

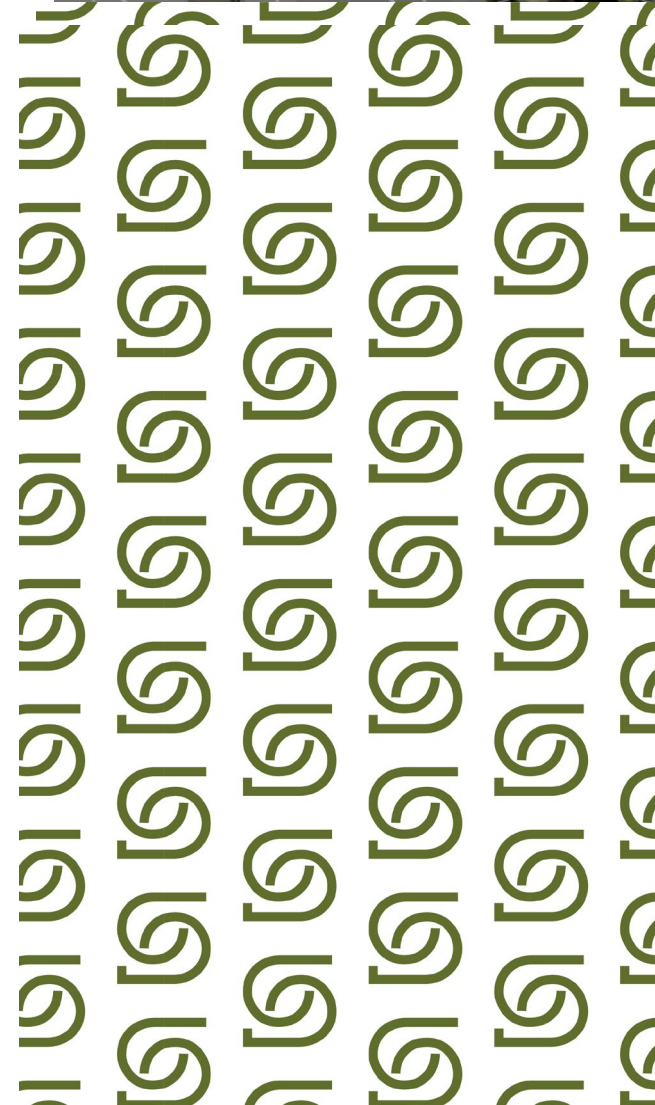
# What is Quality in Higher Education?

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# Introduction

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- Higher education is central to national development
- Universities shape knowledge, skills, research, and innovation
- Quality determines relevance, credibility, and impact
- The concept of quality is multidimensional and evolving

# Defining Quality in Higher Education - 1

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- Quality in HE is a complex and evolving concept that cannot be captured by a single definition.
- Nega Kahsay (2012) highlights that experts describe it in various ways:
  - some see it as elusive and difficult to pin down, while others
  - emphasise its relative nature, shaped by expectations, values, and institutional goals.
- Quality is also viewed as **dynamic**, constantly **adapting to changes in education and society**.
- Rather than being a fixed standard, quality in HE is an **ongoing process**, shaped by the **needs of stakeholders and the ever-changing educational landscape**.

## Defining Quality in Higher Education - 2

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- Defining quality in HE therefore remains a complex task, since 'quality' is inherently **multi-dimensional and not objective**,
- meaning that **no single definition** can **capture its full scope**.
- Different stakeholders, including **students, faculty, employers, and regulatory bodies**, often hold varying views on what quality means, leading to conflicting priorities and expectations.

# Dual Approach Towards Defining Quality - 1

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- Two main approaches for defining quality in HE

The **first**, (Schindler et al., 2015), is to adopt a broad definition that centres on a key goal or outcome, such as fulfilling a **stated mission or vision**.

- This approach often **standards-driven**, emphasising the need to meet predetermined standards, specifications, or requirements,
  - sometimes even to exceed them in the pursuit of excellence.
- The **second** approach is **stakeholder-driven**, focusing on accountability and the delivery of a transformative learning experience that benefits **students and employers** (Beerkens, 2017).

# Dual Approach Towards Defining Quality - 2

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**Standards-driven** approach relies on measurable criteria and benchmarks, **Stakeholder-driven** approach seeks to capture the **diverse expectations** of those directly involved in or affected by HE.

Both approaches offer valuable insights:

- **Standards-driven approach** provides clarity through defined metrics, and
- **Stakeholder-driven** approach ensures that quality reflects the needs of the broader community.

**Together, they highlight the complexity of quality and the importance of a multifaceted approach in QA.**

# Ways to Conceptualise Quality

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Conceptualizing quality in HE is a complex task, as it encompasses multiple dimensions and perspectives.

Rather than having a **single, rigid definition**, it turns out that quality may rather be interpreted through various conceptual lenses that reflect diverse expectations and priorities.

As a result, it is **not a fixed or universally agreed-upon concept but rather fluid and context-dependent.**

To address this complexity, Harvey and Green (1993) proposed five distinct ways of thinking about quality instead of providing a single definition.

Their typology has since become a widely referenced framework in HE literature and among practitioners, offering a structured approach to understanding and evaluating quality in different academic contexts.

# Five view points for Quality (Harvey and Green, 1993)

Quality	Viewpoint
Quality as Exceptional	Sees quality as something special, rare, and difficult to achieve. It aligns with the idea of academic excellence, where only the highest-performing students and institutions meet the required standards. Higher education institutions (HEIs) following this approach often have highly selective admissions, aiming to attract the best students and maintain their reputation for excellence. Faculty members and academic staff often support this view, as it upholds rigorous academic achievements.
Quality as perfection	Focuses on delivering sound and consistent outcomes, with an emphasis on well-defined processes. This perspective is inspired by principles like 'zero defects' and 'getting it right the first time.' While this works well in industries that rely on standardization, it is less practical in HE. Unlike factories producing identical products, HEIs focus on developing diverse and unique individuals, making it unrealistic to expect 'defect-free' graduates.
Quality as fitness for purpose	Defines quality by how well an institution meets its goals and serves its intended purpose. It emphasizes alignment with institutional missions and responsiveness to students' needs. However, a common critique is that simply meeting a stated purpose is not sufficient; there should also be a discussion on whether the purpose itself is meaningful and relevant. This perspective is particularly important for external stakeholders such as policymakers and employers, who assess whether education fulfils broader economic and social objectives.
Quality as value for money	Views quality in terms of efficiency, accountability, and maximizing the return on investment. It considers how resources, such as funding, faculty time, and infrastructure, are used to achieve the best possible outcomes. A typical example would be efforts to increase graduation rates while keeping costs low. This perspective is especially relevant for governments, university administrators, parents, and students who want to ensure that education is a worthwhile investment.
Quality as transformation	Focuses on education as a process of meaningful change. It emphasizes how learning shapes students' intellectual, professional, and personal growth. Instead of simply measuring academic performance or financial efficiency, this perspective highlights how education empowers students and contributes to personal and societal development. Some argue that in an era of mass HE, this should be the primary way to assess quality, rather than relying solely on traditional measures like prestige or cost-effectiveness.

# Quality as Culture - 1

- Quality in HE is increasingly being viewed as part of **an institution's culture** rather than just a set of standards or regulations.
- Nega Kahsay (2012) highlights that quality is deeply embedded in how an organization operates and evolves over time.
- It is not merely about meeting benchmarks but about fostering a shared commitment to excellence **across all levels of the institution.**
- This idea of quality as culture is built on two key elements.
  - First, there is the psychological aspect, which includes shared values, beliefs, and expectations about maintaining and improving quality. When faculty, staff, and students **collectively prioritize quality**, it becomes a natural part of daily operations rather than an external requirement.
  - Second, there is a structural or managerial aspect, which **involves setting up clear processes and coordinated efforts** to ensure quality improvement is systematic and sustainable (European University Association, 2006).

## Quality as Culture - 2

- Quality culture is less about strict systems and more about the **people who bring it to life**.
- It thrives when individuals take ownership of quality in their daily work, embracing a mindset of **continuous improvement rather than just following formal policies**.
- However, as Karakhanyan and Stensaker (2021) highlighted, quality culture is **not one-size-fits-all**:
  - it is shaped by an institution's unique history, mission, and environment.
- What works for one HEI may not work for another, making it crucial to develop a tailored approach that aligns with the institution's specific needs and context.

# Conceptual Model of Quality in Higher Education-1

- At the heart of the model is the idea that quality should be understood in multiple ways.
  - One important aspect of this is ensuring that education aligns with the institution's mission and broader objectives.
  - Another focuses on the transformative nature of learning, emphasising personal and intellectual growth.
  - A further dimension stresses the importance of maintaining high standards and striving for excellence,
  - Another one highlights the need for accountability, ensuring that resources are used effectively and that institutions meet the expectations of students, educators, and society.

# Conceptual Model of Quality in Higher Education-2



**Figure 1:** Conceptual model of quality in higher education (Source: Schindler, Welzant, Puls-Elvidge and Crawford, 2015)

## Defining Quality in Higher Education - 3

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Quality in higher education, therefore, is a **multidimensional** concept with no single universally accepted definition.

It may be understood in terms of institutional effectiveness, stakeholder satisfaction, academic excellence, and alignment with internationally recognised standards.

# Stakeholder Perspectives on Quality

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Different stakeholders interpret quality in higher education differently. It is therefore important to adopt a balanced approach that addresses diverse expectations and priorities.

- Students focus on learning experiences, employability, and student support services.
- Employers emphasise graduate competencies, practical skills, and workplace readiness.
- Governments focus on accountability, efficiency, and contribution to national development.
- Academics emphasise academic standards, research excellence, and intellectual advancement.
- Society expects universities to promote ethical leadership, social responsibility, and community impact.

# Dimensions of Quality

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Quality in higher education extends beyond classroom teaching. It encompasses research productivity, institutional management, student support services, and access to modern facilities and technology.

Key dimensions of quality include:

- Academic quality
- Teaching and learning quality
- Research and innovation
- Institutional governance and leadership
- Student support services
- Infrastructure and learning resources

# Characteristics of a Quality University

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A quality university is one that consistently produces competent graduates, promotes innovation, and operates within a culture of accountability, excellence, and continuous improvement.

Characteristics of a quality university include:

- Competent and motivated academic staff
- Relevant and regularly updated curricula
- Student-centred teaching and learning approaches
- Strong quality assurance systems
- Effective leadership and governance
- International competitiveness combined with local relevance

# Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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Quality assurance systems are essential for maintaining academic standards, improving institutional performance, and enhancing public confidence in higher education institutions and their qualifications.

Key elements of quality assurance in higher education include:

- Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) mechanisms
- External Quality Assurance (EQA) processes
- Accreditation and programme reviews
- Institutional audits and benchmarking
- Continuous monitoring and improvement processes

# Challenges Affecting Quality

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Many higher education institutions face significant challenges in maintaining and improving quality while simultaneously expanding access to education. **Financial, infrastructural, and human resource constraints** continue to affect the delivery of quality higher education.

Major challenges affecting quality include:

- Rapid growth in student enrolments
- Limited funding and inadequate infrastructure
- Shortage of qualified academic and research staff
- Rapid technological change and digital transformation
- The need to balance access, equity, and academic excellence

# Quality and Employability

The quality of higher education is **increasingly measured** by graduate employability and the ability of institutions to prepare students for the changing demands of the labour market and society.

Key aspects linking quality and employability include:

- Alignment of academic programmes with labour market needs
- Development of critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills
- Promotion of entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity
- Equipping graduates with lifelong learning competencies and adaptability requires universities to move beyond the transmission of disciplinary knowledge and focus on developing the skills, attitudes, and mindsets needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world

# Quality in African Context



Higher education institutions in Africa continue to work towards improving quality while responding to the continent's unique developmental needs and challenges.

Key quality considerations in the African context include:

- Expanding access to higher education while maintaining academic standards
- Strengthening regional quality assurance and accreditation frameworks
- Promoting research that addresses local and regional development challenges
- Enhancing collaboration, mobility, and partnerships among African universities
- Balancing global competitiveness with local relevance and societal impact

# Strategies for Enhancing Quality

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Sustainable improvement in the quality of higher education requires strong leadership, adequate investment, and a culture of continuous learning and institutional improvement.

Key strategies for enhancing quality include:

- Strengthening institutional leadership and governance
- Investing in staff development and capacity building
- Improving infrastructure and digital learning systems
- Promoting research, innovation, and knowledge production
- Strengthening partnerships with industry, government, and communities
- Fostering a culture of continuous quality improvement and accountability

# Conclusion

- Quality in higher education is a **multidimensional** concept with no single universally accepted definition.
- Quality in higher education is a shared responsibility that requires commitment from institutions, governments, staff, students, and society as a whole.
- It is not a one-time achievement, but a continuous process of improvement, innovation, and accountability.
- Ultimately, the goal of quality higher education is to produce graduates, research, and community engagement outcomes that contribute meaningfully to national development, global competitiveness, and sustainable societal transformation.



**Thank you**

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# Exercise 1: Defining Quality in Higher Education

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## Objective

- To explore the different meanings and dimensions of quality in higher education.

## Instructions

- Divide participants into groups of 4–6.
- Ask each group to answer:
  - What does "quality" in higher education mean to you?
  - Can quality be measured? If yes, how?
  - Which dimension of quality is most important in your institution?

## Output

Each group develops:

- A working definition of quality.
- Three indicators they would use to measure quality.

## Plenary Discussion

- Compare definitions and identify common themes and differences.

# Exercise 2: Stakeholder Perspectives on Quality

## Objective

- To understand how different stakeholders perceive quality.

## Instructions

Assign each group one stakeholder:

- Group 1: Students
- Group 2: Employers
- Group 3: Government
- Group 4: Academics
- Group 5: Society/Communities

Each group discusses:

- What does quality mean from your stakeholder's perspective?
- What are the top three expectations from universities?
- How should institutions respond to these expectations?

## Output

- Prepare a 5-minute presentation.

## Debrief

Discuss:

- Are stakeholder expectations complementary or conflicting?
- How can institutions balance competing demands?

# Exercise 3: Assessing a Quality University

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## Objective

- To identify the characteristics of a high-quality university.

## Instructions

Imagine you have been appointed to evaluate a university.

Develop a checklist covering:

- Teaching and learning
- Research
- Governance
- Student services
- Infrastructure
- Community engagement

## Output

- Produce a "Top 10 Characteristics of a Quality University."

## Debrief

- Groups compare their rankings and justify their choices.