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## **Exploring the social practice of programme board level self-evaluation and its contribution to Academic Quality Assurance**

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### **Abstract**

This research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the contribution of programme board collective self-evaluative practice within Academic Quality Assurance. It explored self-evaluative practice as experienced and perceived by academic staff who participated in the process of quinquennial programme re-validation (sometimes known as ‘programmatic review’) in a number of disciplinary areas in one Irish Institute of Technology. The data-set was collected in 2014. A programme board’s self-evaluation report should be a collectively produced document that forms the basis for subsequent external peer review and is the foundation document for assuring the quality of programmes and building stakeholder confidence. The author considers that it is what people *do* that counts and a sociocultural perspective was taken. The social practice of self-evaluation was explored by focusing on the experiences of those involved and by seeking to understand their accounts of what happened in the name of the practice; this is the unit of analysis. The research identifies with the social constructivist paradigm accepting the notion of multiple constructed subjective realities. The purposes of the research was to understand more deeply how academic staff experience the social practice of evaluating programmes of study and to explore its contribution to Academic Quality Assurance. The research suggests that staff believe assuring the quality of programmes of higher education is very important but a variety of quality cultures exist amongst staff. Respondents’ experiences of recent self-evaluative practice indicate that it was outcomes focussed rather than process focussed, there was little or no active participation

by many staff and the self-evaluation was conducted by small groups, the self-evaluation reports could have been more reflective, and many participants had partial or no knowledge of institutional expectations. The project also highlighted some differences in perceptions of self-evaluative practice between staff groups based on their years of teaching experience. It is recommended that Higher Education Institutions, and programme boards, review how they practice self-evaluation and redesign how the quality of their programmes of study are assured and enhanced.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Quality Assurance, Quality Enhancement, Self-Evaluation, Social Practice

## Introduction

It is accepted international good practice that quality assurance (QA) procedures include self-evaluation, followed by review by persons who are competent to make national and international comparisons (ENQA 2009; IHEQN 2005; QQI 2014). The ‘self’ is the team of academic staff that delivered a course or programme of study over the previous five years and ‘self-evaluation’ is the collective reflective activity that results in a meso-level<sup>1</sup> report, often called a self-evaluation report (SER), of the staffs’ judgments for the consideration of external peers that visit the college to review the programme.

Self-evaluation is an irregular activity within the constellation of academic social practices (including teaching, assessment, research, administration). It takes place periodically so is more of an evaluative ‘moment’ than other social practices. Self-evaluation means different things to different people best understood by the four different motivations offered by Sedikedes & Strube (1997): self-enhancement, self-verification, self-assessment and self-improvement. At the core of self-evaluation, whatever the motivation, lies an ability to critically think which can be defined as “a capacity to work with complex ideas whereby a person can make effective provision of evidence to justify a reasonable judgment” (Moon, 2005, p.12). Making judgements and interpreting data is dependent on the instruments that are present in the local context (Denvall, 2009). The programmatic review process is the most important QA event for any programme of study and makes use of two instruments: self-evaluation and the peer review visit. The latter is highly dependent on the former which must be “analytical and reflective; identify strengths, areas for improvements, opportunities and constraints; and be concise and to the point” (IHEQN, 2005). In an examination of Norwegian QA practice Langfeldt *et al.* (2010, p. 403) found that “*the primary task of the*

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘meso’ level refers to the level of the small group. The ‘macro’ level deals with the sectoral or institutional level and the ‘micro’ level deals with the level of the individual.

*panels [external peer panels] seems to relate to an analysis of the evidence collected from the institutions. The SER creates the initial impression of the programme with external peers, influences the agenda for their site visit and is central to the dialogue with staff during the visit.”*

Finlay believes that “done well and effectively, reflective practice can be an enormously powerful tool to examine and transform practice” (2008, p.10). However, there are concerns over academics’ authority and competence to self-regulate. QA literature is peppered with language like “game playing” (Newby, 1999:263), “vener” (James & McInnis, 1997, p.110), “masquerade” (Newton, 2010, p.52), “compliance” (Harvey, 1997, p.136; Newby, 1999, p.263), “performativity” (Rowlands, 2012), quality as a “colonising force” (Skelton, 2012, p.794), “impression management” (Newton, 2000, p.156; Newton, 2002, p.39) and “façade” (Jibladze, 2013, p.343) raising concerns about not only the value of the QA activities themselves but those tasked with participating in them. Stoddart<sup>2</sup> observed that “the question is not ‘whether higher education should be subject to evaluation and assessment’, it has always been, but rather ‘who should do it?’” (Brown, 2004:, p.x). Laffan<sup>3</sup> considers Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ireland are ‘patchy’ on assessment of quality” (Ahlstrom, 2013, p.12). This research explores the perceived effectiveness of meso-level self-evaluative practice and its contribution to assuring and enhancing the quality of programmes of higher education (HE).

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<sup>2</sup> John Stoddart was Chairman of the Higher Education Quality Council in the UK.

<sup>3</sup> Professor Laffan spent 35 years in the Irish academic system. In 2013 she was appointed as new director of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, Florence. The referenced comment is from a speech she gave at the MacGill Summer School (a popular August think tank attended by policy makers and ‘off duty’ politicians) in 2013.

## Literature Review

There is much literature on macro level issues and in particular on the ineffectiveness of QA as a tool for achieving lasting quality improvements (Askling, 1997; Gosling & D’Andrea, 2001; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Horsburgh, 1999; Houston & Paewai, 2013; Jarvis, 2014; Kristensen, 1997; Newton, 2000; Raban, 2014; Shah, 2013; Singh, 2010; Skelton, 2012).

Some authors examine different definitions of quality in HE (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey, 1997;), quality culture (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Newby, 1999), the difficulties of enhancing quality in HEIs (Baird & Gordon, 2009; James & McInnis, 1997; Newton, 2010), individual academics’ perceptions of the value of quality audit (Cheng, 2011), the role of academic council<sup>4</sup> (Rowlands, 2012; Rowlands, 2013), effective external QA (Brennan & Shah, 1997; Cheung & Tsui, 2010), effective peer review (Gielen *et al.*, 2011) and distrust of academics and HEIs to self-regulate (Raban, 2014). Some literature does discuss self-evaluative practice in a primary school and post-primary school context where some countries require annual audit type reviews of schools (O’Brien *et al.*, 2014; O’Brien *et al.*, 2015; Vanhoof *et al.*, 2009), but within the scope of this study, little work has been uncovered on self-evaluation in a HE context (Zou *et al.*, 2012).

Some research has shown that self-evaluations are of intrinsic value and create “an arena for communication” where problems can be openly discussed; that *“it is the internal processes that grow up in parallel to external monitoring, or as a direct consequence of external monitoring, that have the most impact”* (Harvey, 1997, p.135). Weiss believes that aside from the evaluation findings it is hoped that participating in the evaluation will help staff *“to remember why they are doing this job, and it can reinvigorate their practice”* (1998, p. 25).

Bamber, in Saunders *et al.* (2011, p.194), writes that “self-evaluative practices can provide a

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<sup>4</sup> In Ireland the Academic Council is an institutional board consisting of academics (elected) and managers (ex officio) who are responsible for academic issues in the HEI. Most HEIs have an academic council but it may have a different name in other jurisdictions; in Australia they are called Academic Boards for example.

fertile seeding ground for changes reaching far beyond the evaluation itself and unintended (but desirable) consequences can ensue from thoughtfully designed catalysts”. However, many staff participate minimally in it, are arguably unaware of its importance and simply view it as a tick-boxing exercise rather than a developmental opportunity. Harvey & Stensaker (2008) argue that whilst QA rules and procedures are laid down by Institutions the evidence suggests that there is still a lack of staff attachment and active involvement in the processes. Ball (2003, p.220) questions if we understand why we are self-evaluating and argues that “we become uncertain about the reason for actions. Are we doing this because it is important, because we believe in it, because it is worthwhile?”

HEI’s Codes of Practice aspire to involve the active participation of all academic staff involved in the delivery of the programme and it is common practice to give detailed guidance to staff on the composition of a SER. However, Barnett (1992, p.119) warns that “a single minded-check-list approach to safeguarding quality is misguided, ineffective and pernicious”. Whilst he recognises that lists or guidelines can be useful aides-memoires and can help to establish a reasonable level of uniformity across a single institution “*it is easy for the assumption to develop that the procedures in themselves are indications of quality*” (1992, p.120). The assumption in self-evaluation is that all staff will participate in creating a report but Bamber (2011, p.196) correctly identifies that agency is not straightforward in self-evaluations and that whilst it can be seen as “*an antidote to top-down evaluative practices*” the evaluation is still being done *to* the academics concerned - even if they turned out to be willing collaborators. Not then, as Bamber points out, a straightforward case of self-evaluation.

Trowler identifies that the social reality in HEIs can be “difficult” (1998, p.158) and he recommends a ‘policy scholarship’ approach, as opposed to a ‘policy science’ approach, placing emphasis on understanding the organisational culture if we are to try and understand what is taking place. Harvey & Stensaker (2008) used cultural theory to identify four ideal types of quality cultures in HEIs (see Figure 1). Cultural theory suggests that there are only two dimensions that are of importance in understanding an individual’s involvement in social life: the extent to which an individual’s behaviour is group controlled and the extent to which an individual’s behaviour is prescribed by external rules and regulations.

		Degree of group-control	
		Strong	Weak
Intensity of external rules	Strong	Responsive	Reactive
	Weak	Regenerative	Reproductive

**Figure 1: ‘Quality Culture’ in a ‘Cultural Theory’ framework  
(Harvey & Stensaker, 2008, p.436)**

- Responsive Quality Cultures - organisations with an improvement agenda seeking to take opportunities and maximise benefits from engagement with policies or requirements [Strong Group Control, Strong external rules]
- Reactive Quality Cultures - organisations that are reluctant to embrace most forms of quality evaluation and do so only when complied to; quality seen as a beast to feed (Newton, 2000) [Weak Group Control, Strong external rules]
- Regenerative Quality Cultures - encompasses a learning-organisation approach, seeking out learning opportunities and generating space for reflective review [Strong Group Control, Weak external rules]

- Reproductive Quality Cultures - culture is limited by the expertise and individual aspirations of members focusing on reproducing what individuals or individual departments do best [Weak Group Control, Weak external rules]

Knowledge is not what is written in a document or what those in authority say knowledge is, rather knowledge is what happens in reality, what is enacted by people/agents. “It is what people *do* that counts” (Saunders *et al.*, 2011, p.208). Documents may detail good practice, they may be accepted as fit for purpose and they are part of the participant’s context.

However, the reality comes from how the practice is enacted by those who are tasked with enacting it. This project will enable me to explore the quality culture(s) in one Irish Institute of Technology (IoT) through engaging with those involved in *doing* self-evaluations in the organisation.

## **Context**

The HE system in Ireland has gone through a number of significant changes in the last two decades including inter alia the abolition of undergraduate tuition fees in 1996 (Department of Education, 1995, p.107), implementation of the Bologna Process, a Governmental drive to create a knowledge economy through growing the HE sector including widening participation (Sursock, 2015), more college places (HEA Statistics, 2015) and increased numbers of staff and students. The QA of this increased HE provision was legislated for (Qualifications Act 1999) and monitored by a number of state funded quality assurance agencies. These macro level changes fundamentally altered the work experience for academic staff who found themselves working in bigger Colleges, in larger or new Departments with larger numbers of new colleagues; many of which are not full time lecturers. For many courses in the IoT

sector the Leaving Certificate<sup>5</sup> attainments, or ‘Points’, of the school leaver entering their courses fell as an expanding university sector and new private HE providers attracted more of the higher achieving school leavers creating new work challenges for staff including concern about falling standards (Keena, 2014), retention of students<sup>6</sup>, and pressure to attract more school leavers through redesigning current programmes and designing new programmes<sup>7</sup>. The level of quality monitoring increased too as state agencies introduced policies and procedures which created additional administration for colleges and staff such as external examiner protocols (QQI, 2015). More recently, the economic recession triggered reductions in funding for HE and higher levels of youth unemployment causing increased pressures for more college enrolments to finance college operations and positively impact youth unemployment rates (Sursock, 2015), and the Minister for Education has issued a long term plan that proposes creating a new type of “Technological University” based on geographical clusters and mergers (HEA, 2011). New legislation, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, has merged the number of state funded HE agencies into one new national quality agency and has introduced a switch in focus from quality assurance to quality enhancement (QE). Increasing numbers of graduates have emigrated, retiring staff have not been replaced, and staff’s terms and conditions have been altered including reduced pay and increased teaching hours. Academic staff dissatisfaction culminated in the commencement of strike action in February 2016. Meanwhile it has been a boom time for the “Quality Industry” (Newton, 2000) with an increase in the numbers of new programmes to be accredited, ongoing monitoring of approved programmes, a busy schedule of quinquennial programme re-validations (formerly programmatic reviews) as well as

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<sup>5</sup> The ‘Leaving Certificate’ is the Irish equivalent to the UK’s ‘A’ Levels. They are state examinations completed by students after their final year in secondary school. Results are converted into ‘Points’ and these are used by HEIs to control the numbers of enrolments for third level programmes of study. For example, a prospective Medical student may need 550 points and an Arts student may need 450.

<sup>6</sup> In 2013/14 an average of 11% did not progress beyond first year in Irish Universities (O’Sullivan, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> There were 1,415 different programmes of study available to students in 2015 (Walshe, 2015).

Departmental, School and Institutional Reviews. It is clear that there has been and will be an increase in the numbers of self-evaluations and academic staff will be spending more time completing this social practice than heretofore so it is opportune to explore the experiences of self-evaluative practice at this time. Additionally, recent changes at European level provide an opportunity for HEIs to re-examine its QA/QE efforts.

The European Standards and Guidelines for QA in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were revised and republished in 2015 reflecting a paradigm shift towards student-centred learning and teaching. The revised ESG recognise “stakeholders, who may prioritise different purposes, can view quality in higher education differently and quality assurance needs to take into account these different perspectives” and ensure “a learning environment in which the content of programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpose” (ENQA, 2015, p.5). The previous ESG suggested that good QA practice would include periodic external review of programmes making use of a “self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review” (ENQA, 2009, p.21). However, the ESG 2015 is less prescriptive encouraging HEIs to be more flexible in their programme designs, more student-centred, and presenting new guidelines for cyclical external QA. The frequency of external QA is not prescribed and HEIs can provide the basis for the external quality assurance through “a self-assessment **or** [author’s bolding] by collecting other material including supporting evidence” (ENQA, 2015, p.14). These changes towards a more devolved and flexible model of QA/QE align with Kristensen’s view that “higher education institutions within the EHEA have to improve and take the initiative and the lead within quality assurance and quality enhancement” (2010, p.156) and Amaral & Rosa’s belief that responsibility for quality enhancement would be ‘repatriated’ back to HEIs “endorsing a flexible, negotiated model of evaluation that by definition is non-mandatory, and is shaped by

those participating in the acts of teaching and learning” (2014, p.241). ESG 2015 gives more control to HEIs in the EHEA over their QA/QE processes.

In Ireland, the Qualifications Act (2012) established a new Quality Authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), who are required to advise the Minister for Education on quality assurance (QA) and, for the first time, quality enhancement (QE). This new focus would suggest new or revised practices may be required, particularly if the contribution of the current practices is questionable.

This paper’s specific audience are those that are involved in quality assurance processes and are in a position to change how things are currently done including academic staff, academic managers, and members of Academic Council. The paper is both relevant and timely as it explores what people have done in the recent past and can inform HEIs and their staff as they review and redesign their QA processes and practices<sup>8</sup>.

## **Methodology**

This project explores “*what people [academics on the programme board] do, what they value, and what meanings they ascribe*” to the activity of collective self-evaluation (Saunders *et al.*, 2011, p.2). What people do can be termed practice and practice is a key aspect of sociocultural theory. In this paper, a sociocultural perspective is adopted (Trowler, 2008; Saunders *et al.*, 2011) and the social practice of self-evaluation is explored through the surveyed experiences and perceptions of those involved and with the intention of seeking to understand their accounts of what happened in the name of the practice. The epistemological view underpinning this work is that there are multiple constructed subjective realities, which

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<sup>8</sup>In 2015/2016 QQI is developing guidelines and policies on QA and Validation which will then be adapted and adopted by individual providers.

are detailed in the individual's experiences of a particular phenomenon. Choosing an interpretivist paradigm does raise issues about the generalisability of findings, and the subjectivity of both research participants and myself. As the research will not be positivist, it is recognised and accepted that the generalisability of the findings is affected.

The metaphor of the implementation staircase (Saunders, 2006) suggests that the experience of the self-evaluation instrument depends on the stair that you are viewing from. For example, the Academic Council's perception of how effectively self-evaluations are being completed and used may be different to the perceptions of the academic managers or the individual staff themselves. This project will focus on some of the local adapters of knowledge and seeks to give voice to some of the stakeholders and their values and "beliefs about the world" (House, 2006, p.121). Rather than being "*passive role players who simply enact cultural norms and values*", staff have the opportunity to be "*actively involved*" in the creation of new cultural norms and values (Trowler, 1998, p.153). Understanding more about the experiences of assuring quality can inform and improve the design of social practices by identifying areas for improvement and highlighting areas that currently work well, and giving staff a voice by involving them in a participatory qualitative inquiry.

### **Profile of Respondents**

The survey questions were developed through an emergent participative approach after consideration of the literature and draft questions were piloted with colleagues who suggested amendments. All of the respondents work in the same Irish Institute of Technology given the pseudonym "Emerald College" in this paper. Respondents could choose more than one option in most of the 68 questions asked and Likert scales were used to allow respondents to

indicate how strongly they felt about statements. Some questions were reversed and repeated in other sections of the survey to facilitate cross checking.

A total of 118 responses were received from staff. 108 respondents had participated in programme revalidation review in the previous six months and were included in the dataset. This indicates a response rate of 35% of the total academic staff<sup>9</sup> was achieved. Whilst this is considered satisfactory not all respondents answered all questions so the extent to which definitive conclusions can be drawn is limited by the response rate.

**Table 1: Respondent's experience of programmatic reviews in Emerald College**

<b>Response Rate</b>	<b>Participation in Programmatic Reviews (5 year cycle)</b>
1%	No experience
21%	One cycle
36%	Two cycles
42%	Three or more cycles

Programmatic Reviews take place every five years and the most recent one had taken place less than 12 months from the date of the survey. I was interested in exploring if the experience of staff who had participated in multiple iterations of reviews was different to those that had participated in one or two reviews. Table 1 shows that 21% of respondents have participated in programme level self-evaluation in Emerald College only once and I have labelled this group of respondents the 'least experienced'. 36% of respondents have participated in two cycles of self-evaluation and I have labelled them as those with 'some experience'. 42% have experienced more than two self-evaluations and I have labelled this group of respondents the 'most experienced'. Some staff may have participated in self evaluations in other colleges before joining Emerald College or may have participated as

<sup>9</sup> There is no national, sectoral or institutional average response rate. A response rate of 100 is satisfactory for marginally acceptable accuracy and I am 95% certain of +/- 10% accuracy in the survey results.

peers in the review of programmes of study elsewhere. However, this survey required participants to focus on their experience of the process in Emerald College alone.

Each programme of study has its own quality assurance board, called the ‘programme board’, consisting of all the lecturing staff who teach on the programme, student representatives, the programme’s Head of Department and the Head of School. Departments are sub units of Schools, each with its own manager, or ‘Head’. The Head of School is a senior manager and a member of the Executive management team of the College. There is usually more than one Department in a School and Heads of Department answer to Heads of School. Guidelines and procedures for QA, including the composition of programme boards, is established by the College’s Academic Council.

**Table 2: Respondents’ membership of programme boards**

No. of programme boards you were a member of	Response Percent	Least experienced	Some experience	Most experienced	Total Responses
0	0%	0	0	0	0
1	20%	7	7	7	21
2	31%	7	11	15	33
3	18%	3	8	7	18
4	13%	3	5	6	14
5 or more	18%	3	7	9	19
Total	-	27	38	44	105

Staff may participate on a number of boards in a range of Departments and Schools working with a large and diverse range of colleagues. Table 2 shows that all respondents were members on at least one programme board. 80% were members of 2 boards or more and 49% were members of three boards or more so respondents’ experience of self-evaluation is informed by participation on multiple programme boards. By design the survey did not seek information on the academic unit of the programmes. This was considered at the design stage

and it was felt that as I was collecting data in only one college the response rate might be reduced if respondents felt that their unit might be identifiable from the results. Programme boards are small groupings in the main so, whilst there may be value in identifying the academic unit of the programme boards, this was excluded from the survey. 82 programmes were reviewed in the period and the respondents included 38% of the programme chairs and 58% of the Heads of Department. The respondents' 'roles' included Heads of School, Heads of Department and lecturing staff. The roles of 'Chair' and 'Secretary' were established in the College's Code of Practice by the Academic Council. Both are members of the lecturing staff on a programme board and are chosen by the programme board to fulfil those roles. The survey was carried out in 2014.

## **Findings**

### ***Assuring the quality of HE programmes of study***

Respondents were asked to indicate how important they felt quality assuring programmes of study was to each of ten listed stakeholders and Table 3 clearly shows that respondents agree that quality assuring programmes of higher education is important. The results also show that 100% of least experienced staff agreed that quality assuring programmes was important to six of the ten stakeholders listed. The largest differences between the least experienced and most experienced staff groupings are in their perceptions of how important quality assuring programmes is to their institution and to their lecturing colleagues. 100% of the least experienced respondents believe that their Institution considers that assuring programmes of study is important and 83% of the most experienced staff share this perception. 84% of the least experienced staff believe that their lecturing colleagues consider quality assuring programmes is important whereas 97% of the most experienced staff believe their lecturing colleagues view QA as being important.

**Table 3: The importance of assuring the quality of HE programmes of study to different stakeholders**

Stakeholder	Overall	Least experienced	Some experience	Most experienced
The wider public	96%	100%	97%	93%
Your Institution	91%	100%	97%	83%
Your Department	93%	95%	97%	90%
Your lecturing colleagues	94%	84%	97%	97%
Your profession	91%	90%	97%	88%
Your graduates	94%	100%	97%	90%
Your students	98%	100%	97%	96%
Your potential students	96%	95%	97%	95%
Employers	97%	100%	97%	95%
You	97%	100%	97%	95%

***Lack of 'active' involvement by many stakeholders in the process***

Respondents were asked to indicate how actively involved they perceived different stakeholders were in the self-evaluation. The most active participants were the programme chairs and secretaries, the Head of Department responsible for the programme and the respondent themselves. 52% of respondents indicated that they held one of these roles and I wanted to see if there was any difference between those that had an assigned role and those that did not. Table 4 shows the responses of HOD, Chairs and Secretaries and Table 5 shows the responses of those that had no specific role.

**Table 4: Stakeholder participation as perceived by those with specific roles (Chair, Secretary and Head of Department)**

Stakeholder	No. Responses	Very Involved	Partially Involved	Little or no involvement
HOS	39	36%	33%	31%
HOD	41	63%	12%	24%
Chair	41	95%	5%	0%
Secretary	35	63%	20%	17%

All Lecturers	34	29%	53%	18%
Some Lecturers	30	30%	60%	10%
Students	40	23%	45%	33%
Graduates	39	18%	59%	23%
Employers	39	18%	51%	31%
Professional Bodies	36	19%	36%	44%
Respondent	38	97%	3%	0%

Both Tables identify that students, graduates, employers and professional bodies had slight involvement in the reviews. However, the largest perceived difference regards the active involvement of lecturers. Both groups agreed that there was lecturer participation in the process but 41% of the group without roles agreed or strongly agreed that some lecturers had little or no involvement. The group with roles perceived that only 10% had little or no involvement.

**Table 5: Stakeholder participation as perceived by those without specific roles**

Stakeholder	No. Responses	Very Involved	Partially Involved	Little or no involvement
HOS	41	27%	29%	44%
HOD	42	45%	31%	24%
Chair	40	80%	13%	8%
Secretary	37	62%	22%	16%
All Lecturers	31	26%	64%	10%
Some Lecturers	27	26%	33%	41%
Students	42	10%	52%	38%
Graduates	37	14%	49%	38%
Employers	37	16%	51%	32%
Professional Bodies	36	11%	42%	47%
Respondent	39	69%	26%	5%

Table 6 presents the perceptions of staff based on their years of experience. It reinforces the earlier observation that the programme chair was most involved followed by the Secretary

and HOD. 45% of the most experienced respondents perceived that external stakeholders had little or no involvement compared to 23% of the least experienced respondents. The role of Chair is perceived to be the role which has the highest level of involvement.

**Table 6: Stakeholder participation as perceived by respondent group**

Respondent group	Least experienced			Some experience			Most experienced		
	High	Medium	Low	High	Medium	Low	High	Medium	Low
HOS	29%	52%	19%	32%	26%	42%	36%	25%	39%
HOD	52%	29%	19%	45%	27%	27%	58%	24%	18%
Chair	86%	10%	5%	83%	13%	3%	92%	5%	3%
Secretary	63%	25%	13%	50%	32%	18%	65%	15%	21%
All Lecturers	12%	71%	18%	28%	64%	8%	31%	55%	14%
Some lecturers	44%	13%	44%	15%	50%	35%	53%	47%	0%
Externals <sup>10</sup>	21%	56%	23%	15%	48%	37%	13%	42%	45%
Respondent	84%	16%	0%	82%	11%	7%	79%	21%	0%

Legend: High = Very involved, Medium = Partially involved, Low = Little or no involvement

A difference between the perceived involvement of lecturers is noted. When asked to reflect on the participation of ‘some’ lecturers the most experienced group’s responses indicate that all lecturing staff were either very or partially involved. However, this view is not shared by 44% of the least experienced staff who perceived that some lecturers had little or no involvement in the process.

### *Need for increased reflection and familiarity in self-evaluation reports*

Table 7 shows that 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the self-evaluation reports were analytical and reflective. 71% agreed or strongly agreed that the programme boards took the opportunity to ‘take a good hard look’ at their programmes. However, 36%

<sup>10</sup> Externals includes the data for Students, Graduates, Employers and Professional Bodies.

of respondents were disappointed that their teams did not reflect more deeply with over half (56%) of the least experienced staff being disappointed.

**Table 7: Perceived level of reflection**

<b>Level of Experience</b>	<b>I was disappointed that we did not reflect more deeply</b>	<b>The self-evaluation reports for my programmes were analytical and reflective</b>	<b>I think we took the opportunity to take a good hard look at our programmes</b>
Least experienced	56%	68%	68%
Some experience	25%	78%	68%
Most experience	37%	74%	74%
Average	36%	73%	71%

Analysis by group role shows that the HOD/Chairs/Sec group, the primary actors in the production of the SER, are more confident about the quality of the self-evaluation reports.

Despite an Academic Council approved set of self-evaluation guidelines and a template, Table 8 shows that less than half of the respondents (47%) indicated they were familiar with the College's guidelines on self-evaluation. 50% indicated they did not know what they were trying to achieve and what they were supposed to do. Further analysis shows that only 37% of Programme Chairs, Programme Secretaries and Heads of Department admitted being familiar with the College's guidelines on self-evaluation.

**Table 8: Familiarity with what was required to be done**

<b>No. of years teaching in Emerald College</b>	<b>I am familiar with the College's guidelines on self-evaluation</b>	<b>We knew exactly what we wanted to achieve and what we were supposed to do</b>	<b>I was happy with how we went about our self-evaluations</b>
Least experienced	50%	47%	59%
Some experience	39%	56%	73%
Most experienced	51%	46%	64%
Average	47%	50%	67%

The Academic Council's suggested template for self-evaluation includes a list of over twenty specific items that the Council considered should be included in a self-evaluation report.

Despite half of staff being unaware of the guidelines for conduct of self-evaluation and not being aware of what they were trying to achieve, responses indicate that most relied on the College's template and either used it or adapted it. This suggests respondents seem most focussed on 'the expected output from' [the SER] and not 'the process of' self-evaluation.

### *Staff Experience Influencing Perception*

Table 9 shows that respondents hoped that the self-evaluation process could help them to improve the programmes (92%), amend programmes (71%), identify what was good and/or bad about the programmes (64%) and legitimate a position (55%).

**Table 9: The perceived purpose of self-evaluation and what respondents hoped to achieve**

<b>No. of years teaching in Emerald College</b>	<b>I hoped it would help us to improve the programme</b>	<b>I hoped it would uncover what was good/bad about our programme(s)</b>	<b>Self-evaluation is the primary way in which changes are made to modules and programmes</b>	<b>Self-evaluation is to be used to legitimate a position</b>
Least experienced	95%	76%	62%	52%
Some experience	88%	64%	65%	58%
Most experienced	93%	59%	81%	56%
Average	92%	64%	71%	55%

76% of the least experienced staff hoped that the process would uncover what was good/bad about the programmes yet only 59% of the most experienced staff identified that as an aspiration. 81% of the most experienced staff saw module and programme changes as the main intended use with only 62% of the least experienced staff agreeing with this. This shows some significant differences between staff regarding the perceived purposes of self-evaluation.

## Discussion

Kristenson (2010) argues that responsibility for QA and QE is fundamentally the responsibility of HEIs and the institutional procedures in Emerald College align well with good practice. This survey has shown that academic staff recognise the importance of quality assuring programmes of higher education. However, staff experiences of *how* programmes are quality assured suggest that there are issues that need attention.

The overall survey response rate was satisfactory and most of the survey respondents' perspectives was informed by participation in a number of programme self-evaluations. Almost half of respondents indicated they were unaware of Emerald College's guidelines for conduct of self-evaluation and were not aware of what they were trying to achieve. Barnett wrote that "*if rules are really to become part of the fabric of institutional life, directly impinging on quality at all levels, then every member of staff has to internalise those rules*" (1992, p.120). The survey responses suggest that the QA/QE 'rules' have not become part of the fabric of Emerald College's life and this does raise some issues with regard to staff's preparedness to complete effective self-evaluation. Despite a low level of knowledge of the self-evaluation guidelines respondents indicated that a high number of programme boards made use of the approved template. Finlay warns that "*where practitioners follow models in mechanical, routinised or instrumental ways, they all too easily fall into the trap of engaging neither critical analysis nor their emotions*" (2008, p.12) and it is clear from the survey that many respondents believe they could involve more external stakeholders including students, and could have been more reflective. Despite adoption of good practices the mechanical and instrumental approach taken by many participants seems to reinforce Harvey & Stensaker's view that "*the structures are not enough to enhance quality*" (2008, p.438).

Harvey & Stensaker (2008, p.438) believe that “*a quality culture is nothing if it isn’t owned by the people who live it*” and other authors argue that participation by as many staff as possible is important for transparent and effective self-evaluation (House, 2006; Torres & Preskill, 2001; Weiss, 1998). In line with good practice, Emerald College’s Code of Practice seeks active participation by all academic staff involved in the delivery of the programme in the self-evaluation process. However, respondents believe that many staff were not actively involved in the self-evaluation of their programmes and the SERs were completed, in the main, by small groups of staff led by Programme Chairs, Secretaries, and Heads of Department. The value in quality assessment, Harvey contends, comes from participation in the self-evaluation process rather than the outcomes it produces because of the “*the very process of dialogue and reflection it sets in train*” (Harvey, 1997, p.135) but this current exploratory research suggests that the level of “*discussion, dialogue and communication among equals*” (Vedung, 2010, p.268) that is desirable did not occur.

Rather than one dominant quality culture it is more likely that a range of cultures exist. More experienced staff believe their lecturing colleagues are committed to QA but appear to have less confidence in the College’s commitment. They are less reliant on external stakeholders to identify what is good or bad about their programmes and primarily view self-evaluation as a mechanism for approving amendments to programmes that they have already identified. Whilst the source of their confidence was not explored in this research it may be drawn from experience itself (both time spent ‘in the field’ as well as involvement and participation with other colleges and/or projects) and awareness of external environments. The main uses might be identified as being self-improvement and instrumental (Sedikedes & Strube, 1997; Weiss, 1998) and suggest a quality culture that is both “reactive”, and “reproductive” (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008, p. 437). Less experienced staff have full confidence in their College’s

commitment to QA but are less convinced about their colleagues' commitment to quality assurance; 44% perceived that some staff had little or no involvement. They hoped that the process would help them to uncover what was good or bad about their programmes and over half was disappointed that their programme boards did not reflect more deeply suggesting a quality culture that is seeking to be more "responsive" in taking the opportunities offered and may be more open to a more "regenerative" quality culture (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008, p.437).

### **Recommendations**

There is agreement that quality assuring programmes is important, but a review of the experiences and perceptions of the social practice in place suggests that currently, it is of limited effectiveness. Laffan's observation about the patchiness (Ahlstrom, 2013) of quality assessment appears to be reinforced by this survey and supports the claims of "game playing", "compliance" and veneer" made by various authors. It is argued here that the overall mood from this survey is encapsulated by this comment from a lecturer with over 14 years' teaching experience who indicated that QA was very important to them but wondered *"if it boils down to a mere paper exercise in practice"* (anonymous respondent).

Therefore, the revised ESG (2015) presents opportunities for academics and their institutions to redesign QA and QE practices that work more effectively for them in building stakeholder confidence in what they do. There is an opportunity to reflect on what has taken place before and to use that deep understanding to inform new design for the enhancement of programmes of study.

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