

**https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=UJXlIWT2TkKdiMXUjtqqI1DN**

**-GHAiztFool_P-fxYDhUQVZXNkZCVVRVRjBEUUxKTlEzUUJJVEtaVi4u**

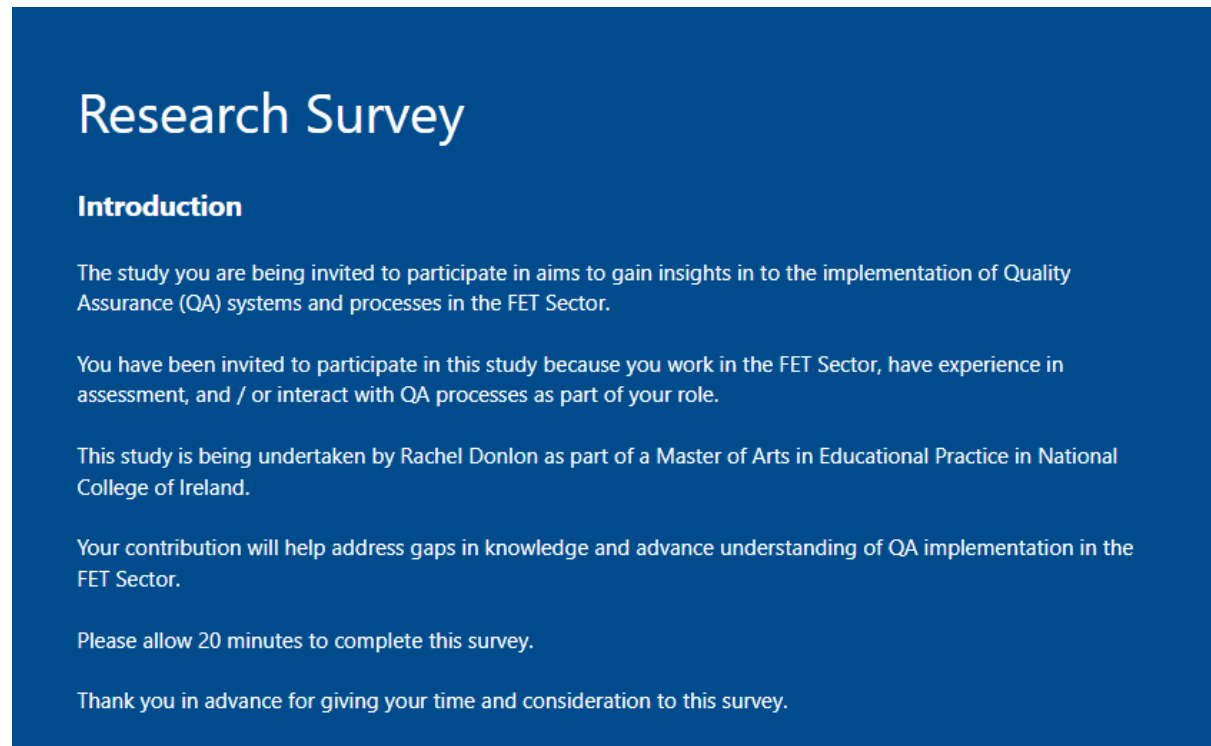Below is *'Figure A.2'* showing a static image of survey 'start' page.



*Figure A.2:* *'Static Image of Survey Start Page'.*

Below is *'Figure A.3'* showing static text extracted from the survey.

# Consent

Please read the below information carefully. By answering the associated questions, you will be confirming your consent to participate in this study.

## Research Study Information

### (i) RESEARCH STUDY THEME

The study you are being invited to participate in aims to gain insights in to the implementation of Quality Assurance (QA) systems and processes in the FET Sector.

This study is being undertaken by Rachel Donlon as part of a Master of Arts in Educational Practice in National College of Ireland.

### (ii) PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This study aims to address gaps in knowledge and advance understanding of the implementation of Quality Assurance (QA) systems and processes in the FET Sector.

### (iii) CONFIRMATION OF PARTICULAR REQUIREMENTS

Participants in this study will be asked to answer a series of questions by clicking the answers that are most appropriate to their practice. For some questions, there will also be the opportunity to provide the researcher with more information. The survey submissions will be anonymous . No personally identifiable data will be collected from participants as a result of answering this survey.

### (iv) VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participant involvement in this study is voluntary.

### (v) ARRANGEMENTS TO PROTECT THE CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA

No personal data will be collected via the questionnaire. Participant responses are anonymous and your identity is not visible to the researcher. All data held by the researcher will be stored securely and will be destroyed one year after research completion, anticipated September 2023.

1. Have you read the above consent information and do you consent to take part in this study? *

   ○ Yes

Next

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# About you

2. You have been invited to participate in this study because you work in FE, have experience in assessment, and / or interact with QA processes as part of your role. How long have you been employed in your organisation / sector? *

○ 1-5 years

○ 6-10 years

○ 11-15 years

○ 16-20 years

○ More than 20 years

3. Considering your organisation / sector, select the role(s) that you are currently involved with, or have fulfilled at least once in the past 5 years. Select all that apply.
   *

☐ Contributing to or creating QA Policy

☐ External Authentication (EA)

☐ Centre Management

☐ Head of QA

☐ QA Personnel (may be specific to an awarding body or a general QA role)

☐ Internal Verifier (IV) Internal Authenticator (IA)

☐ Teacher / Assessor

☐ Other

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|------|------|-------------|

# In this section you will answer questions based on your experience of Assessment and Quality Assurance in your organisation

4. Considering the assessment materials that you encounter in your practice, select the most prominent assessment method(s).
   *

   ○ LDA (Locally Devised Assessment – all assessment material is created by the assessor).

   ○ AIS (Assessment Instrument Specifications – all assessment material is provided to the assessor).

   ○ Both LDA and AIS.

5. To what extent do you agree with the statement below.
   *

   |  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
   |---|---|---|---|---|---|
   | In education, 'assessment methods and requirements probably have a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other factor'. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

6. In your opinion, what stage of the academic year are QA processes most prominent in your practice? Use the directional arrows to the right of the options to rank the options below. Place the stage that QA processes are most prominent in your practice at the top, and least prominent at the bottom. You also have the option to leave the options in the order presented. *

   End of the year - when final assessments are being completed / submitted.

   Mid year - when a number of assessments have taken place.

   Start of the year - when planning and preparation is taking place, and no assessments have taken place.

   Late in the year - when final assessments are being devised.

   Early in the year - when first assessments are taking place.

7. In your organisation, what information, resources and supports are accessible concerning QA processes? Please select all appropriate answers.
   *

☐ Job descriptions and role objectives of QA personnel in your organisation.

☐ Description of performance standards / criteria in relation to QA processes.

☐ Access to current policies and practices in QA.

☐ Detailed guide to implementation of QA processes.

☐ Access to feedback / feed-forward from QA processes.

☐ Staff training on QA processes.

☐ Communities of practice in QA.

☐ Guidance on the relationship between QA and learner outcomes.

☐ Guidance on the relationship between QA and teaching and learning practices.

☐ Other.

8. In your organisation what internal QA practices are applied consistently? Select all appropriate answers.
   *

☐ Internal Quality Audits.

☐ IV / IA (Internal Verification / Internal Authentication).

☐ Evaluation of Teaching and Learning.

☐ Cross Moderation – comparing learner evidence submitted to one assessor to evidence submitted to a different assessor for the same assessment, and comparing grading and feedback for the assessments.

☐ Teacher / Assessor Self-Evaluation.

☐ Other.

9. Considering the purposes of assessment, indicate to what extent you agree each one is important to address in your practice. Use the directional arrows to rank the options - placing the most important at the top and least important at the bottom. You also have the option to leave the options in the order presented.
*

Quality Assurance – assessing to provide the evidence required for QA processes.

Certification – assessing to provide the means to discriminate between different levels of achievement, and to discriminate between students for awarding purposes.

Assessment AS Learning – assessing so students can primarily learn by doing assessments that allow them to critically evaluate their own work, to monitor their own learning and make changes accordingly to promote lifelong learning skills. These assessments are usually more informal in nature.

Assessment FOR Learning – assessing to generate discussion and feedback on the quality of students work, to promote further learning and development. These assessments can be formal and informal in nature, and they also provide valuable information that can steer teaching.

Assessment OF Learning – assessing so students can demonstrate learning that can be judged.

10. In your opinion, what purposes of assessment do the QA processes in your organisation prioritise? Use the directional arrows to rank the options - placing the option mostly prioritised at the top and least prioritised at the bottom. You also have the option to leave the options in the order presented.
*

Certification - assessing to provide the means to discriminate between different levels of achievement, and to discriminate between students for awarding purposes.

Assessment AS Learning - assessing so students can primarily learn by doing assessments that allow them to critically evaluate their own work, to monitor their own learning and make changes accordingly to promote lifelong learning skills. These assessments are usually more informal in nature.

Assessment FOR Learning - assessing to generate discussion and feedback on the quality of students work, to promote further learning and development. These assessments can be formal and informal in nature, and they also provide valuable information that can steer teaching.

Quality Assurance - assessing to provide the evidence required for QA processes.

Assessment OF Learning - assessing so students can demonstrate learning that can be judged.

11. In your opinion, what are the influences that shape current QA systems and processes in your organisation? Use the directional arrows to rank the options - placing the strongest influence at the top and the least at the bottom. You also have the option to leave the options in the order presented.
   *

   Organisation management / organisation leadership.

   Internal QA policy and Internal Authentication requirements.

   External QA Policy and External Authentication requirements.

   Learner outcomes and needs of the learner.

   Teaching and learning requirements.

12. In your opinion, which statement most adequately describes the approach of QA processes in your organisation.
   *

   ○ A compliance approach - with standardisation being reinforced, focusing on accountability.

   ○ A resistance approach - which hinders innovation by imposing standards without allowing space for creating genuine organisational culture of quality and self-improvement.

   ○ A convergence approach - which recognises the benefits of QA and the risks of standardisation. Practices consistently develop and mature, practices are analysed and refined on reflection. Innovation is fostered with a genuine, supportive organisational culture of quality and self-improvement.

13. In your opinion, what statement most adequately describes the stage of development of QA processes in your organisation.
   *

   ○ Compliance stage – conformed to and completed regularly.

   ○ Verification and standardisation stage - focusing on accountability.

   ○ Self-regulation stage – understanding behaviours and impacts of QA processes.

   ○ Transformative stage – innovation is prominent, actively learning from the system, actively addressing gaps in QA and creating a meaningful system, with the aim to reach a sustainable quality culture.

14. To what extent do you agree with the statement below. *

| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 'QA processes in your organisation are open to adaptation, development and innovation'. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

15. To what extent do you agree with the statement below.
*

| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 'Current QA processes in your organisation improves outcomes for learners'. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

16. To what extent do you agree with the statement below.
*  ▭

| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 'Data generated from QA processes / feed-forward from QA processes informs your practice'. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

17. Using the chart below indicate what way, in your opinion, QA systems and processes in your organisation impact your practice.
*  ▭

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

Very Negatively                                                                                      Very Positively

18. In a few words, please state the main way you feel current QA systems and processes in your organisation have impacted your practice? *

Enter your answer

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# In this section you will answer questions on the future direction of Assessment and Quality Assurance in your organisation

19. Research indicates that an alignment must exist between assessment methods, teaching methods, teaching activities, and intended learning outcomes in an effective educational programme. In relation to this, please indicate the extent that you agree with the statement below.
   *

|  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 'Working on achieving this alignment should be a focus of the QA processes in my organisation'. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

20. In your organisation, what stage of development would you like to see QA processes move towards? *

   ○ Compliance stage – conformed to and completed regularly.

   ○ Verification and standardisation stage - focusing on accountability.

   ○ Self-regulation stage – understanding behaviours and impacts of QA processes.

   ○ Transformative stage – innovation is prominent, actively learning from the system, actively addressing gaps in QA and creating a meaningful system, with the aim to reach a sustainable quality culture.

21. Considering how QA processes are evaluated in your organisation, indicate the extent you agree each of the following actions should be prioritised.
*

|  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Structured self-evaluations for teachers / assessors. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Internal centre-led audits with follow up action points. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| External audits with follow up action points. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Developing communities of practice in the area of assessment and QA to generate action points. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Encouraging learner evaluation of assessment processes to generate action points. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

22. In terms of reviewing the elements of QA processes in your organisation, indicate the extent you agree each of the following elements should be prioritised.
*

|  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Learning resources and learning support services for students. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Assessment materials, methods and processes. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teaching and learning. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Communities of practice in the area of assessment and QA. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Communication around QA processes. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

23. Using the chart below, indicate to what extent are you likely to support CPD in the area of assessment and QA processes in your organisation with a view to enhancing the culture of quality? *

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

Not at all likely                                                                                          Extremely likely

24. Please feel free to share any thoughts you have concerning assessment and QA processes as a result of taking this survey.
    *

    Enter your answer

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|------|--------|-------------|

*Figure A.3:* *'Static Text Extracted from Survey'.*