

# Quality of Administration in Higher Education

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**SUHF**

Sveriges universitets- & högskoleförbund

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# 1. Introduction

Year after year, quality and quality assurance remain topical themes in the field of higher education. From a research perspective, the fact that at least two peer-reviewed journals (*Quality in Higher Education*, *Quality Approaches in Higher Education*) and dozens of books have been dedicated solely to this topic underlines the importance of quality in higher education. In general, quality seems to be among the thematic priorities of higher education research (see for example Teichler 2015, Tight 2012).

From a policy perspective, quality has slowly but steadily become a key area in higher education. In Europe, this trend has been significantly reinforced since 2003 by explicit linkage with the Bologna process, when European ministers of education decided 'to commit themselves to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level', stressing 'the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality' (Berlin Communiqué 2003). At European level, this process led within a few years to the development of national quality assurance agencies, adopting the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and setting up the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). ESG in particular has been highly influential in shaping the undertaking to develop both external and internal quality assurance models throughout Europe.

To date, attention to quality and quality assurance has focused on the context of the three core missions of universities: teaching and learning, research and public service. However, quality and quality assurance of administration have so far received less attention. As compared to the extensive literature on quality and quality assurance of educational processes and quality of research,

few studies have addressed quality of administration, whereas book chapters, papers or journal articles conceptualising quality or quality assurance in the context of higher education institutions are almost non-existent. This apparent lack of interest extends to policy and practice; for instance, in ESG, which was revised in 2015, there is no mention of administrative quality assurance other than in relation to the professional qualifications and competence development of administrative and support staff and effective information management practices (see ESG 2015, p. 14).

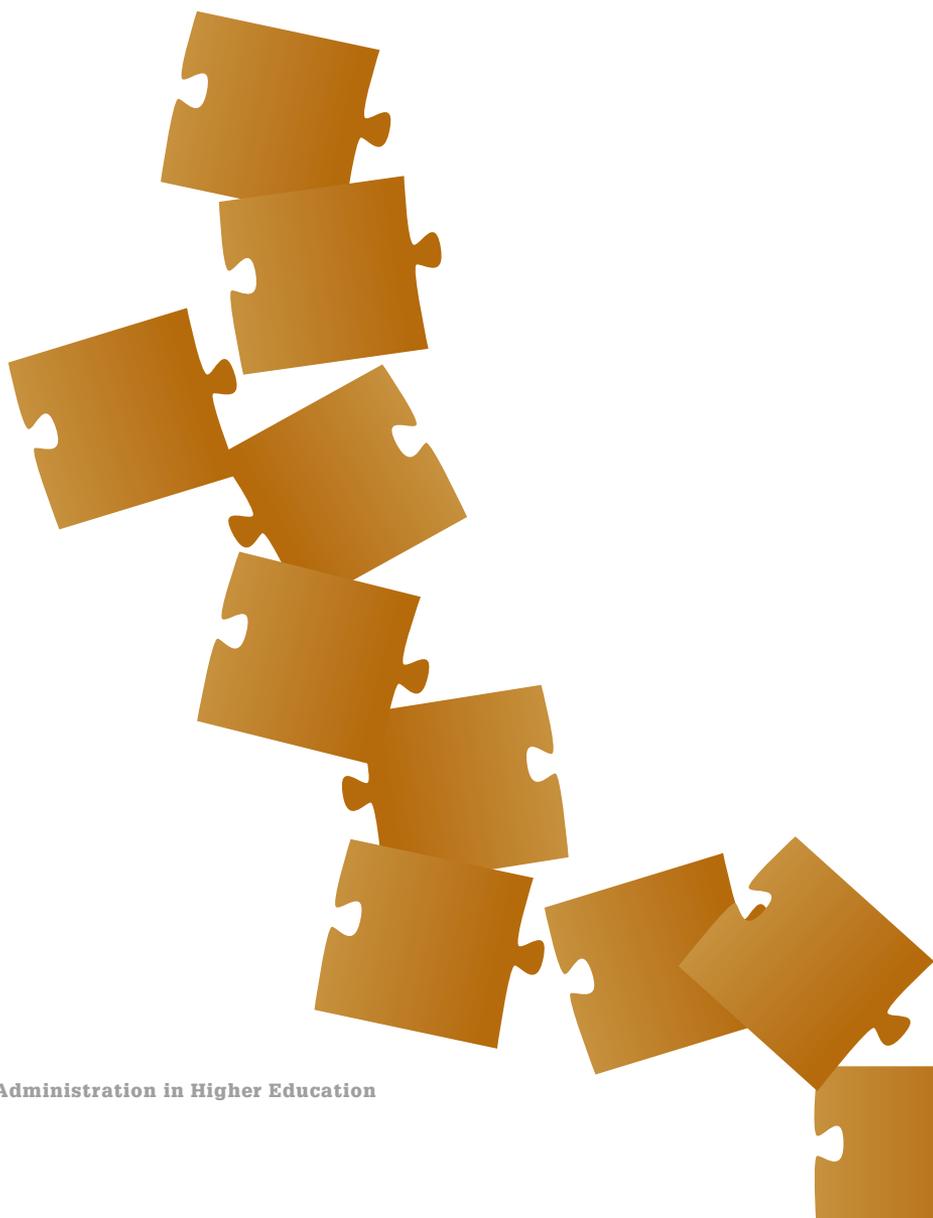
Assuming that the topic is not purposefully dismissed as insignificant, there are two possible reasons for this lack of attention. On the one hand, quality of administration may be taken for granted, in the sense that it is indirectly incorporated in other organisational actions, processes and initiatives to monitor or improve the quality of administrative services although not specifically designated as such. Alternatively, it may be considered that the issue is already addressed, if only indirectly, in the context of quality assurance of teaching and learning, research and service. Either way, this lack of attention has resulted in serious deficiencies in our understanding of quality in the context of administration.

This short report, carried out as 'desk research', was prepared at the request of Association of Swedish Higher Education (SUHF) to address the existing knowledge gap regarding quality in administration of higher education institutions. The main objective of the report is to enhance understanding and so further the development of administrative quality and quality assurance in higher education institutions. Rather than serving as a catalogue of technical advice, the report is primarily generic, conceptual and analytical in nature, in the sense that it does not contextualise administrative quality for any specific higher education system (including the Swedish higher education system). However, the analysis and insights elaborated here can be used to 'scaffold' concrete and practical actions for enhancing and assuring administrative quality in higher education institutions.

The report is structured as follows. The second chapter discusses the multiple dimensions of the concept of quality in the context of higher education, along with conceptualisations and classifications of administration and administrative work in higher education institutions. The second chapter concludes with a synthesis of the previous sections, distinguishing between different dimensions of quality in administration. The third chapter briefly introduces and analyses

different mechanisms that can be utilised for administrative quality assurance. The chapter also discusses the basic principles of designing organisational administrative structures and the possible implications of these structures for the development of administrative quality assurance. Finally, the fourth chapter presents a set of recommendations derived from the main insights of the analysis.

The authors wish to note that the terms 'university' and 'higher education institution' are used interchangeably in this report. While most of the examples are of greater relevance and more accurately apply to research universities, they are *mutatis mutandis* also applicable to higher education institutions of other kinds.



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## 2. Quality in higher education administration

### **Quality in the context of higher education**

As a concept, *quality* is something positive and desirable; it is good or excellent, effective, purposive, economic, democratic, professional, uniform, reliable or ethical: something that meets certain 'standards'. At an abstract level, quality can be defined as 'the distance between an objective and a result, with the implicit assumption that quality improves as this distance shrinks' (Santiago, Tremblay, Basri and Arnal 2008, p. 262). However, this definition leaves scope for multiple interpretations, depending on who sets the objectives, for what purpose and how results are measured vis-à-vis objectives. It follows that any discussion of the concept of quality must proceed from basic and fundamental questions such as 'quality of what', 'quality for whom', and 'quality for what'. Indeed, over the years, quality in higher education has become a complex and 'slippery' subject, with many competing definitions and interpretations. As a consequence, scholarly and practice-oriented attempts to define, quantify and evaluate quality have generated many theories, conceptual models and measurement approaches (Turner 2011). Despite these attempts, no clear or universally accepted definition has as yet captured all aspects of quality in the context of higher education.

There are two categorically distinct ways of understanding quality in higher education institutions: *objective and relative*. An objective understanding of quality suggests that it is possible to identify and qualify certain aspects of higher education institutions, and that the same assessment can be applied to all relevant circumstances. In contrast, a relative understanding holds that there is no objective, definitive or final description of quality as an assessment of what is 'good' or 'bad'. Rather, quality is seen to depend on the objectives, perceptions and subjective criteria of the person, group or organisation making those judg-

ments, in a specific context and against a pre-defined set of evaluation criteria. In this sense, there are as many qualities as there are goals and criteria for the operations and products of higher education institutions (e.g. Barnett 1992; van Vught 1994; Kivistö 2007). In the absence of objective criteria for assessing quality, the relative approach has predominated in the context of higher education.

The primary role of higher education institutions is to produce services related to three institutional missions: teaching, research and public service (also known as the 'third mission'). The most widely utilized categorization of quality in higher education is based on the seminal work of Harvey and Green (1993), which distinguishes the following *five dimensions* of quality (see also Harvey 2006).

1. *Quality as exceptionality or excellence.* (a) Traditionally, exceptional quality is defined as something special, exclusive, unique, distinctive or self-evident (i.e. unnecessary to prove), which is achieved when implicit and intuitive standards of service are surpassed. This traditional conception of quality is of little value in assessing quality in education because it offers no definable means of measurement. Nevertheless, it is of enormous value in building prestige, which is a major indicator in the construction of many university rankings and league tables. (b) A second aspect of exceptionality is excellence. Unlike the traditional understanding of exceptionality, quality as excellence is assessed using benchmarks (e.g. amount of institutional revenue, number of Nobel prize winners on the staff) against which 'high' standards can be evaluated. (c) The third and final notion of quality as exceptionality in some ways dilutes the notion of excellence, defining a high quality product as one that has passed a set of quality checks, based on attainable criteria designed to ensure at least minimum quality standards. According to Harvey (2007), this corresponds to what have been described as 'threshold definitions' of quality or, in some cases, 'benchmark quality', implying minimum benchmarks or minimum 'quality standards' rather than the 'excellence benchmarks' discussed above.
2. *Quality as perfection or consistency.* This notion of quality emphasises flawlessness and reliability in delivering service outputs; good quality means delivering the service on time and without faults or errors – not just once but consistently. Beyond conforming to pre-defined and measurable

specifications, this absence of defects approach also embodies a philosophy of proactive prevention rather than retrospective inspection. The focus is on ensuring at each stage that faults do not occur rather than subsequently identifying defects (Peters and Waterman 1982; Harvey 2006). As part of the conception of quality as perfection or consistency, an organisational quality culture increases collective commitment to getting things done right and well at the first attempt. This democratises quality by making everyone responsible for service quality at each stage of the production process.

3. *Quality as fitness for purpose.* Fitness for purpose, which equates service quality with fulfilment of a specification or stated outcomes, can be understood in two ways. First, it can be considered primarily as 'customer satisfaction' – that is, meeting the needs and requirements of service users. For instance, students who find employment immediately after graduation (which is, for many, the purpose of education) may consider their educational experiences to be of 'high quality' despite their university's lower rank, delays in grading exams or being taught by teachers with inadequate pedagogical skills. Second, fitness for purpose can also be understood from an institutional perspective. On this conception, a high quality institution is one that clearly states its mission/goals and is efficient and effective in meeting those goals. In this way, fitness of purpose can also be linked to the concept of effectiveness, referring to university's capability in achieving organisational goals and desired outcomes (results and impacts) (e.g. Pollitt & Bouckaert 2004).
4. *Quality as value for money.* Value for money judges the quality of provision, processes or outcomes against the costs of producing the service in order to obtain maximum benefit from the use of available resources. This approach is closely related to the concept of efficiency, where a given number and standard of services are produced at a lower cost, or more services are produced with a given level of resources. The highest level of quality is reached when no higher amount and standard of teaching, research or service outputs can be achieved with existing inputs. In this sense, the concept of quality is also explicitly connected to accountability.

5. *Quality as transformation.* Quality as transformation involves a process of qualitative change from one state to another (cf. Harvey & Green 1993). Transformation as a process of transmutation can apply to an individual or an organisation or to the service supplied by the organisation. For instance, in an educational setting, transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students or to the development of new knowledge through research. As such, it can also refer to changes within an institution that better enable it to provide transformative learning or research (Harvey and Knight, 1996). This can also be closely linked to notions of added value of the provided service (Harvey 2006).

Harvey and Green's categorization was originally an attempt to deconstruct the abstract concept of quality in the context of higher education, focusing on its various dimensions in order to reconcile different ways of thinking about quality (Santiago et al. 2008). Over the years, it has undoubtedly become the most influential framework for understanding and discussing quality in the context of higher education institutions. Although almost 25 years old, its position remains unchallenged in the field of higher education research, and for that reason, it is adopted here as a starting point for conceptualizing administrative quality (see the last section of this chapter).

### **Defining administration in the context of higher education institutions**

On a traditional view of universities, two professional groups – academics and administrators—are seen to exist in parallel within the one organisation. While *administrators* (sometimes also referred as 'general staff', 'auxiliary staff', 'professional staff' or 'support staff') are often categorized as 'non-academic staff', this term is now considered pejorative and exclusionary, as it is based on negation – that is, on what they are not (see for example Gornall 1999, Conway & Dobson 2003; Aarrevaara & Dobson 2016). Although several recent studies have suggested that the boundaries between academic and administrative work have become increasingly blurred (e.g. Whitchurch 2008; Veles & Carter 2016), and although most academics are required to participate in certain administrative activities, it can be assumed that the distinction between administration and academics remains relevant. There are at least three important reasons for this. (1) The status of administrative and academic staff is often distinguished by legislation, norms,

remuneration standards, recruitment procedures, and so on. (2) The core competencies and merits needed for academic tasks are usually distinguished from the competencies and merits needed for administration. (3) The direct outputs of academic and administrative work are usually very different.

The distinction between 'academic' and 'administrative' functions is also highlighted in the division of power and authority in the governance of higher education institutions. Rather than administrators, it is the academic management (rectors/presidents, deans, department heads, directors and collegial bodies such as councils and boards) who remain in charge of higher level decision-making and governance, even though this divide has become less clear-cut (e.g. Szekeres 2011). However, as administrators are primarily responsible for developing and supplying critical information and advice that informs decision-making processes, they often exert significant influence on that decision-making. Administrators are also responsible in their own right for managing large sections of institutions, but issues surrounding governance and implementation of institutional strategy are by and large still determined by academics and academic managers (e.g. Gornall 1999, Conway & Dobson 2003).

### **Administration as administrative work**

The primary *purpose of administration* in higher education institutions is to provide maintenance, integration and coordination, support and supervision serving the core missions of teaching and learning, research and public service. Although administration should not be considered merely subservient to academic activities, it plays a primarily supporting role that secures and enables accomplishment of the institution's core functions.

It is important to acknowledge that the administration function in universities is not a functional monolith but rather a diverse assemblage of tasks and activities, ranging from basic secretarial work and maintenance services to highly skilled specialist and professional activities. These include (but are not limited to) institutional research and planning, student services, general administration, study administration, human resource management, financial administration, legal advisory services, research and innovation services, as well as more entrepreneurial activities such as alumni affairs, marketing and public relations and business development. In addition, supporting services such as library, ICT, capital and property administration, operations and maintenance can equally be considered as elements of administration (e.g. Szekeres 2004; Gray 2015).

Figure 1 depicts a continuum between different *types of administrative tasks* in universities. On this continuum, staff groups can be framed along two dimensions: the level of skills required for administrative tasks and the extent to which tasks are connected to core academic functions and missions. Overlaps between circles highlight tasks that also include activities from the other categories.

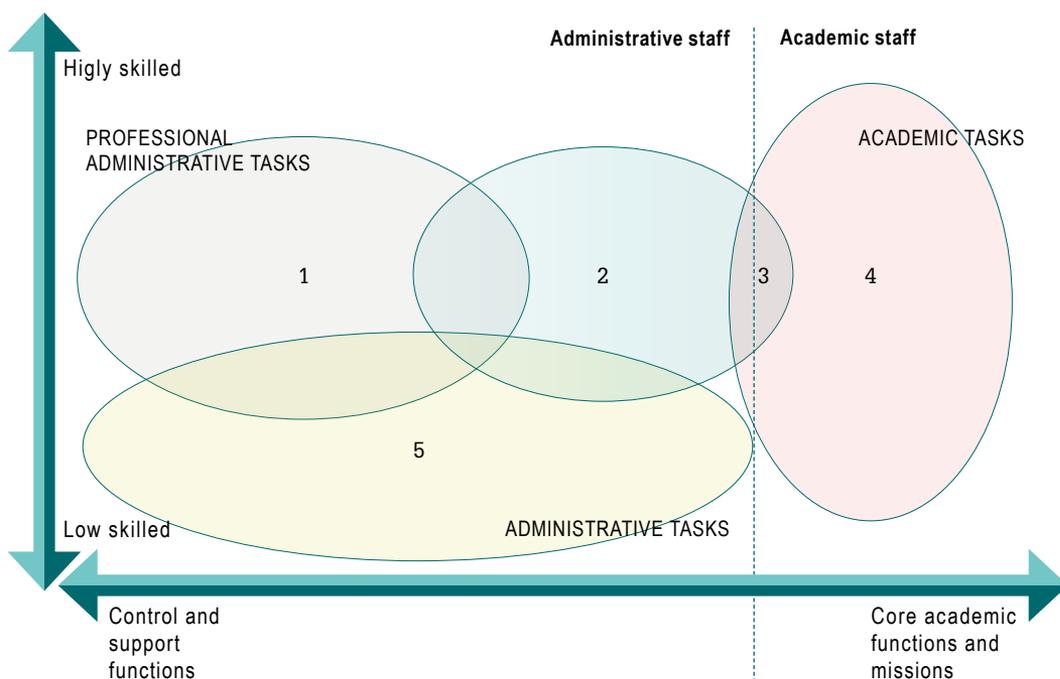


Figure 1. Continuum of tasks in higher education administration

*Staff category 1:* An increasing number of administrators work in positions requiring a higher level of professional expertise that is not strongly linked to academic tasks or to the work of academics. For instance, the skills and expertise of lawyers and legal experts, communications and marketing specialists, controllers and accountants and heads of administration are not directly related to the three core missions of universities, even though their work supports the accomplishment of these missions. Within their own professional area, their expertise is universal, in the sense that their knowledge could be utilized without requiring any significant update in organisations other than universities.

*Staff category 2:* The vast majority of administrators work on tasks directly related to core academic missions that require a high or medium level of expertise and skills. In many ways, this is the core area of university administration. For example, this category includes institutional planning and development and HR specialists, who are highly skilled, and whose substantive work is at least indirectly concerned with implementation of the university's core missions. Equally, administrative positions closer to the core academic missions, such as grants and contracts specialists in research support services or heads of study affairs, belong to this category.

*Staff category 3:* There is also an emerging field of higher education professionals (third space professionals or para-academics), often officially categorized as administrative personnel, whose work resembles that of academic staff. These administrators often have academic skills and qualifications and work closely with academics on tasks such as research infrastructure, research applications, pedagogy or curriculum development. This category also includes academics specializing in the areas of administration (para-academics). These are discussed in more detail further in the text.

*Staff category 4:* These are academic staff (research and teaching personnel) whose main tasks are academic but whose work includes occasional administrative duties.

*Staff category 5:* These are administrative and support staff whose job does not require a high level of skill. These positions can range from specialized tasks like payroll computation to tasks like cleaning, which have no direct link to core academic missions. Tasks in this category may also include general secretarial or administrative assistant work, which has links to academic missions, as well as roles that are more directly related to academic missions, including study and student service assistants, study secretaries and laboratory technicians.

In the recent literature on academic work and profession, there has been growing interest in the aforementioned group of employees who are employed as administrators but whose work and qualifications resemble those of academic staff. This group is commonly referred to either as 'third space professionals', 'quasi-academics' or 'higher education professionals'. The concept of *third space profes-*

*sionals* refers to a new domain among professional staff in the higher education workforce. These may be academics with a largely managerial function or professional administrative staff who contribute directly to teaching or research – for example, by developing online teaching materials or offering specialized research support (Gray 2015). Third space professionals work in a ‘space’ with connections to both administrative and academic domains, but their career trajectory does not easily fit either domain because their career structure is divided along rather traditional lines. These professionals often work in a project environment and have developed a separate identity that distinguishes them from academics and administrators (Whitchurch 2006, 2008, 2010).

The term *para-academic* is used to describe new roles that combine academic and professional support activities by creating narrowly specialized positions in teaching, research or service. According to McFarlane (2011), this has ‘resulted in the “up-skilling” of librarians into student skills advisers and of information technology support workers into learning technologists’ while at the same time, many academics have ‘seen their role “deskilled” from all-round academics into para-academic roles such as quality assurance advisers, departmental heads or educational developers’ (p. 63). Para-academic roles are stretching and unbundling understandings of traditional academic and administrative roles by fragmenting what were formerly more comprehensive skill sets into narrower specialities. In particular, the use of technology in the design of teaching materials and the facilitation of student learning online is creating specialist roles typical of the two-directional flow of professional support and academic staff in new para-academic roles (McFarlane 2011).

*Higher education professionals* are not academics, but they have a deep understanding of core functions of higher education that are of relevance to their service or management-support roles. For instance, as researchers in the field of higher education, planning analysts and institutional researchers may use academic research methodologies in their work although not themselves academics. The same can be said of administrators with a practical development orientation dealing directly with research information, including quality officers, developers or international office specialists (often in the roles of administrative ‘middle-managers’) (see Teichler 2015).

It can therefore be difficult to draw a clear distinction between academic and third space professionals, especially in the case of tasks and positions that are closely related to core academic missions. Where this distinction needs

to be made, it can hardly be based on professionals' status or core competencies (including working background). In these circumstances, it may be more useful to focus on the main direct outputs of their work. If the main output relates directly to teaching, learning and/or conducting research, we are probably talking about academic tasks; otherwise, we are probably dealing with a professional administrative position with close connections to core academic functions. However, this raises the further question of why this distinction should be drawn in the first place, and what relevance it has in contemporary universities.

### **Administration as service**

Regardless of any differences in the concrete substance of administrative work, all forms of administration can be understood as a *service*. In essence, a service is a transaction between two parties: a service provider and a service user. In considering administrative work as service provision, two main groups of users can be identified: internal and external. *Internal users* are relatively easily defined as academic staff and academic units, as well as other administrators and administrative units, who 'consume' the administrative service provided. *External users* are stakeholders, such as funding bodies, businesses, industries, public sector organisations and authorities, prospective students and private individuals, who interact with universities, often by communicating with the administration. Depending on the chosen cultural and legal perspective, students can be considered as internal or external users of services. Whatever their status, they are among the most important groups using the services of university administration.

Services in general have special *characteristics* that distinguish them from goods. Unlike physical goods (e.g. cars, computers, shoes, vegetables), services have several special characteristics (regardless of their substance), with implications for perceived quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1983; Doherty, Horne & Wootton 2014). Unlike goods, services are characterised by *intangibility* and *inseparability*, which means that in many cases they cannot be touched, sensed or tested and are simultaneously created and consumed. This makes evaluation of service quality more difficult for the user; for instance, students receiving study counselling cannot determine how well they were counselled before actually implementing the guidance they have received in their course selections. Similarly, researchers receiving legal advice or budgeting instructions from the research service unit cannot easily determine its accuracy and validity at the time of receiving it.

Services are also characterised by *heterogeneity*, which means that a service's production processes and features are more difficult to standardize than those of physical goods. While some administrative tasks and processes requiring a lower level of expertise can be standardized (e.g. procedures for issuing degree certificates to students), many require a high level of expertise and are bound to changing circumstances in the service provision process, making standardization almost impossible. For example, when offering dispute resolution counselling for supervisors who are having problems with their staff, human resource specialists can follow standard guidelines on how to proceed, but this is often only a loose framework. Finally, as services are transactions in which the service provider does something for or with the service user, *active user participation* is often required. Without this, it is impossible for the user to gain maximum benefit from the service; for example, students who fail to comply with the guidelines for graduation may experience a delay, even though the study administration would have given all the necessary instructions in advance concerning how to complete the graduation process without any such delay.

In addition to the generic special features of services, administrative services in universities are also subject to expectations concerning universities' multiple roles in modern societies. At least four dominant categories of expectations can be distinguished as follows (based on competing value approach; see Quinn & Rorhrbaugh 1983).

1. *Universities are public bureaus* or agencies using the public authority vested in them. In carrying out their official responsibilities as defined by legislation and other provisions, universities are expected to comply with defined norms and standards in relation to issues such as equality and fairness in selecting students, grading courses and awarding degrees, as well as in recruitment and treatment of staff. Effective and good quality administrative service demands that universities operate within the limits of rules, regulations and norms set by public authorities.
2. *Universities are resource centres* using (mostly public) resources. Institutions are accountable for the resources they receive, and they are expected to produce value for the public sector in return for those resources. This value is concretized primarily in measurable outputs (degrees, publications, patents)

and secondarily in outcomes (increased human capital, new knowledge, innovations). Effective and good quality administrative behaviour is then related to the efficiency of administrative work itself and to the productivity of universities as a whole.

3. *Universities are academic communities* of scholars informed by academic traditions and norms. As collegial communities of scholars, universities are characterised by inherently motivated and committed staff, cohesion between professionals, and respect for academic values and integrity as guiding principles of action. Notions of academic freedom and collegiality are sometimes at odds with more top-down administrative hierarchies that more often emphasise organisational control rather than flexibility or autonomy (Gray 2015). It follows that the key requirements for effective administrative behaviour include a commitment to understanding, preserving and serving the academic 'ethos' (i.e., characteristics of academic work and community).
  
4. *Universities are entrepreneurial organisations* operating in markets and are important for society primarily because they are seen as instruments for economic growth and development. Universities' entrepreneurial orientation demands ongoing adaptation and innovation to acquire and maintain external resources from society and from markets. Key requirements for effective administrative service include adaptability, development-orientation and proactivity.

In modern societies, (public) higher education institutions cannot choose one role to the exclusion of others; they must play multiple roles, serving several constituencies simultaneously. To be capable of dealing effectively with all these tasks, there must also be several understandings of quality. In public organisations, external governance (i.e. steered by public authorities) often intervenes in the processes of internal governance, and this is especially apparent in administrative work. Administrators must comply with legislative requirements, as well as ensuring that academics do so as well; they must follow or implement government policies, institutional internal policies and performance measures while at same time taking account of academic traditions and peculiarities. In addition to these three roles, many administrative services need to take account of market

pressures from the external operating environment. The match between roles and administrative tasks is more evident in some cases than in others—for example, while marketing experts must work in an entrepreneurial fashion, institutional planning is often guided by notions of universities as resource centres. An administration’s ability to mix these four roles can be considered an important prerequisite for higher quality.

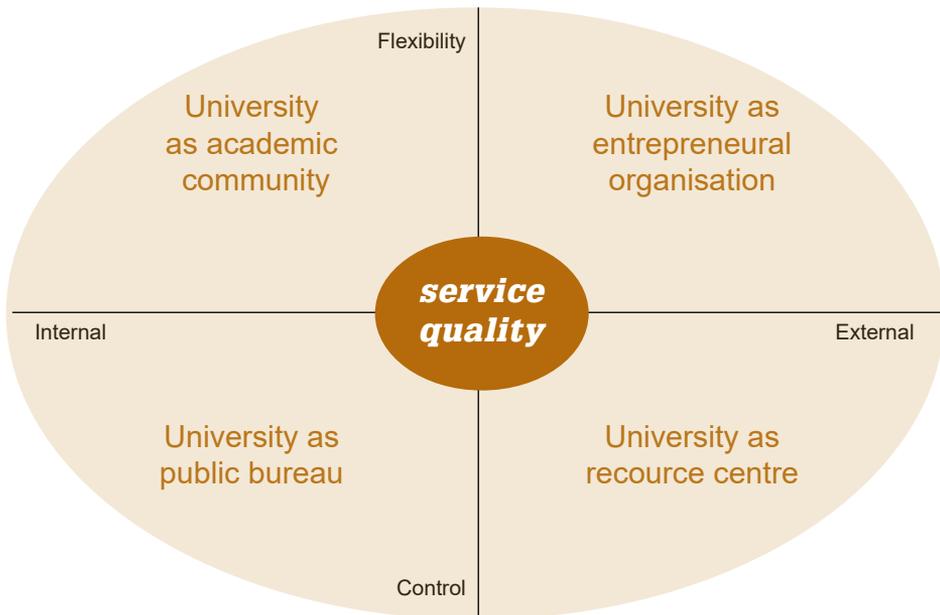


Figure 2. Four understandings of a university (adapted from Quinn & Rohrbaugh 1983)

A final important aspect of administrative service is the extent to which it should be understood as a *customer service* or as a *public service*. Understanding administrative service as customer service means that quality is determined primarily by the customer experience; in other words, quality relates essentially to ‘customer satisfaction’—that is, the level of confirmation of expectations associated with the received service experience. A few existing empirical studies of quality of administration in universities seem to have adopted the customer satisfaction approach (see e.g. Soutar & McNeil 1996; Abouchedid & Nasser 2002; Waugh 2002; Arena, Arnaboldi & Azzone 2010; Calvo-Porrá, Lévy-Mangin & Novo-Corti 2013; Teeroovengadum, Kamalanabhan & Seebaluck 2016). All of these apply a variant of the SERVQUAL model or instrument, originally developed by

Panasuraman et al. (1988) to assess consumer service quality. The model measures the gap between service user expectations and experiences by focusing on the following five dimensions of service quality (Calvo-Porrá et al. 2013, see also Panasuraman 1988; Soutar & McNeil 1996).

1. *Tangibles*: appearance of physical facilities, equipment, comfort, signs, accessibility, spaciousness, functionality, personnel and communication materials.
2. *Reliability*: the ability of staff to provide the promised service on time, accurately and dependably.
3. *Responsiveness*: staff willingness to help, to provide prompt service and to show agility in respect of common processes and attention to incidents.
4. *Assurance*: staff professionalism and accomplishment of assigned tasks.
5. *Empathy*: capacity of staff to understand student needs.

As studies have utilized the SERVQUAL-model in different ways across a range of research settings, it is impossible to draw overall conclusions about the relative importance of each of these dimensions. For instance, while Calvo-Porrá et al. (2013) found that the dimensions of tangibility and empathy are the most important determinants of perceived quality, Soutar and McNeil (1996) found that empathy was not a significant determinant of satisfaction in the university context. In addition to tangibles and empathy, Ahmed et al. (2010) found that responsiveness was positively associated with students' level of satisfaction while reliability and assurance were not. Overall, any generalisation from these studies is constrained by the fact that in utilizing SERVQUAL-model, perceptions of quality were not confined to administrative service but also included experiences related to teaching and learning.

If understood as *public service*, then the value of administrative services can be understood as more than just individually assessed 'satisfaction'. Based on the categorization adapted from the work of Jorgensen and Bozeman (2007), the nature of administration as a public service can be understood in terms of the values that drive universities as public actors. In particular, this relates to the following.

- Non-measurable contributions to society (e.g. key values such as serving the common good, advancing social cohesion, providing social stability and advancing human rights)
- Ability to channel and transform public interests into decisions and action (e.g. key values such as user democracy and other forms of direct citizen involvement)
- Interaction with the environment (e.g. key values such as promoting openness, transparency, fairness, trustworthiness and neutrality)
- Ability to promote 'good' organisational values (e.g. key values such as efficiency, timeliness, stability and innovativeness)
- Capacity to meet expectations in relation to the role of public sector employees (e.g. key values such as professionalism, honesty, integrity and high moral and ethical standards)
- Need to treat users of services as citizens (e.g. key values such as legality, equity, responsiveness and user orientation)

If public values are taken as a starting point for conceptualizing administration as a service, then customer satisfaction is only one possible dimension of the quality, as users (both external and internal) are also constituents of the public service approach. The public values model is complicated, but it may be of importance in discussing the role of administration in universities and therefore the quality of administrative services.

### **Dimensions of quality in the administration of higher education institutions**

Based on Harvey and Green's (1993) framework for quality and the conceptualization of administration and administrative services, this section now summarises one possible understanding of the dimensions of quality in HEI administration (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Quality in the administration of higher education institutions

1. *Administrative quality as exceptional/excellence.* This first aspect can be defined in terms of quality of resources and other administrative services inputs (cf. Harvey 2006). It includes ‘tangibles’ like attractiveness and adequacy of facilities, equipment and furnishings. More importantly, however, it refers to an appropriate level of budget and well-qualified and motivated administrative staff. As an important prerequisite of all other aspects of quality, staff motivation is maintained by means of fair and transparent recruitment, equal opportunities for career development, fair remuneration principles and opportunities for staff training. Quality can be determined, at least to some extent, by benchmarking against an acceptable minimum set of standards (e.g. number of administrative staff as compared to academic staff, staff qualifications, budget share of administrative services) at other similar institutions, or by excellence benchmarking (against prestigious, world-class institutions). Defined in this way, exceptional/excellent quality encompass-

es all types of administrative services and can be applied equally to all the aforementioned understandings of a university, referring to adequate or, in best cases, abundant resources—both monetary and human—to fulfil their roles as public bureau, accountable resource centre, entrepreneurial organisation and professional community.

2. *Administrative quality as perfection/consistency.* This dimension relates to reliability, availability and accuracy in all aspects of administrative work. As well as individuals with a professional attitude, this requires organisational actions by institutional management that enable the administration to perform consistently without unnecessary fault, error or delay in a basis by designing appropriate processes and structures, particularly in relation to staffing and the coordination and division of labour. It also requires an organisational quality culture – that is, a deeply rooted and genuine collective commitment to getting things done well, preferably at the first attempt. Occasional mistakes and errors are not treated as failures but as opportunities to learn how these can be prevented from happening again. Perfection also involves responsiveness or staff willingness to help, providing prompt service to both internal and external users (students, academic staff, fellow administrators, external stakeholders). This dimension of quality as perfection and consistency includes all administrative work involving clear routines and processes, whether as part of study administration, maintenance and operations or ICT services. However, it is more challenging, although not impossible, to apply this to non-routine aspects of administrative work (e.g. professional tasks). Understanding quality in terms of consistency is particularly important in public service; ensuring that everything is done in accordance with rules and regulations and in a reasonable, fair and transparent manner can be considered high quality service.

3. *Administrative quality as fitness for purpose.* In the context of administration, fitness for purpose has two meanings. First, it refers to matching the delivery of any kind of administrative service to the expectations of users, whether internal or external. The key issue is that the user experience as a whole should be perceived as satisfactory by the ‘customer’. In best cases,

the service provided exceeds expectations. However, this user-centredness makes administrative quality as fitness for purpose highly relative and subject to variation based on individual preferences and experiences, which may be influenced by any of the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model referred to above (i.e. tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy). Second, the alternative interpretation of fitness for purpose is more categorical, referring in the present context to the capability and capacity of a university administration (or some part of it) to fulfil its purpose vis-à-vis the university's mission and goals. This means completing administrative tasks (e.g. maintenance, integration and coordination, support and supervision) in an effective way. The fitness for purpose approach relates equally to all four requirements faced by contemporary universities: operating within the limits of rules, regulations and norms set by the public authorities (universities as public bureaus); operating efficiently and productively (universities as resource centres); understanding the boundary conditions set by academic work (universities as scholarly communities) and remaining adaptive to the needs of external society (universities as entrepreneurial organisations).

4. *Administrative quality as value for money.* Quality in administration can be understood as the ability to achieve the maximum benefits of administrative services with the use of limited monetary and human resources. To put it another way, quality of administration is maintained or increased when resources are not wasted – that is, are not allocated to activities or processes that do not add value to the service provided. While determining the optimal level of efficiency is of course difficult, identifying slack resources is often more straightforward. Demands for the greater efficiency of administrative activities are often augmented by the views of academics, who (sometimes harshly or categorically) consider administrative staff to be 'a financial drain and representative of a bloated bureaucracy' (Gray 2015, p. 548). At the same time, quality as value for money must be balanced against quality as exceptionality/excellence, as attempts to extract too much from people are likely to harm all aspects of administrative quality. Understanding quality as value for money applies equally to all types of administrative service, regardless of their level of professionalization. However, administrative positions requir-



ing lower levels of expertise or involving more routine tasks are more likely to be assessed in terms of potential efficiency gains from re-organisation, centralization and automation or digitalization of services. Value for money approaches are closely linked to the growing accountability requirements for public authorities, again highlighting the idea of universities as resource centres.

5. *Administrative quality as transformation.* Finally, quality can be understood as administration's ability to achieve positive changes and added value for core activities. In the case of universities, administration does more than support academic activities; it proactively creates favourable conditions and circumstances for the institution's financial success and academic excellence while at the same time meeting the needs of service users. This requires the administration from the lowest to the highest positions to be adaptive and forward looking in relation to changes in circumstances, as well as being able to understand the 'bigger picture' in which university operates, beyond its own work tasks (cf. Shanahan & Gerber 2004). In this sense, the dominant notion here is the idea of universities as entrepreneurial organisations.

3



### 3. Quality assurance in higher education administration

#### **Defining quality assurance for administration**

Universities are by their nature specialized *professional organisations* that share some of the features of other professional organisations such as hospitals or knowledge-intensive firms. The most distinctive characteristics of such professional organisations is the high level of autonomy of the work, practised by professionals with specialized expertise and skills. As professional organisations have few if any routine tasks that could be controlled and managed in the same way as industrial production lines, their work is more difficult to manage either by coordinating working processes or by direct management supervision. In the case of universities, even standardization of outputs is at times difficult because research and learning outcomes and the impacts of societal interaction are difficult to define and measure comprehensively. Usually, the only way to coordinate the work is by standardizing the required skills (at the time of recruitment) and by mutual adjustment, where individuals autonomously and informally coordinate their work with each other (i.e. collegial control) (Mintzberg 1979).

These characteristics have important implications for quality assurance in professional organisations, and particularly in universities. The required expertise – and therefore the authority – to evaluate the quality of professionals' work is available only to other professionals working in the same field; this is a defining characteristic of almost all specialized professions. As recruitment processes are typically controlled by professionals themselves (e.g. external peer reviewers, search committee members), there is little scope for non-professionals to coordinate the work.

Despite the recent emphasis on stronger management-orientation, universities can still to a large extent be described as professional bureaucracies, shar-

ing characteristics common to all professional organisations with a highly skilled work force engaged in complex tasks. Professional bureaucracies are 'bottom heavy' in the sense that professionals are central to production processes and are therefore the organisation's most important part. As noted above, coordinating professional work is difficult for anyone other than the professionals themselves and their peers. For this reason, until the late 1980s, academic staff in many countries enjoyed high levels of freedom from external regulation, relying instead on self-regulation through behavioural norms embedded in their communities and disciplines. For that reason, the leadership and coordination functions of university administration have traditionally been weak, confined to translating the policies of public regulators into internal governance requirements. In many European countries, development of more comprehensive internal quality assurance was eventually triggered in the 1990s and early 2000s by public authorities' demands for quality assurance rather than institutions' own initiatives.

Although external and internal quality assurance has been practised in most higher education systems for almost 30 years, no single internal quality assurance model seems applicable to all universities. Institutions have built their own systems as more or less tailor-made approaches, often triggered by the necessity to meet external requirements for quality assurance specified by public authorities. The primary focus has been on addressing the quality of universities' core missions – teaching and learning, research and, more recently, third mission activities. As a direct consequence of the aforementioned fact that administration is considered primarily as a support function and not as a standalone core function of universities, administrative quality assurance has played only a minor role in these developments, and quality assurance of administrative activities has often been limited to those areas with close links to academic activities.

What, then, might constitute an internal quality assurance model specific to university administration? By definition, internal quality assurance can be defined as processes and practices that assess, monitor, guarantee, maintain and improve the quality of inputs, processes and outputs. As a mechanism, quality assurance often focuses simultaneously on both accountability and control (i.e. ensuring that certain standards are met and that services are appropriately delivered) and on improvement/enhancement (i.e. promoting future performance rather than judging past performance) (cf. Kis 2005; Vlasceanu, Grünberg & Parlea 2007; Harvey 2007).

At present, we know of no quality assurance framework that could be applied in an administrative services context. However, by examining how internal quality assurance systems operate in practice, a distinction can be drawn between three complementary and partly overlapping forms of quality assurance: *primary quality assurance*, *secondary quality assurance* and *latent quality assurance* (Figure 4).

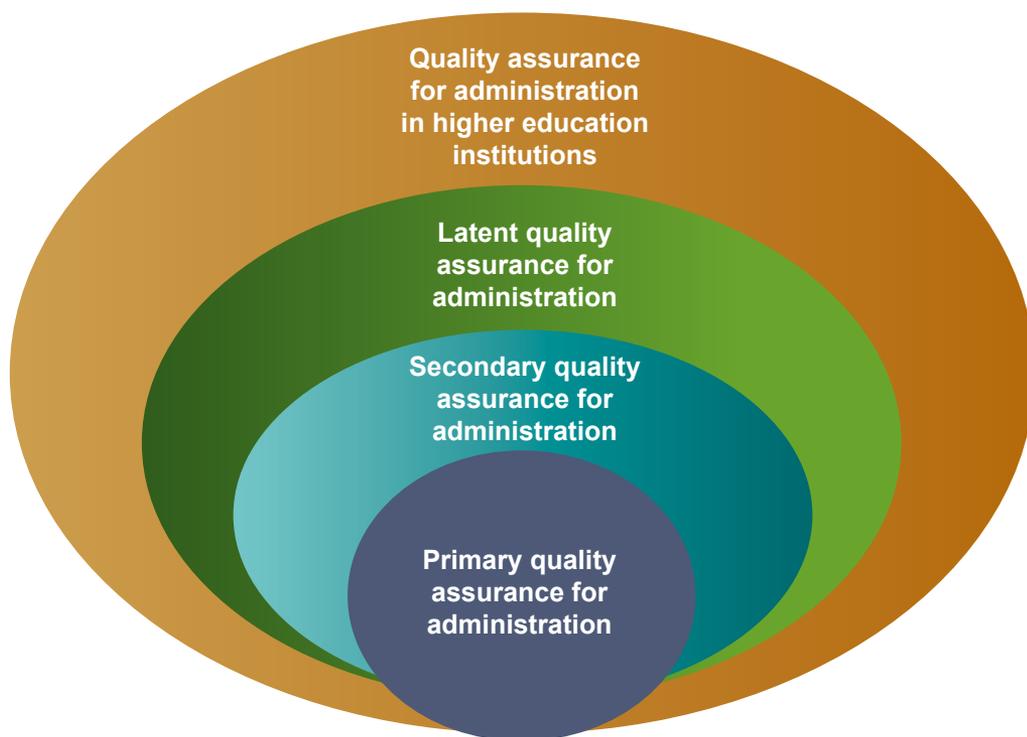


Figure 4. Dimensions of quality assurance for administration in higher education institutions

*Primary quality assurance* in this context can be defined in terms of practices and processes that focus explicitly on administration and/or administrative services and processes. These may include a number of quality assurance mechanisms running in parallel, sequentially or cyclically. While their logic is more or less the same as that of regular quality assurance instruments, their content is confined specifically to administrative services. The main instruments and their content, objectives and focus are set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Main instruments of quality assurance in administrative services

	<i>Contents</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Focus</i>
<b>Action plans, regulations, quality assurance guidelines and manuals</b>	Binding documents containing descriptions of e.g. overall architecture of quality assurance, the objectives, division of responsibilities in quality assurance, and policies & procedures related to quality assurance	To describe the quality assurance system as a whole and to specify guidelines for how it will work	Accountability Improvement
<b>Administrative audits, assessments, evaluations and reviews</b>	Self-evaluation, external assessment (site visit by external/peer reviewers), final report and recommendations	To assess whether quality assurance procedures are adequate and carried out effectively vis-à-vis the institution's own objectives; audit examining the system's potential to achieve good quality but not quality itself	Improvement
<b>Feedback surveys</b>	Periodic surveys of users of administrative services (academic staff, other administrative staff, students, external stakeholders)	To monitor and measure service users' subjective experiences and satisfaction	Accountability (Improvement)
<b>Statistical data and performance indicators</b>	Quantitative data on financial and human resources, measuring costs, use of facilities and equipment, staff characteristics, service outputs, with performance measures that may include ratios and indices	To increase transparency, comparability, and objectivity	Accountability (Improvement)
<b>Benchmarking</b>	Systematic quality-oriented comparison of administrative processes/models with selected benchmark organisations	To learn about areas of improvement by comparing strengths and weaknesses with relevant benchmark organisations	Improvement
<b>Internal forums for open dialogue</b>	Sharing experiences related to administrative services and processes	To exchange good practices, discuss areas of development, present ideas for further development and foster quality culture and awareness of administrative quality	Improvement

As most of these instruments can be utilized to secure or improve several aspects of quality at the same time, it is difficult to match them exactly with the dimensions of quality discussed in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, in assessing a given dimension of quality, some instruments are more closely connected than others. For instance, administrative audits and feedback surveys that measure user satisfaction can be related to quality as fitness for purpose. Similarly, statistical data and performance indicators can be used to measure quality as value for money or as excellence, and benchmarking and internal forums for dialogue can support quality improvement as transformation.

In addition to their strengths, each of the instruments listed above has weaknesses related to their use. For instance, quality manuals are often thick books, prepared with enormous effort, but once completed, they may be little used if seen only in terms of compliance requirements rather than any genuine interest in quality improvement. Self-evaluations, which form an essential part of administrative assessments, risk being reduced to 'write-ups', game playing and impression management, where administrative units use self-assessments as a vehicle to influence external judgements rather than to authentically inform judgements about 'self'. Conducting assessments can be also expensive and administratively burdensome to implement, robbing resources from real administrative work. Performance indicators run the risk of reductionism, shifting attention to what is measurable rather than what is important from the perspective of quality (Kis 2005). Feedback surveys are prone to inaccuracies caused by inappropriate sampling frames, quality of survey data and instruments, non-response issues and interpretation of results, whereas discussion forums and benchmarking exercises can be demotivating in terms of participation and effort if not followed by concrete actions resulting in observable quality improvement. These challenges, however, do not render quality assurance meaningless or harmful but rather serve to highlight the limitations that must be acknowledged in designing and selecting appropriate methods of quality assurance.

*Secondary quality assurance* can be understood in this context as those dimensions embedded in regular quality assurance of teaching and learning, research and third mission activities. In quality assurance of teaching and learning, these relate to study administration to the extent that it is considered to impact on the quality of education. On the research side, this relates more particularly to research assessment exercises and audits, which often examine the adequacy of support services for research teams, infrastructure and project management, all of which relate indirectly to the quality of administrative services. Institutional quality assurance as a whole can be based on more generic, 'industrial' quality assurance frameworks, models or standards, which may also address the quality of administrative services. The most well-known of these include the EFQM Excellence Model (see Calvo-Mora, Leal & Roldán 2005; Tari & Madeleine 2011), the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) (see e.g. Nogueiro & Saraiva 2008), and the ISO 9001 quality management system (see e.g. Basir, Davies, Douglas &

Douglas 2017). In addition, institutions may apply a generic model of continuous improvement based on some variant of the PDCA (plan, do, check and act) quality cycle, which may include dimensions related to quality of administrative services.

In addition to primary and secondary quality assurance, a range of actions, practices and policies embedded in universities' administrative activities can be categorized as quality assurance procedures although not explicitly recognized (or named) as such. Together, these procedures can be characterised as *latent quality assurance*, including, for example, field specific certification procedures, risk assessments, specialized audits (e.g. ICT security), organisational development and restructuring activities to improve service processes, internal control of legal or judicial aspects of administrative decisions, internal audits, as well as streamlined human resource management policies to ensure the competencies and job satisfaction of administrative staff. All of these procedures are characterised by loose or non-existing links with primary or secondary quality assurance while substantially serving the same purpose.

The impact of quality assurance systems on quality (however it is measured) remains a matter of debate. There is, for instance, a lack of clarity about the essential purpose of quality assurance, the adequacy of diverse methods and instruments and the actual consequences of quality assurance. Identifying the features of effective quality assurance systems is rendered more complicated by difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of such systems. It is also difficult to know how the quality of education might or might not have changed in the absence of quality assurance processes (Kis 2005). In any case, it should be acknowledged that, though interlinked, the concept of quality and the processes of quality assurance remain quite distinct. According to Harvey (2006), the difference between quality and quality assurance is conceptually similar to that between the concept of intelligence and IQ tests, which purport to measure intelligence. In other words, quality can exist in the absence of any activities of quality assurance, in the same way that intelligence exists regardless of testing. The role of quality assurance, then, is to make existing quality (or the lack of it) more visible by defining, measuring, reviewing and improving it.

### **Organisational structures and quality assurance in administration**

An additional important aspect of quality assurance relates to how administration is organised in terms of *organisational structure*. This is again very much a

matter of specialization of tasks and the level of centralization or decentralization of authority and administrative tasks. Division of labour and how it is coordinated are significant determinants of productivity and quality. Conceptually, specialization refers to the horizontal and vertical division of labour within an organisation (Mintzberg 1979). The role of horizontal specialization is to increase productivity by dividing tasks into units and categorizing individuals by their special expertise; vertical division of labour refers mainly to the coordination and control of this work in hierarchical layers. As in other organisations, tasks in a university setting are specialized horizontally by substance – that is, by academic field (such as chemistry, physics or economics) – and by administrative function (such as accounting, marketing or human resources) and vertically by layers of unit-level management. Professional work requiring a high level of expertise, such as academic work, is specialized horizontally but less so vertically. Administrative work is typically more specialized vertically because it involves stricter hierarchies of decision-making and authority. However, this is not easily generalized because much administrative work requires a high level of skill (see Figure 1). Some administrative work may be less specialized horizontally (and vertically) when organised within academic departments and not as specific functions within a centralized administration unit. Table 2 provides some examples of specialization related to administrative and academic work in universities for both administrative and academic tasks in all quadrants.

Table 2. Specialization of work in universities

		Level of horizontal specialization	
		Higher	Lower
Level of vertical specialization	Higher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teaching and research assistants (most junior academic positions)</li> <li>- Specialized secretaries (e.g. registrar's office)</li> <li>- Maintenance and operations staff (e.g. cleaners)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pedagogical managers, study programme managers</li> <li>- Unit level administrators</li> <li>- Departmental general administrators</li> <li>- Office secretaries</li> </ul>
	Lower	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Professors, senior academics</li> <li>- Lawyers, accountants, research and teaching developers</li> <li>- Professional administrators (legal experts, accountants etc.)</li> <li>- Heads/directors of administrative offices (e.g. head of study affairs, head of communications etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Academic managers (deans, department heads)</li> <li>- Leading/managing administrators</li> </ul>

Another way of categorizing administrative structures is to frame them in terms of the university's three academic missions (see Table 3). As discussed earlier, most of the administrative work in universities is closely linked to academic work in terms of mission (teaching, research, service). However, some administrative services are not differentiated by mission but are generic, covering all or most aspects of the university's operations. In addition, part of the administration is professional in the sense that it is not university-specific and requires specialized expertise (e.g. marketing, legal advisors, accountants).

Table 3. Administrative structure by university mission

<b>FUNCTIONS/ MISSIONS</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Research</b>	<b>Public service</b>
<b>Mission-differentiated administrative functions</b>	Student and study services (e.g. registrar's office, international office, student aid office, housing, student sport and health services)	Research services (e.g. grant writers, intellectual property rights specialists, research funding specialists, project management support, laboratory, data and infrastructure services)	Third mission-related services (e.g. alumni services, continuing education services, innovation services, career and recruitment services)
<b>Non-mission-differentiated administrative functions</b>	e.g. general administration, office secretaries, travel services, HR secretaries, operations and maintenance, ICT support services		
<b>Professional administrative functions and central management</b>	e.g. accounting and finance, legal services, marketing and communications, library services, strategic planning and development, HR specialists, ICT specialists		

Broadly, there are two major and mutually exclusive strategies for organising administrative services in universities: *decentralized* and *centralized*. In the traditional decentralized model, most administrative services are placed under the authority of basic units – that is, departments, institutes, schools, colleges or faculties. They are coordinated only loosely by functional offices (e.g. HR, study affairs, communications and marketing) within the university's central administration. In this model, each unit handles most of the mission-differentiated and non-mission-differentiated administrative functions while professional administrative functions often remain centralized. Another characteristic of this model is that administrative staff operate mostly under the line authority of academic leaders, most often deans and department heads, who also make decisions (or at least exert a strong influence) on recruitment and promotion of administrators. Administrative staff are less specialized horizontally, which means that most administrators work in more than one area of administrative specialization. For this reason, administra-

tors are often closer to the substance of academic work and may be well acquainted with discipline-specific characteristics and peculiarities related to their work. Among the greatest benefits of the decentralized model are its flexibility and the proximity of administrators to the core academic tasks they support.

The traditional decentralized model is increasingly being replaced in a strong international trend towards centralized arrangements, known as 'shared services' or the 'one administration model', for administrative services. In this model, which has many variants, all or most of the administrative services typically occurring across several departments, faculties or other units are placed under the authority of one university-wide administrative unit, which is responsible for delivering and coordinating administrative services for all academic units. Even where administrative staff are physically located in the same facilities as faculties or departments, they are no longer under the line authority of deans or department heads but have their own administrative line managers (e.g. study coordinators work under the head of study affairs, who in turn works under the director of study services). In many cases, shared services units are also independent budgetary units that provide—or even sell—services to academic budgetary units. The main rationale for centralization is to reduce administrative costs arising from unnecessary duplication of administrative activities in academic units. By standardizing procedures and correcting staffing disparities at the whole-institution level, centralisation is also believed to resolve the disparate or opposing service processes that sometimes result from the myopic sub-optimisation tendencies of departments and faculties. This is often achieved by creating pools of administrators and allocating staff to those tasks and units considered to be in most urgent need of services.

Centralized coordination is likely to increase both horizontal and vertical specialization, thereby reinforcing the tendency to form administrative silos and top-down management layers. At the same time, this approach is prone to conflicts between the direct line authority of centralized administrative managers and academic unit leaders, whose authority over the administration in their units is only indirect and unofficial. Alternatively, where authority relationships are not clearly defined, there may be confusion among academic and administrative management as to who should take responsibility for coordinating specific administrative tasks.

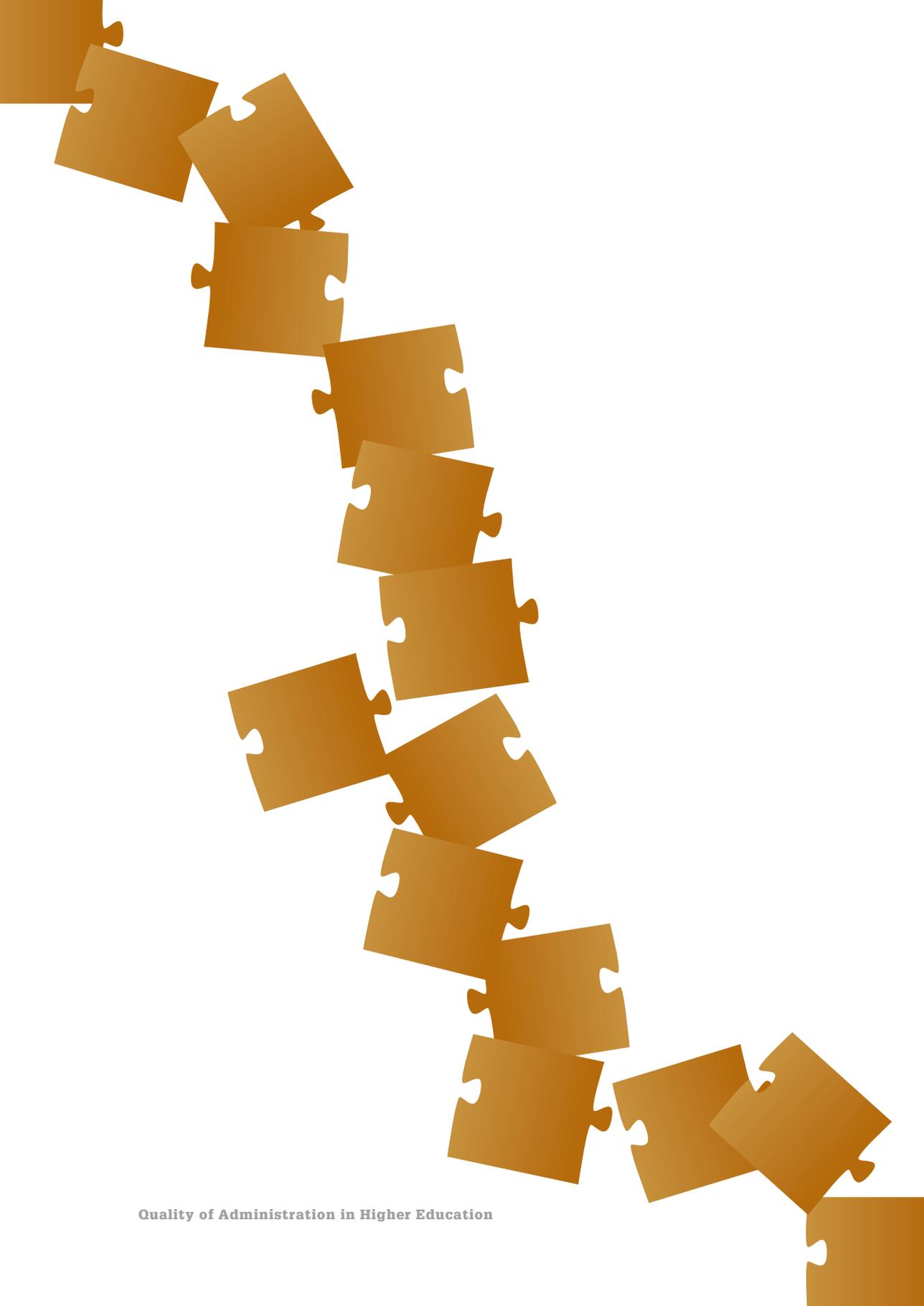
The question of which aspects of the administration should or should not be decentralized is both important and interesting but falls outside the scope of this



report. Nevertheless, based on the main division of administrative work (see Table 3) between 'mission differentiated administrative functions', 'non-mission differentiated administrative functions' and 'professional administrative functions and central management', it may be deduced that non-mission-differentiated administrative work (other than general administration within departments and other units) and professional administrative functions are easier to centralize than mission-differentiated administrative functions located in basic units. In any case, no universal set of criteria seems to exist that might offer easy solutions to this issue.

Whether a university's administrative structure is more centralized or decentralized also has a number of implications for quality assurance.

- If the administration is centralized, the role of *secondary quality assurance* (see the first section of this chapter) presumably becomes weaker, particularly for mission differentiated administration (see Table 3), as academic managers have no line authority over administration.
- If the administration is centralized, the development of *primary quality assurance* also becomes more crucial from the perspective of coordination because the horizontal and vertical specialization of administrative work are likely to increase.
- If the administration is centralized, forms of *latent quality assurance* should be explicitly integrated with *primary quality assurance*, as these impact more on non-mission-differentiated administrative functions, professional administrative functions and central management.
- If the administration is decentralized, *secondary quality assurance* is likely to play a more central role, particularly in areas of mission-specific administration, as administrative work is likely to be more intertwined with the core academic tasks it serves.
- If the administration is decentralized, non-mission-specific administration and professional administrative functions, which are not addressed by *secondary quality assurance*, need to be addressed by instruments of *primary quality assurance* and *latent quality assurance*.



4



## 4. Recommendations

This final section of this report presents recommendations based on the analysis and insights set out in the preceding chapters and summarizes the most important points from the analysis.

### **1. Defining quality in administration**

*Define what quality means in the context of different administrative tasks and what constitutes an integrated perspective on administrative quality.*

With the help and active engagement of external and internal stakeholders, universities should initiate a process to define and decide on the most relevant dimensions of quality in administration. The five dimensions of administrative quality outlined at the end of chapter offer a starting point for this process, which should include reflection on the extent to which dimensions of administrative quality are entangled with dimensions of academic quality. This can be achieved by examining the outputs of administrative work and their proximity with academic tasks. The definition of administrative quality should also be informed by an understanding of the multiple roles and ideas of the university (as presented in Figure 2), as well as addressing whether particular administrative services should be treated from a customer satisfaction or public service perspective.

It seems important that the process of defining administrative quality should take account of differences in administrative tasks and positions, which can usefully be framed by reference to the continuum of tasks elaborated in Figure 1. At the same time, universities should allow for some degree of flexibility in this process, as some dimensions of quality may be shared by all administrative work and processes while some may be specific to certain administrative tasks and positions. In any case, it is clearly important to define administrative quality in order to make it 'visible' and acknowledged throughout the university.

## **2. Understanding administrative personnel as a crucial prerequisite of higher quality**

*Design career models for administrative staff and allow flexibility in terms of staff status that eludes the traditional academic/administration divide.*

Whatever the definition, quality cannot be achieved without motivated and dedicated administrative staff. This means that universities should attend to the recruitment, career advancement (administrative career tracks), training and remuneration of administrative staff with as much enthusiasm as in the case of academic staff. In particular, it is important to identify the most critical skills and competencies for different types of administrators, and the process of defining the quality of administrative work entailed by different tasks should provide valuable insights. In general, this also requires that the value of administrative work would be acknowledged alongside academic work at all levels, including institutional strategies and action plans.

Universities' HRM policies should also acknowledge the new roles of administrators and academics (see the discussion on third space professionals and para-academics) caused by the blurring of boundaries between administrative and academic work. In concrete terms, this means that career trajectories and remuneration principles should be sufficiently flexible to allow switching between academic and administrative roles and to avoid career dead-ends.

## **3. Promoting internal coherence in quality assurance at all levels**

*Clarify differences and overlaps among the three dimensions of quality assurance of administration; integrate these with an overall quality assurance model for the university and communicate clearly the mechanisms and rationale of administrative quality assurance for all staff.*

All three dimensions of administrative quality assurance (primary, secondary and latent) should first be identified and then treated together as a single 'quality assurance entity' for administrative services. If not already done, this entity should be fully integrated with the university's overall quality assurance system/model. In many cases, the optimal solution may be that quality assurance of administration would be integrated with quality assurance of core missions (as far this is technically and culturally possible). This would mean expanding the scope of secondary quality assurance of administrative functions that more directly serve the core academic missions. Where this is not feasible, specific instruments addressing the quality of administration should be developed along the lines outlined in Table 1. During all stages of this process, it is important that both administrative and academic staff are kept informed about the role and rationale of administrative quality

assurance. Clearly, the design of internal quality assurance must also comply in all aspects with the requirements of external quality assurance systems.

As organisational structures are instruments of coordination rather than ends in themselves, designing the administration's organisational structure (as centralized or decentralized) should not 'hijack' the development of administrative quality. However, as noted in the final section of chapter 3, it should be acknowledged that this structure is of significance for how quality assurance is organised.

#### **4. Clarifying the purposes of administrative quality assurance for greater legitimacy**

*Identify and communicate the purposes of administrative quality assurance to create shared understanding of the values of quality assurance.*

Within the processes for assuring the quality of administration, the two purposes of quality assurance (accountability and improvement) must also be balanced. In particular, universities should clarify the purposes of quality assurance while taking account of previous recommendations concerning the internal coherence of quality assurance systems. From the perspective of perceived legitimacy, it is also important to make clear to all parties whether the primary role of quality assurance is to promote future performance (improvement) or to judge past performance (accountability). Administrators and academic staff are likely to be more supportive of the use of certain quality assurance instruments if they understand exactly the purpose for which it is used (see Table 1).

#### **5. Making an impact with administrative quality assurance**

*Continuously evaluate the costs associated with quality assurance of administration, and ensure that these are balanced against its real impacts.*

Three of the most important aspects of quality assurance are setting goals for quality assurance, monitoring progress towards those goals and implementing follow-up by use of monitoring procedures. In many cases, what matters most is not how precise the goals are, or how they are set or monitored, but whether something is really changed by quality assurance. Lack of impact is often a direct result of weaknesses in the implementation of follow-up procedures. This creates a significant risk that staff will see quality assurance in its entirety as another meaningless administrative exercise, especially when related directly to administration. Monitoring is effective only if linked to action. Impact can be improved in at least two ways: by assigning clear responsibilities for overseeing follow-up procedures and by implementing quality assurance instruments cyclically rather than as one-off events.

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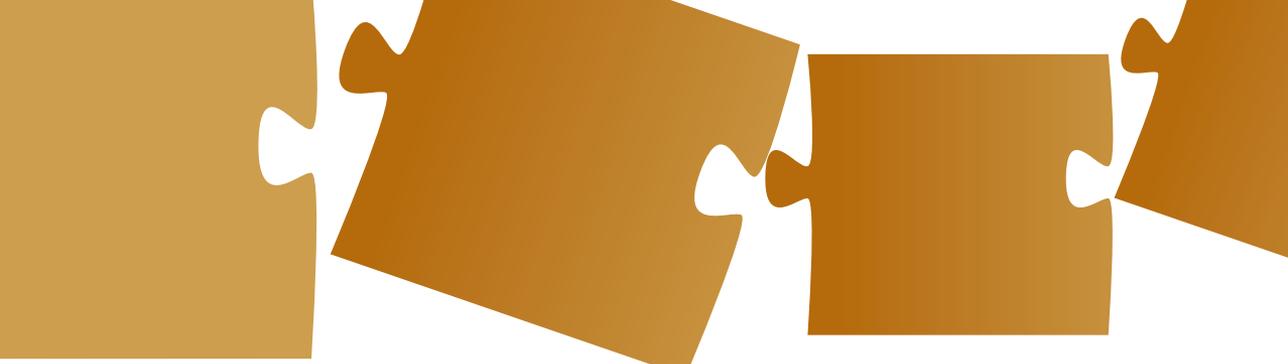
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