Quality in Practice: Exploring Programme Leaders' Engagement, Interpretation, and Response to Internal Programme Evaluative Frameworks

Aisling McKenna, BSc, MSc

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Contents

List of Abbreviations

ADTL	Associate Deans for Teaching and Learning
APR	Annual Programme Review
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.
GET	Group Experiential Theme
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
PET	Personal Experiential Theme
PPR	Periodic Programme Review
PRSB	Professional, Regulatory, or Statutory Body
QA	Quality Assurance
QE	Quality Enhancement
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland

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Author's declaration: I declare that the thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. No sections of the thesis have been published or submitted for a higher degree elsewhere. The thesis is not the result of joint research and is my own work alone.

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Abstract

This thesis explores programme leaders' experiences of engaging with formal programme evaluation in an Irish higher education institution. It examines how programme leaders interpret quality within their roles and how formal evaluation processes align to their responsibilities for maintaining and enhancing academic programme quality. The study also considers how evidence-informed practice shapes programme leaders' understanding of quality in evaluative work. Using an IPA approach, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with 20 programme leaders in a single institution.

The findings reveal a disconnect between the intent of policy driven quality guidelines for the evaluation of programme quality and their practical interpretation by programme leaders. Formal evaluations are often positioned as bureaucratic exercises for reporting and accountability rather than tools for enhancement. Contributing factors to this positioning include a perceived external ownership of the process, a restrictive evaluative scope, and a reliance on quantitative metrics to derive inferences on quality. In response to these limitations, programme leaders developed parallel evaluative practices aimed at planning quality enhancement. These locally developed evaluations were characterised by strong local ownership and a context specific scope. Local evaluations tended to adopt an inclusive approach to evidence and prioritised stakeholder perspectives and narrative feedback over quantitative metrics.

This thesis argues that in this study, quality assurance and enhancement exist within distinct evaluative domains, framed by different conceptualisations of quality, methodologies, and evidence. It argues for a simplification of formal processes and reduction of the administrative burden associated with policy-driven assurance. Further, it advocates for institutional recognition of local evaluation systems that more effectively serve the purpose of improving academic quality. Finally, the research argues that evidence-informed practice must evolve beyond a reliance on metrics to include professional judgement and a broader range of narrative-based data that reflect the complex, context-sensitive realities of academic programmes.

Chapter 1. Introduction and Context

1.1. Introduction

Contemporary higher education is replete with a complex ecosystem of frameworks and systems for quality assurance, including internal and external evaluations, accreditation processes, and audits across many levels within and across institutions. This complex array of requirements, guidelines, and processes inevitably inform how quality is assured within higher education institutions, reflecting an interplay of both transnational and national political considerations (Beerkens, 2015; Blanco Ramírez, 2013; Hazelkorn et al., 2018; Westerheijden et al., 2014). These policy discourses are inevitably a response to the prevailing value system that underpins the purpose of higher education (Barnett, 1994; Henkel, 1998; Filippakou & Tapper, 2008; Filippakou, 2011; Ashwin et al., 2015) and how quality in higher education is defined and evaluated (De Weert, 1990; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003).

1.2. The Research Problem

The contemporary higher education landscape is characterised by an increasing demand for accountability, transparency, and demonstrable quality. The implementation of regulatory requirements to assure quality in higher education has increasingly been shaped by policy-driven frameworks and assurance regulations designed to demonstrate accountability and excellence in teaching and learning. However, within this highly regulated environment, a fundamental tension persists between the requirement to assure quality for external accountability (Hazelkorn et al., 2018; Hoecht, 2006; Newton, 2002), and the professional and moral commitment of academic staff to enhance quality of academic programmes (Cardoso et al., 2016; Cartwright, 2007; Lackner, 2023; Mårtensson et al., 2014).

This study addresses a fundamental research problem arising from persistent tensions between quality assurance and quality enhancement in higher education. These tensions are multi-dimensional, reflecting differences in goals and contrasting epistemological and methodological foundations underpinning efforts

to assure and improve quality. Prior research suggests that the distinct purposes of assurance and enhancement, and the complexity inherent in these distinct purposes, may render them difficult to pursue simultaneously (Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Beerkens, 2015). These tensions become particularly evident in the application of evaluative instruments, where quality assurance frameworks have been previously criticised for prioritising externally imposed standards over internally driven, practice-based conceptions of quality (Barnett, 1994; Filippakou, 2011; Filippakou & Tapper, 2008; Blanco Ramírez, 2013).

The implementation of these systems, which have traditionally prioritised accountability and compliance with externally defined guidelines (Hoecht, 2006; Hazelkorn et al., 2018; Ewell, 2009) have been widely critiqued. Previous work has argued that processes to assure quality in higher education tend towards summative (Ewell, 2009) or mechanistic processes (Perovsek, 2016; Vettori, 2018), that rely on retrospective judgement (Biggs, 2001; Giller, 2023). In contrast, quality enhancement processes within institutions are described as being typically formative in intent (Ewell, 2009), prospective in nature (Biggs, 2001; Giller, 2023), and driven by the professional and moral commitment of staff to maintain and enhance quality (Cardoso et al., 2016; Cartwright, 2007; Lackner, 2023; Mårtensson et al., 2014).

Beyond the goals of policy-driven systems and the design of instruments intended to assure quality, a further dimension of the assurance–enhancement tension lies in how evidence within these frameworks is used to make inferences and judgements about educational quality. Reflecting a neo-liberal approach to evaluation (Vedung, 2010), policy-led assurance frameworks frequently prioritise quantitative approaches to the measurement of quality, which have been critiqued as transforming the multi-dimensional, stakeholder-relative, and context-dependent nature of quality to reductionist, and techno-rational interpretations (Bloxham, 2012; Harvey, 2007; Henkel, 1998; Pettersen, 2015).

The scope, epistemological underpinnings, and the positioning of specific forms of evidence as evaluative indicators of quality within assurance-based frameworks has implications for how these are experienced and interpreted by those tasked

within implementing evaluative processes on quality within higher education institutions. Existing research suggests that engagement with externally defined assurance- based processes is frequently perceived by academic staff as bureaucratic (Newton, 2000, 2002; Anderson, 2006; Stensaker, 2008; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014; Kallio et al., 2016; Overberg, 2019; Seyfried & Reith, 2019) and is often perceived as disconnected from core educational values (Newton, 2000; Tam, 2001; Newton, 2002; Anderson, 2006; Cartwright, 2007; Houston, 2008; Filippakou, 2011; Kleijnen et al., 2013; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014; Overberg, 2019; Harrison et al., 2022; Watty, 2003; Abdulaziz Aldhobaib, 2024). These perceptions risk the potential for counter-productive outcomes (Cardoso et al., 2016; Bloch et al., 2021), drawing attention away from activities that could more productively contribute to quality enhancement (Vettori, 2023) .

Central to this debate is the role of academic programme leaders, who are often the individuals tasked with maintaining and enhancing the quality of academic programmes. The research problem emerging from the existing body of work is that there has been relatively little attention paid to the specific experiences and interpretations of these individuals and their relationship with the evaluation of quality. Given their responsibilities, the experiences of programme leaders are central to understanding how the tensions between quality assurance and quality enhancement in teaching and learning manifest at academic programme level. This research attempts to address this problem by shedding light on the gap between the intent of these evaluative systems for assurance, and how enhancement is progressed in practice by programme leaders.

1.3. Context of this research

1.3.1 European Context

Within Europe, member states within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), under the Bologna process, have established a range of frameworks and guidelines, designed for the purposes of enhancing the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications across the 48 members states (Neophytou, 2025). Within this broader framework for cross-border alignment, the

European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) (ENQA, 2015) provide a series of guidelines and standards on how the quality of academic qualifications are assured and monitored within higher education systems. The ESG are intended to provide a framework for assuring and enhancing educational quality within national contexts through external quality assurance, and the articulation of processes and standards to guide the development of internal quality assurance procedures within higher education institutions.

1.3.2 National Context

My research is situated within the Irish higher education institution, which is governed by the legislative, governance, and accountability framework set out in the *Universities Act* (1997). Section 35 of the Act requires universities to establish quality assurance procedures aimed at improving the quality of education and related services, including the evaluation of both academic and professional units within each institution (Universities Act, 1997).

In response to these requirements, Irish universities established the Inter-Universities Quality Steering Committee, which operated from 1997 to 2002 to support the development of a shared, sector-wide approach to quality assurance. Building on this work, the Governing Authorities of the seven Irish universities approved the establishment of the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) in 2002. The IUQB was tasked with monitoring the effectiveness of quality assurance processes across the sector and advising on national and international developments in quality assurance (Higher Education Authority, 2008, pp. 5–6).

The *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012* provided for the establishment of a new statutory agency for quality assurance across Irish higher and further education. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was subsequently established as an independent public body with responsibility for overseeing quality assurance and qualifications in education and training. The Act also provided for the dissolution and amalgamation of several existing state bodies, including the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), and the Further Education

and Training Awards Council (FETAC), as well as the incorporation of the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) into the new agency (Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012).

Among its range of functions, Section 27 of the Act mandates QQI to issue guidelines for the establishment of quality assurance procedures. In 2016, QQI published its *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines* for higher education, further education, and English language providers, identifying 11 core areas for the development of institutional quality assurance processes. These guidelines are informed by the *European Standards and Guidelines* (ENQA, 2015), a relationship that was subsequently affirmed in the 2019 external review of QQI conducted by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2019).

Section 3.3 of the QQI Statutory Guidelines (QQI, 2016b) provides standards for the ongoing monitoring and review of academic programmes in higher education institutions. The guidelines provide for the establishment of programme evaluation processes that ensure that,

> *"Programme delivery is monitored in a way which allows for the identification of needs and the modification and adjustment of the programme and the delivery method as appropriate. Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of a programme is used as an opportunity to evaluate that programme with the benefit of the experience of programme delivery incorporating feedback from staff and learners. Such evidence is reflected in learner enrolment and programme completion rate data; learner, teacher, trainer, employer and/or industry feedback and evaluations of the programme."* (p.11)

Both the ESG and QQI core statutory guidelines make reference to the dual goals of assurance and enhancement in programmatic review. The ESG state that the monitoring and reviews of academic programmes, "*should lead to continuous improvement of the programme*" (ENQA, 2015, p. 15), while the QQI core statutory guidelines note that monitoring and programmatic review should, "*inform updates of programme content; delivery modes; teaching and learning methods; learning supports and resources; and* information provided to learners" (QQI, 2016b, p. 12).

Institutional compliance with the Core Statutory Guidelines are reported through annual reporting to QQI, and the effectiveness of these procedures is subject to external review, mostly recently through the Cinnte Institutional Review cycle, 2018-2024 (QQI, 2016a).

1.3.3 Institutional Context

This research is situated within a single Irish university, subject to the statutory and regulatory requirements for quality assurance outlined above. The institution's academic organisational structure is based on disciplinary-based academic Schools, which report into several Executive Faculties.

Programme monitoring and review was introduced in the institution in 2013, following the development of procedures by faculty-based Associate Deans for Teaching and Learning (ADTLs), in consultation with the university leadership and programme leaders (Wickham et al., 2017), and aligned to the 2009 ENQA Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2009).

Two procedures for programme evaluation were developed: an annual monitoring process, designed to provide an opportunity for self-reflection, review and identification of quality-related issues within the programme (APR), and a more robust five-year cyclical programme review, which examined incremental change to support further enhancement of the programme curriculum and development over a longer period (PPR). The five-year cyclical evaluation included requirements for consultation with staff, students, and external stakeholders, and feedback from an appointed external examiner on the documentation generated by the evaluation process. Engagement with both processes for programme evaluation were guided with reference to two proforma templates.

While the procedures for implementation of programme evaluation were developed on an institutionally consistent basis through a university policy on programme review, responsibility for ensuring engagement with the process was largely faculty-based. Implementation of procedures for the annual process locate responsibility for the completion of the annual programme evaluation to the

programme team and Programme Board structures within the institution, with submission of the report to the respective Faculties Teaching and Learning Committee. Responsibility for engagement of the five-year cyclical process similarly resides with the programme team, with submission of the report to both the Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee and the Faculty Management Board.

1.3.4 The Role of Programme Leader

The role of academic programme leadership in higher education institutions is frequently associated with a diverse and multi-dimensional range of responsibilities (Cahill et al., 2015; Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Haugen et al., 2024a; Irving, 2015; Maddock, 2023; Stensaker et al., 2018), incorporating the retention of an active teaching and research portfolio, alongside administrative management, academic oversight, programme development and pastoral responsibility for students (Cahill et al., 2015; Vilkinas & Ladyshewsky, 2012; Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Aitken & O'Carroll, 2020). Programme leaders also play a central role in the assurance and enhancement of programme quality on behalf of their academic area (Cahill et al., 2015; Haugen et al., 2024a; Ladyshewsky & Jones, 2007; Milburn, 2010; Weenink et al., 2022; H. H. Yang, 2024).

As part of their quality management agenda, programme leaders have been frequently identified as assuming responsibility for the coordination of evaluative processes that monitor and assure academic programme quality (Aitken & O'Carroll, 2020; Cahill et al., 2015; Haugen et al., 2024a; Ladyshewsky & Jones, 2007; H. H. Yang, 2024), including coordinating activities on programme development and quality enhancement (Cahill et al., 2015; Milburn, 2010; Weenink et al., 2022; H. H. Yang, 2024). Within this research study, formal programme evaluation processes are typically coordinated by the programme leader, on behalf of the programme team.

1.4. Research Questions

Given the identification of my research problem, my thesis is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do programme leaders understand and prioritise the concept of quality and its relationship to programme evaluation processes?
2. How do programme leaders make sense of their experiences of engaging in programme evaluation?
3. How do programme leaders experience, position, and use evidence in evaluative work on quality?
4. How do programme leaders respond to their experiences of formal programme evaluation in light of their responsibilities for quality assurance and enhancement?

1.5. Positioning Myself within the Research

The motivation for undertaking this research emerged from my professional responsibilities and interests within higher education in roles involving the creation and analysis of data generated within the university as an institutional researcher, and in the coordination of departmental quality reviews. Within these roles, I have most frequently worked with members of the university senior leadership team and other academic and professional leaders, reflecting institutional-level concerns and priorities. Additionally, my work has involved meeting external statutory and regulatory reporting requirements. This work has exposed me to the measures and metrics used by higher education funders and other statutory agencies to monitor the effectiveness of higher education institutions at a systems level.

The work of institutional research is often framed as supporting the use of evidence in decision-making and planning in higher education (Saupe, 1990; Terenzini, 1993; Thorpe, 1999; Volkwein, 1999; Longden & Yorke, 2009; Swing & Ross, 2016). However, as the generator of these statistics, I was often at a remove from how these data were used in practice, which led to lingering questions: how were the data provided being used? Were the data generated considered useful? What, if any, support did the data provide in informing decisions?

A further intersection of this research with my professional work in departmental quality reviews of both academic and professional departments, required by the

statutes underpinning universities (Universities Act, 1997) and quality within higher education (Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012) in Ireland. Although required by statute, rarely, if ever, were departments enthusiastic to undertake a quality review. Therefore, an aspect of this role was seeking to work with the leaders of departments to design approaches to undertaking reviews, which both fulfilled external requirements, and established a specific emphasis for their review that would attempt to provide value to the department. In reflecting on this work, again, questions emerge: What are the challenges faced by the leaders of departments in undertaking reviews? What interactions occur within departments that shape the process of quality review? Do quality reviews contribute to quality enhancement?

I was keen that my research could address some of the questions emerging from my work in both institutional research and quality evaluation. While my role in quality did not have responsibility for the development or implementation of programme evaluation, the monitoring and review of academic programmes is also a statutory requirement under the core guidelines for quality assurance in Ireland (QQI, 2016b). As an evaluation of quality which included reference to several statistical measures of quality it provided a vehicle to consider some of the themes emerging from my professional practice. Finally, as an individual who has worked primarily with more senior academic and professional leaders, understanding the experiences and interpretations of academic programme leaders situated within academic departments provided an opportunity to get insight into a role within the university that I have limited direct experience of working with.

1.6. Definitions Adopted

As an institutionally based research study, the terminology to describe the entities and roles relevant to this research may differ between institutions. Cognisant of institutional variation, my thesis has adopted specific definitions in describing these entities and roles.

For the purposes of this thesis, the term "quality" refers to participants' understandings of the concept of quality, including the characteristics they associate quality in their practice. This encompasses both their individual professional contexts and in their roles as programme leaders of academic programmes.

In this thesis, evaluative practice is conceptualised as a social practice, encompassing activities and initiatives undertaken within the institution with a defined purpose or function in making inferences about quality (Saunders, 2011). In line with this perspective, evaluation is defined, following Saunders (2006) as the, "*purposeful gathering, analysis, and discussion of evidence from relevant sources about the quality, worth, and impact of provision*". Using Saunders (2006) four cluster of evaluative practice, this thesis deals with evaluative practice emerging from "systemic" evaluation, which arises from policy or regulatory frameworks, and the manifestation of these frameworks as "internal" institutional level evaluative practices that make judgements about quality. The thesis also considers how evaluative practice emerges from "self" evaluation, which is undertaken by practitioners, in this case programme leaders and programme teams, for the purposes of improving their programme.

This thesis engages with the tension between quality assurance and enhancement in evaluative practice in higher education. Within the literature, quality assurance is commonly associated with processes designed to support accountability and the diagnostic assessment of quality and standards (Elassy, 2015). In the context of this research, quality assurance refers to evaluative processes and frameworks that are implemented with a view to providing confidence to both internal and external stakeholders on the quality of the academic inputs, processes and outputs in higher education (Mårtensson et al., 2014; Williams, 2016; Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2021; Harvey, 2025).

The concept of quality enhancement emerging from evaluation in this thesis is framed as the processes and activities which specifically aim to extend quality beyond current thresholds or standards (Williams, 2016). In terms of a relationship to quality assurance, it can be aligned to Bigg's (2001) concept of

prospective quality assurance, which is concerned with evaluating quality with a view to encouraging and planning future improvements.

The unit of evaluation described within this research refers to a programme or course of study, which leads to successful completion of an award or qualification. These may be described variably as courses, programmes, or majors within different higher education institutions. For the purposes of clarity, this thesis adopts the term 'programme' to describe these study pathways. Programmes within this study include both bachelor undergraduate degrees and masters-level degrees programmes.

Different organisational structures in individual higher education institutions will define terms associated with the academic organisational structures in diverse ways. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to an 'academic area' to reference the immediate disciplinary-based department, school, institute, or centre to which the research participant belongs.

The study will focus on the experiences of academic staff who have responsibility for the day-to-day management and coordination of academic programmes in higher education institutions, a role that is referred to as 'programme chair' within the institution where this research was conducted. These are referred to variably in existing research as programme or course leader (Cahill et al., 2015; Haugen et al., 2024a; Irving, 2015; Sanderson, 2018; Shawa, 2019), programme or course director (Aitken & O'Carroll, 2020; Maddock, 2023; Milburn, 2010; Vilkinas & Ladyshewsky, 2012; Weenink et al., 2022), or programme or course coordinator (Ladyshewsky & Jones, 2007; Sanderson, 2018). For the purposes of clarity, this research will use the term 'programme leader' where comparable terms are used within the existing literature. Additionally, I recognise that the role of programme leader in some institutions may be coordinated by individuals whose role profile may be classified as a professional support role. In this case of this study, programme leader refers to an academic member of staff, who undertakes the role of programme leader while often simultaneously being involved in teaching and other scholarly activities within their academic area.

The programme-level evaluation processes examined in this research may be variably referred to as review, monitoring, audit, or evaluation processes. Within this thesis, I will refer to these as 'programme evaluation.'

1.7. Structure of the Thesis

This chapter of my thesis has identified the research problem, and the basis for this study. Emerging from the identified research problem, I have outlined the research questions that this study has attempted to address. The chapter concludes with noting my positioning within the research and explains how specific roles and processes will be described throughout the thesis.

Chapter Two will discuss the existing body of academic literature aligned to my research aims and consider the current gaps in the literature that my study will contribute to. Chapter Three rationalises the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as the methodological approach used to address my research questions, and outlines the steps taken in the data collection and analysis of twenty semi-structured interviews with programme leaders in the institutions where this research is situated.

Chapter Four presents my findings, and these are discussed in light of the existing literature in Chapter Five. Finally, Chapter six summarises how the findings of this research address my research questions, considers some limitations of this study, and discusses the implications of this research to practice and potential areas of future research.

1.8. Conclusion

This study addresses a gap in the current body of research on how the tensions between quality assurance and enhancement manifest at the level of academic programmes. Specifically, this study has focused on academic programme leaders, who are often tasked with responsibility for coordinating processes for both the assurance and enhancement of quality within their academic programme, and whose experiences and interpretations of these processes remains under studied. By focusing on how programme leaders make sense of their experiences of formal programme evaluation, this research aims to provide

insight into the practical realities of implementing institutionally defined evaluative processes on academic programmes. In doing so, it aims to examine how these systems influence, enable, or constrain efforts towards assuring and meaningfully enhancing quality in teaching and learning.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter situates my research within the broader academic discourse on programme leadership and quality evaluation in higher education. It considers how academic programme leaders engage with formal evaluative frameworks and outlines the study's contribution to existing knowledge in this domain.

To examine the experiences of programme leaders in navigating evaluation systems, the chapter engages with several interrelated themes. It begins by exploring how the concept of quality has been defined and interpreted within higher education literature. This foundational discussion provides a lens through which evaluative practices can be examined and contextualised.

The chapter then explores the practice of evaluating quality in higher education. Firstly, it examines the role of programme leadership in the context of quality management and quality evaluation, including examining the characteristics of the role that may shape their approach to quality evaluation. This section then considers the findings of existing research on evaluative systems and frameworks that are developed to assure the quality in higher education institutions. Where available, I draw on studies conducted at the programme level to highlight the specific challenges and opportunities faced by programme leaders in implementing and responding to these frameworks.

Finally, the chapter examines the role of evidence-informed practice in attempting to measure quality, with an emphasis on previous studies that explore the how evidence-based approach are positioned and used to make inferences about quality in evaluative work on teaching and learning in higher education contexts.

2.2. The Meaning of Quality in Higher Education

At a conceptual level, research on defining what is meant by quality in contemporary higher education began to emerge in the 1990s, with a number of authors offering a foundational heuristic framework for understanding a range of perspectives through which quality can be defined. One of the most frequently

cited frameworks by Harvey and Green (1993) proposed five primary definitions of quality: exceptional standards, consistency or zero defects, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformation, while in their literature review of contemporary work on definitions of quality, Schindler et al (2015), subsequently identified a conceptual model to define quality under four broad themes as, accountable, purposeful, exceptional, and transformative. More recently, in her critique of these widely adopted definitions of quality, Cheng (2017) argues for inclusion of more human factors into our understanding of quality, including quality reflected as a virtue of professional practice.

However, among those attempting to define quality beyond these broad themes, the concept of quality is frequently proposed as a relativist construct (Barnett, 1992, 1994; Gibbs, 2010; Harvey, 2024a; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Krause, 2012; Nabaho et al., 2017). This relativism is reflected in the argument that the definition of quality is stakeholder-relative (Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Bettinson et al., 2024; Dicker et al., 2019; Gibbs, 2010; Giller, 2023; Green, 1994; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Harvey & Green, 1993; Houston, 2008; Krause, 2012; Lemaitre, 2002; Udam & Heidmets, 2013; Van Kemenade et al., 2008; Vettori & Lueger, 2010), context-dependent (Gibbs, 2010; Skelton, 2004; Van Kemenade et al., 2008; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Krause, 2012; Leiber & Seyfried, 2025); and shaped by the people, standards, and values (Van Kemenade et al., 2008; Newton, 2010) that underpin it.

These shifting lenses through which quality is understood positions quality as a multi-faceted (Watty, 2003; Marshall, 2016; Nabaho et al., 2017; Leiber & Seyfried, 2025), complex (Houston, 2008; Krause, 2012), and continually evolving (Shields, 1999; Giller, 2023) concept, to the point that the elusiveness of quality makes it arguably undefinable (Pirsig, 1974; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011). Using Pirsig's seminal philosophical work on defining the essence of quality, Shields (1999) leverages Pirsig's thesis to propose that quality in teaching and learning in higher education cannot be conceptualised as a static feature or characteristic, but instead revealed as a more fluid and evolving and emerging concept, typified through the emerging and shifting relationship between the student and knowledge.

As a subjective and stakeholder-specific concept, definitions of quality have therefore been argued to be "*never neutral, or innocent. They are about balances of power, within higher education and between higher education and other social actors." (Lemaitre, 2002, p. 34).* Therefore, within evaluative systems at policy and institutional level, the concept of quality is inevitably shaped by the values that underpin how we understand the fundamental purpose and concept of higher education (De Weert, 1990; Barnett, 1992, 1994; Green, 1994; Ashwin et al., 2015; Westerheijden et al., 2014; Nabaho et al., 2017; Ashwin, 2020a, 2020b; Paul & Quiggin, 2020; Tavadze, 2023), which may be interpreted differently at policy, institutional, or sub-institutional level (De Weert, 1990; Elton, 1998; Knight & Trowler, 2000; Watty, 2003; Filippakou, 2011).

It therefore follows that if we accept that concepts of quality are not neutral, then the systems developed to evaluate quality are also inherently non-neutral (Patton, 1998). Instead these systems of evaluation are shaped by the subjective values, power struggles (Barnett, 1992, 1994; Filippakou, 2011) and political priorities (Henkel, 1998; Skolnik, 2010), that underpin how quality is conceptualised, and subsequently evaluated.

2.2.1 The Meaning of Quality in Formal Evaluation

The value systems that underpin how quality is conceptualised inevitably inform how the concept of quality is reflected and prioritised within evaluative systems developed to assure and support the ongoing enhancement of educational quality. At a policy level, definitions of quality have been described as synonymous with quality as value for money, based on return on public investment in higher education (Lemaitre, 2002; Harvey, 2007; Newton, 2010) or 'fitness for purpose' in delivering the market-oriented requirements for student choice, or fulfilling employment-centric skills needs (Ashwin et al., 2015). These policy-level priorities subsequently shape how quality is reflected within the regulatory frameworks and systems that underpin quality assurance and evaluation processes at institutional level (Filippakou, 2011; Westerheijden et al., 2014; Beerkens, 2015).

Existing literature highlights a divergence between how educational quality is interpreted and prioritised within policy-driven assurance frameworks and how it is understood by academic staff engaged in teaching and learning (Cartwright, 2007; Dicker et al., 2019; Mårtensson et al., 2014; Nabaho et al., 2017; Newton, 2002; Saarinen, 2010; Udam & Heidmets, 2013; Williams, 2016). In contrast, studies examining academic staff interpretations of quality have emphasised conceptions of quality that prioritise student transformation (Newton, 2002; Watty, 2003; Houston, 2008), the effectiveness of teaching (Dicker et al., 2019), and the dynamics that underpin relationships between students and staff (Dicker et al., 2019; Udam & Heidmets, 2013).

The coexistence of multiple interpretations of quality across policy, institutional, and academic domains, creates what Filippakou (2011) refers to as a "*network of discourses*", where policy-driven objectives of quality assurance intersect with the educational priorities of academic practice. The tension between these priorities and objectives can result in a "*decoupling*" (Overberg, 2019) between the conceptualisation of quality embedded within assurance systems and the lived experience of quality as understood by academic staff. This misalignment can result in quality assurance processes being perceived as bureaucratic or performative exercises, which have a limited substantive connection to educational quality (Newton, 2000; Tam, 2001; Newton, 2002; Watty, 2003; Anderson, 2006; Cartwright, 2007; Houston, 2008; Filippakou, 2011; Kleijnen et al., 2013; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014; Beerkens, 2015; Overberg, 2019; Harrison et al., 2022; Watty, 2003; Abdulaziz Aldhobaib, 2024).

Given the tensions between how quality is defined by different stakeholders, and how these relate to processes that evaluate quality, Leiber and Seyfried (2025) have proposed the importance of '*quality literacy*' in navigating contrasting perspectives on how quality is both defined and interpreted within the processes and methodologies used to evaluate, measure, and assure quality. The concept of 'quality literacy' involves a capacity to move between and within multi-faceted understandings of quality, as required by institutional systems and other stakeholders. Arguably, programme leaders interpretations of quality may offer a

unique perspective, reflecting a distinctive 'quality literacy' (Leiber & Seyfried, 2025) that requires them to, "*to detect and understand different perspectives of quality, their inherent conceptual complexity, the practical challenges and resulting dilemmas*" (p.13).

Leiber and Seyfried's conclusions identify a gap in the current academic discourse, and a need to understand more about the role and consequences of quality literacy in evaluating quality of teaching and learning in higher education. This study responds to this identified gap, by considering how programme leaders interpret how quality is understood in the context of evaluative systems at programme level, and how they attempt to navigate these systems.

2.3. Programme Leaders and Their Responsibilities for Quality

As outlined above, the tensions between how the concept of quality is defined and interpreted within these frameworks provides a central tenet for how programme leaders navigate the evaluation of quality in their roles. This section of the literature review considers how the role and positioning of the programme leader within an institutional context may also contribute to their experiences of navigating these tensions.

As outlined in the introduction Section 1.3.3, programme leaders have a wide and varied role, incorporating both day-to-day programme management, as well as responsibility for the assurance and enhancement of quality within their programme. These responsibilities, which typically involve the monitoring and assuring academic quality, and coordinating programme development, position programme leadership as an academic middle-management role (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Saunders & Sin, 2015; Maddock, 2023).

Programme leadership, like many academic departmental leadership positions, is often fulfilled in the absence of line-management authority (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Milburn, 2010; Sanderson, 2018; Maddock, 2023). The role therefore requires programme leaders to progress their responsibilities by leveraging collegial goodwill (Whitchurch, 2009; Milburn, 2010; Sanderson, 2018; Haugen et al., 2024a), and engaging in collaborative practice with colleagues (Cahill et al.,

2015). Programme leadership can therefore be argued to require what Knight and Trowler (2000) describe as '*interactional leadership'*, where the responsibilities of the role are progressed through '*directed collegiality'* (p.78), which leverages a shared understanding of social and cultural norms and common goals among the programme team, rather than through direct managerial authority.

The positioning of programme leadership within broader organisational structures inevitably shapes their approach to coordinating responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement within their area. Translating and implementing institutional policy, while simultaneously encouraging peer engagement with local developmental practice has been previously identified as representing a managerial-collegial duality (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). In a quality assurance context, this dual perspective positions programme leaders as key brokers between the translation and interpretation of assurance-based policy and regulations to programme teams, and attempting to collegially influence and navigate enhancement-focused change and programme development (Milburn, 2010; Irving, 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Weenink et al., 2022; Haugen et al., 2024a). Programme leaders' work in evaluating quality is therefore inevitably progressed through mediating practices (Saunders & Sin, 2015) that reflect the "*alternating currents*" (Haugen et al., 2024b) between the vertical pressures of compliance and alignment with institutional rules, regulations, and processes; and horizontal signals, emerging from their inherent academic values (Saunders & Sin, 2015) and knowledge of locally-situated programme stakeholder needs, e.g., colleagues, students or external (Haugen et al., 2024a, 2024b).

A growing body of research has explored the lived experiences of programme leaders (Cahill et al., 2015; Haugen et al., 2024b; Sanderson, 2018; Shawa, 2019; Stensaker et al., 2019), offering valuable insights into the complexities of the role. Several previous studies have also examined how programme leaders are positioned within higher education institutions (Winter, 2009; Vilkinas & Ladyshewsky, 2012; Saunders & Sin, 2015; Irving, 2015; Haugen et al., 2024a), and have mapped the breadth of responsibilities associated with the role (Aitken & O'Carroll, 2020; Milburn, 2010; Mitchell, 2015). However, relatively few have

specifically focused on programme leaders' experiences managing the evaluation of quality in the context of these dualistic pressures.

A small number of studies that have directly addressed how programme leaders experiences in planning quality enhancement and change initiatives within academic programmes (Saunders & Sin, 2015; Weenink et al., 2022). Weenink et al.'s study investigated the experiences of programme leaders in the social sciences discipline across multiple institutions in the Netherlands, focusing on how they understand and enact quality management within the broader scope of their responsibilities. In contrast, Saunders and Sin examined the tensions faced by academic middle managers, including programme leaders, in implementing a policy-driven Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) within Scottish universities. While both studies address quality enhancement, they do so from distinct vantage points: Saunders and Sin focussed on the implementation of externally mandated national policy, whereas Weenink et al. explored departmentally initiated enhancement planning as part of ongoing internal quality management.

Despite these differing contexts, both studies shed light on how the managerialist–collegial tensions play out in coordinating quality-related initiatives. Saunders and Sin's findings highlight the friction between national policy goals and the challenges of translating these into meaningful local practices. Meanwhile, Weenink et al.'s findings emphasise the intra-departmental tensions that can arise when programme leaders navigate issues of academic seniority and the diverse, often conflicting, interpretations of quality among disciplinary colleagues.

Taken together, these studies underscore the complexity of programme leadership in the evaluation and enhancement of academic quality. Saunders and Sin advocate for inclusive, locally owned frameworks that support meaningful engagement, while Weenink et al. demonstrate that even within such locally driven approaches, programme leaders must contend with intricate social dynamics and norms when planning and implementing quality enhancement initiatives.

The identified gap in understanding how programme leaders interpret and prioritise the concept of quality and navigate their dualistic responsibilities is

significant for two key reasons. Firstly, given the dual positioning of programme leaders, it is important to understand how the demands of their role shape their conceptualisation of quality, particularly where institutional and practice-based understandings of quality diverge. Secondly, and more critically, programme leaders are responsible for managing both the assurance and enhancement of quality within their programmes. Gaining insight into how they conceptualise quality and apply this within evaluative processes allows for a more nuanced reflection on how meaning about these processes is interpreted and managed at a programme level.

2.4. Evaluating Quality in Higher Education

This section of the literature review examines the characteristics of institutional frameworks used to evaluate quality in higher education, with a particular focus on the evaluation of teaching and learning. It begins by exploring how these evaluative frameworks have been positioned in previous studies, highlighting the mechanisms and criteria commonly deployed to evaluate educational quality. The discussion then considers how academic staff experience and interpret these frameworks in practice, drawing on empirical research that examines their engagement with institutional quality assurance processes.

Finally, this section considers the proposed dual functions of these frameworks to both assurance and enhance quality and asks if the tensions between the goals and objectives of quality assurance and enhancement can be reconciled within a singular framework for evaluations; and if not, what are the alternative strategies for addressing these competing aims.

2.4.1 Framing Evaluative Practice on Quality

Within higher education, numerous scholars have identified a range of frameworks, paradigms, and cultures that shape the practice of evaluation. These frameworks reflect how evaluation may be shaped by its objectives (Bogue, 1998; Harvey & Newton, 2004), institutional priorities (Bamber, 2011c, 2011b) varying stakeholder expectations (Iacovidou et al., 2009), or epistemological underpinnings (Harvey, 2007)

Bamber's (2011c, p. 167) *Discretionary Framework for Evaluative Practice* illustrates how varying degrees of control and scope shape different forms of evaluative activity within institutions. Bamber's framework was later applied in a study with Sally Anderson (Bamber & Anderson, 2012) to explore how academic staff engaged with subject-level evaluations of teaching and learning used different forms of evidence within both institutional and local level evaluations. Although their study focused on subject-level rather than programme-level evaluation, the framework remains relevant to this research, particularly in examining how scope, control, and evidentiary practices influence the experiences of those engaging with institutional evaluation systems.

The findings from Bamber and Anderson's study underscore the complexity of evaluating quality in higher education. Their work highlights the challenges posed by systems designed to serve multiple goals and audiences, and advocates for recognition of the value of discrete evaluative processes to separately address the aims of quality assurance and quality enhancement. This distinction is particularly pertinent in considering evaluative work coordinated by academic programme leaders, who, as part of their responsibilities, often navigate these overlapping demands while coordinating quality assurance and enhancement within their programmes.

Both Bamber (2011) and Bamber and Anderson (2012) associate tightly controlled and narrowly focused evaluation practices with top-down, policy-driven, or institutionally mandated quality assurance processes. In contrast, evaluative practices characterised by looser control and broader scope tend to emerge from bottom-up initiatives and are more frequently focused on supporting quality enhancement. The tensions between these two approaches, namely external, compliance-oriented assurance and internally driven enhancement, are central to Bamber and Anderson's analysis and are echoed in other research. This body of work highlights a disconnect between the purposes of formal, highly structured evaluation systems and their capacity to support meaningful enhancement of programmes. Specifically, while top-down frameworks may effectively serve

accountability and compliance functions, they often lack the flexibility needed to support planning on genuine improvement.

As noted in Section 2.2.1 above, some of the tensions between assurance and enhancement have been identified as rooted in the dissonance between the policy goals of quality assurance and the values of academics (Vettori & Lueger, 2010; Blanco Ramírez, 2013; Beerkens, 2015; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025). Other studies exploring the implementation of quality assurance within higher education institutions also suggest a misalignment between the goals of institutional frameworks for quality assurance and the realities everyday academic practice (Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Williams, 2016; Seyfried & Reith, 2019; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025). However, further critique of institutional assurance systems focuses on the mechanics of the implementation of these frameworks, which frequently emphasise control and alignment to rules and regulations rather than providing flexibility to support innovation and creativity (Hoecht, 2006; Stensaker, 2008; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Kleijnen et al., 2013; Mårtensson et al., 2014; Haugen et al., 2024b)

Given that programme leaders are often tasked with coordinating both quality assurance and enhancement activities, their experiences offer critical insight into the appropriateness and effectiveness of institutional evaluation systems and their relationship to academic practice. As coordinators of quality at the programme level, programme leaders must interpret and implement policy-informed frameworks while simultaneously engaging with academic colleagues and students in ongoing quality management and enhancement efforts. Their dual role requires them to understand and reflect on the tensions between institutional policy goals and stakeholder-driven understandings of quality.

These experiences provide valuable perspectives on how formal programme evaluation processes respond (or fail to respond) to the local priorities of staff, students, and other stakeholders. Building on Bamber and Anderson's (2012) work at subject level, this research focuses on programme-level evaluation, exploring how programme leaders experience and respond to institutional quality frameworks in practice. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the

interplay between policy, practice, and professional judgement in the evaluation of academic quality at programme level.

2.4.2 Institutional Systems for Evaluation

The procedures for the conduct and scope of formal programme evaluation within the institution where this research is located reflect an institutional response to national policy requirements, specifically those outlined in the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (2016b). As noted in Chapter one, these guidelines are based on a close interpretation of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG) (2015) which have become a foundational reference point for quality assurance across Europe. Previous studies have suggested evidence of convergence in QA practices across European nations. For example, Lynch and Kelo (Lynch & Kelo, 2020) report that two-thirds of national quality assurance systems fully mirror the ESG. However, other studies point to a significant variation in how these transnational guidelines are interpreted and operationalised at the national level (Westerheijden et al., 2014; Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020; Manatos & Huisman, 2020; Giller, 2023), and note that the interpretation of these guidelines often reflect distinctive national priorities that shape the development of assurance systems for higher education at national level. While acknowledging the broader discourse on transnational and national policy objectives for quality assurance, and their influence on institutional practices, this thesis focuses specifically on institutional-level processes and systems for evaluation at programme-level. This focus allows for a more granular exploration of the issues and experiences reflected in the experiences of programme leaders in the context of their responsibilities for internal quality assurance.

The current body of literature that specifically addresses the experiences of those implementing internal evaluation processes specifically at programme level is relatively limited (Newton, 2000, 2002; Bers, 2011; Zohrabi, 2012; Wickham et al., 2017; Stensaker et al., 2019; Weenink et al., 2022). However, a much broader body of literature examines the implementation of a wider range of quality assurance processes on academic quality in teaching and learning, which may include

quality evaluation as an element of the over-arching assurance framework. Several common themes can be identified within this literature on how institutional or policy driven quality assurance processes are positioned, interpreted, and experienced by academic staff tasked with implementing them.

2.4.3 Perceptions of QA Systems by Academic Staff

2.4.3.1 Central Ownership and Control

Previous research and analysis on the implementation of QA systems in higher education points to a tendency for institutional assurance and evaluation frameworks to be heavily influenced by both external regulatory requirements and institutional-level quality priorities and value-systems (Saunders, 2011; Beerkens, 2015; Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025). Within institutions, the perceived imposition of mandated processes for quality assurance has been argued to result in these systems being interpreted by academic staff as *external* evaluations, and as such, can be perceived as imposed systems which are at odds with the values associated with locally owned, bottom-up self-evaluative practices in their own academic areas (Saunders, 2011).

Jethro Newton used the metaphor of "*feeding the beast*" (2000) to describe a sentiment expressed by academics, where engagement with quality assurance processes assumes a metaphoric organisational life form, both mystical and threatening; external to, and disconnected from, academics' own priorities and values. When interpreted as being largely for external purposes rather than local priorities and values, quality assurance processes have also been argued to contribute to a sense of disillusionment or cynicism in the value of the process (Newton, 2000, 2002; Skolnik, 2010) or feelings of marginalisation from how the outputs of quality assurance processes are used by the institution (Hoecht, 2006). This perceived lack of agency or ownership of quality assurance processes has also been found to contribute to interpretations of quality assurance processes as a threat to professional and academic autonomy (Newton, 2002; Hoecht, 2006; Cardoso et al., 2018; Agasisti et al., 2019; Giller, 2023).

2.4.3.2 Managing Bureaucratic Burden

In implementing institutional-level frameworks for the assurance of quality, existing empirical studies on the experiences and interpretations of academic staff position these processes as being largely compliance-based bureaucratic instruments (Newton, 2000, 2002; Anderson, 2006; Stensaker, 2008; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014; Kallio et al., 2016; Overberg, 2019; Seyfried & Reith, 2019). As bureaucratic systems, engagement is often interpreted as "box-ticking" (Hoecht, 2006; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014) that emphasises documentation and reporting (Newton, 2000, 2002; Hoecht, 2006; Cahill et al., 2015; Stensaker, 2008; Haugen et al., 2024a), and inevitably draws time away from work that may more actively contribute to quality and its enhancement (Vettori, 2023).

Commonly within these studies, where systems of assurance are predominantly positioned as bureaucratic instruments for compliance and accountability, engagement with these processes has been characterised as symbolic (Hoecht, 2006; Vaira, 2011; Westerheijden et al., 2014; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014; Greatbatch, 2016; H. Borch, 2020; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025), or tokenistic (Newton, 1999, 2000; Minelli et al., 2015). These perceptions of bureaucratic burden contribute to academics in some existing studies expressing frustration at the time spent on bureaucratic tasks (Newton, 2000, 2002; Anderson, 2006; Hoecht, 2006; Zohrabi, 2012; Kallio et al., 2016; Vettori, 2023), rather than contributing meaningfully to measuring or supporting the improvement of quality.

2.4.4 Academic Responses to Engagement with Evaluation Systems

In addition to capturing the lived experiences of academics' engagement with institutional frameworks for quality assurance, a body of previous work also examines the ways in which academics respond to the imposition of formal evaluative systems. While the experiences of academic staff to institutional quality assurance systems are predominantly critical of the limitations of the scope and procedural requirements of these processes, existing literature points to a variety of responses by academic staff to the implementation of these systems (Newton, 2002; O'Siochru et al., 2023; Cartwright, 2007; Overberg & Ala-Vähälä, 2020).

In some cases, academic staff express a pragmatic acceptance of the existence of these processes (Newton, 2002; Anderson, 2006; Hoecht, 2006; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Overberg, 2019; Overberg & Ala-Vähälä, 2020; O'Siochru et al., 2023). Some previous studies also suggest this acceptance may be more likely among specific demographic groups of academics, for example, early-career academics who consider these frameworks to be normalised as part of expected academic work (O'Siochru et al., 2023; Overberg, 2019), or female academics (Overberg & Ala-Vähälä, 2020).

A second response identified in previous studies is active or passive resistance by academics to the imposition of quality assurance frameworks (Newton, 1999, 2000, 2002; Cartwright, 2007; Westerheijden et al., 2014; Vettori, 2018). Where quality assurance processes are perceived to represent bureaucratic burden, the provision of extensive documentation, this passive resistance can be identified as taking the form of minimalist engagement with the processes (Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014; Cartwright, 2007; Harvey, 2024a; Hoecht, 2006; Newton, 1999, 2000, 2002; Overberg, 2019; Perovsek, 2016; Seyfried & Reith, 2019). Indicative of this approach is the adoption of a "copy-paste" principle to create the pretence of engagement with required documentation (Perovsek, 2016), where participation is characterised as going along with established rules, rather than active or meaningful engagement (Hoecht, 2006; Cartwright, 2007).

While minimalist engagement may be interpreted as a benign response to externally imposed requirements, previous studies also identify the emergence of its more malignant sibling, "*game-playing*"(Anderson, 2006; Elton, 2004; Harvey, 2002; Liu, 2015; Newton, 2002; T. Cooper, 2003; Liu, 2015), where academic participation with quality assurance processes involves the construction of particular narratives that are considered to align to the perceived 'correct answers' required by quality assurance frameworks. A number of previous studies cite the futility of this game playing as further contributing to demotivation and disillusionment with evaluative processes (Elton, 2004; Newton, 2002; Taylor, 2020).

A third response identified within the literature the adaptation or development of alternative approaches to evaluation in response to the perceived limitations of formal, assurance-based processes. Newton (2002), drawing on the concept of policy reconstruction (Trowler, 1998), identifies evidence of policy reconstruction in the adaptation or interpretation of evaluative processes by academics to both attach more meaning to these processes, while continuing to satisfy the broad requirements of the institutional processes. Newton's description of this adaptation appears to represent reinterpretation within the confines of the overall assurance framework itself; his example of this practice being drawn from the use of alternative approaches to gathering student feedback as part of annual programme monitoring.

The experiences and responses of academic staff to formal evaluative frameworks within the existing body of academic literature tends to be largely critical of both the construction and implementation of institutional quality assurance systems. In light of this, the experiences of programme leaders, who hold defined responsibilities for both assuring and enhancing quality, warrant specific attention and remains underdeveloped within existing research.

While several studies have explored programme leaders' engagement with quality assurance as part of their broader professional responsibilities (Cahill et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Sanderson, 2018; Stensaker et al., 2019; Aitken & O'Carroll, 2020; Haugen et al., 2024a) or evaluative practice by programme leadership within specific academic disciplines, for example, healthcare (Haugen et al., 2024b) and social science disciplines (Weenink et al., 2022), there are relatively few existing studies that examine how institutional processes are reflected in local disciplinary contexts by programme leaders across a whole institution. This thesis contributes to the existing body of knowledge by adopting a cross-institutional, multi-disciplinary approach to examining programme leaders' experiences and responses to evaluative systems. By focusing on a single institution, the research offers a detailed and holistic account of how programme leaders within the institution engage with formal evaluation frameworks across diverse academic contexts, providing insight into the alignment (or misalignment) between policy-

driven evaluation systems and the realities of academic practice across an institution.

2.4.5 Can Quality Assurance and Enhancement be Reconciled?

The critique of the capacity of policy-driven or systematic quality assurance frameworks to support quality improvement on programmes leads to questions of where and how quality enhancement takes place within institutions. As part of their critique of institutional level approaches to evaluate and assure quality, and their limited capacity to support enhancement, several previous studies offer arguments and proposals for how institutional systems may more effectively support enhancement (Stensaker, 2008; Saunders, 2011; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Bamber, 2011c; Kleijnen et al., 2013; Mårtensson et al., 2014; Ashwin, 2020a; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025).

In contrast to the external or centralised control that characterises formal frameworks for quality evaluation, a number of previous studies have argued for greater alignment to the quality values that reflect particular contexts and social-practice from which they emerge (Bamber, 2011c; Saunders et al., 2011; Saunders & Sin, 2015). This aligns with the view that quality is conceptually context-driven, and as such, the location and ownership of evaluative systems should speak directly to how quality is understood and interpreted within those contexts (Harvey & Newton, 2004; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Mårtensson et al., 2014; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025). Context-specific approaches to evaluation are therefore argued to not only acknowledge the importance of quality being interpreted in context, but also contribute to stronger academic ownership and enable evaluation processes to leverage the pre-existing intrinsic commitment of academic colleagues to quality enhancement (Bogue, 1998; Cartwright, 2007; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Kleijnen et al., 2013; Lackner, 2023).

Considerable debate remains on the potential for institutional systems of evaluation to manage the tension between twin goals of assurance and enhancement. Challenges in realising this have been argued to be a result of the diametric relationship between the values and priorities of academic work and the

goals and perceived performance based values of quality assurance (Newton, 2010; Williams, 2016; Harrison et al., 2022). However, others argue that quality assurance and enhancement should not be treated as separate goals (Kaçaniku, 2020), and suggest the possibility that approaches to quality assurance and management can be tailored to promote enhancement, rather than control (Hoecht, 2006; Pohlenz, 2022). At a policy-level, this has be envisaged through the development of more flexible frameworks that enable a symbiotic relationship between assurance and enhancement (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008). Other research has suggested that at institutional level, assurance and enhancement form part of a necessary, integrated, and interactive continuum, with assurance systems offering a diagnostic function, which are subsequently addressed through enhancement planning (Elassy, 2015). Further attempts to address the limitations of compliance-based assurance have recommended the development of institutional frameworks that are underpinned by self-regulation, essentially shifting the emphasis of evaluative practice from top-down implementations towards "bottom-up" driven initiatives to support quality enhancement (Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Mårtensson et al., 2014).

The potential for programme leaders to reshape regulatory or institutional frameworks for evaluation is, arguably, limited. Their role as coordinators of quality assurance and enhancement at the programme level requires them to navigate evaluative processes that may be defined externally by policy or internally by institutional mandates. At the same time, they are expected to collegially lead and support opportunities for quality enhancement within their academic programmes. This dual responsibility places programme leaders in a complex position, where they must reconcile top-down policy requirements with bottom-up academic and stakeholder expectations. Their experiences, and more critically, their responses, to navigating evaluative processes that aim to assure and/or enhance quality remain largely unexplored, particularly within institutions. Understanding these experiences is essential to evaluating the effectiveness and

relevance of institutional quality systems in supporting meaningful academic improvement.

2.5. Measuring Quality in Evaluation

Central to the practice of evaluation is the consideration of the methods used to support conclusions or inferences about quality. This section explores the emergence of evidence-informed practice in higher education, with a particular focus on how evidence is positioned and utilised to assess the quality of teaching and learning within programme evaluation. In this section, I examine key themes from existing research, focusing my analysis on the experiences and responses of academic staff to evidence-informed practices embedded within systems of quality assurance and quality evaluation.

Examining the role of evidence-based practice in evaluation is framed as a distinct element of my study. This approach is informed by the increasing ubiquity of evidence-based practice in the evaluation of both quality and performance of higher education institutions, both within and beyond programme evaluation. As such, it merits specific attention in the context of this study to enable an examination of how the use of evidence in evaluation both influences evaluative outcomes and underlying assumptions about what constitutes quality in teaching and learning within evaluative processes. By examining how academics engage with and interpret evidence in the context of evaluation, I also consider the broader implications of evidence use in shaping how quality is conceptualised and understood by those undertaking evaluative work in previous studies.

2.5.1 The Emergence of Evidence-Based Practice

The emergence of evidence-informed practice to evaluate policy or steer the priorities of publicly funded organisations has emerged in the US since the 1980s (Alexander, 2000) and in the UK since the 1990s (Baba & HakemZadeh, 2012; Head, 2008). For the higher education sector in the UK, its emergence as a tool is linked to the Education Reform Act of 1998 and, further, the creation of the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) in 1992 (Alexander, 2000). Within an Irish higher education context, evidence-based measurement on the

performance of Irish universities has emerged in the establishment a strategic dialogue and performance-compact between the higher education funding body and higher education institutions (HEA, 2013, 2018, 2023). This is further reflected in the establishment of core guidelines for the assurance of quality in higher education (QQI, 2016b), which included reference to how data and information are used within higher education institutions to inform decisions and evaluate practice. Both the practice of evidence-informed decision making, and the development of specific measures or metrics on higher education performance, can be viewed as an attempt by policy makers to introduce tools for the measurement and monitoring of higher education institutions, with the aim of aligning institutional priorities and performance to national policy objectives (Hazelkorn et al., 2015; Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2019).

The origins of evidence-based decision-making (EBDM) are rooted in the idea that scientifically generated measurement can be applied to improve the rigour, quality and impact of policy decisions (Head, 2008) and contribute toward increased public accountability and improved effectiveness (Lingard, 2013; Newman, 2017) or to support continuous organisational enhancement and encourage knowledge building (Besharov, 2009). In the context of academic programmes, evidence-informed practice can be variably used for the purposes of monitoring or performance or efficiency (Alach, 2017b, 2017a; Argento et al., 2020; Biesta, 2007; Broadbent, 2007; Dobija et al., 2019; Kairuz et al., 2016; Kallio et al., 2016; Rabovsky, 2014; Seyama, 2015; Sharvashidze et al., 2023; Stephens & Gallagher, 2022), informing judgement on quality (Ashwin, 2020a; Austen & Jones-Devitt, 2019; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Barbato et al., 2022; Beerkens, 2018, 2022; Chalmers, 2008; Elton, 2004; Leiber, 2019; Pettersen, 2015; Sloan, 2015; Thiedig & Wegner, 2024), or supporting decision-making on future planning (Argento et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2023; Chan, 2020; Robertson et al., 2019; Söderlind & Geschwind, 2019; ter Bogt & Scapens, 2012).

While evidence-based practice has arguably been intended to provide an alternative approach to faith-based or ideologically-led approaches to evaluation and decision-making in higher education (Head, 2010), previous studies have

critiqued the robustness of evidence-based evaluation that rely on quantitative measures of quality, arguing that these have contributed to the development of measures of quality that are grounded in techno-rational or instrumental logics (Henkel, 1998; Melrose, 1998; Harvey, 2007; Bloxham, 2012; Blanco Ramírez, 2013; Pettersen, 2015), that fail to reflect the complex, emergent and context-dependent nature of quality.

If, as previously argued in this chapter, the conceptualisation of quality in higher education is both complex and contested, and the frameworks used to evaluate quality reflective of the relative power and priorities of those who define it, then it follows that the methods used to measure quality are similarly shaped by similarly subjective or political influences. While indicators and metrics for evaluating quality are often presented as methodologically objective, the selection of specific measures of quality has been previously argued to be often inherently influenced by political, social, and institutional value systems (Rabovsky, 2014; Natow, 2022).

These choices carry significant implications for both how quality is evaluated and judged, and how it is understood and characterised in practice. A substantial body of literature has highlighted the political and practical consequences of these evaluative choices (Henkel, 1998; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014; Dahler-Larsen, 2014; Rabovsky, 2014; Seyama, 2015; Dobija et al., 2019; Dahler-Larsen, 2015; Taylor, 2020; Brown et al., 2023). These studies underscore the need to critically examine the assumptions embedded within quantitative quality measures and the broader systems in which they operate. In doing so, they challenge the notion of neutrality in measurement of quality in evaluation and ask questions about the ways in which evidence shapes, and is shaped by, institutional and policy agendas.

2.5.2 Measuring Quality within Formal Evaluating Frameworks

Prior studies on the use of evidence to evaluate quality within assurance-based frameworks identify the predominance of market-based approaches (Ashwin et al., 2015; Taylor, 2020) to conceptualise quality, and the frequent centrality of positivist approaches to the measurement of quality (Harvey, 2007; Bloxham, 2012; Beerkens, 2018). The scale and breadth of metrics that claim to measure

academic quality of teaching and learning is extensive; for example, a 2020 report by the Erasmus+ Sustainable Quality Enhancement in Higher Education, Learning, and Teaching (SQELT) Project identifies over 800 potential performance indicators to monitor the quality and performance of teaching and learning in higher education (Sustainable Quality Enhancement in Higher Education Learning and Teaching (SQELT-PI), 2020).

As discussed previously, the multifaceted, context dependent, and stakeholder relative definitions of quality are recognised as having created considerable challenges in establishing methodological approaches to measure quality reliably and consistently over time (Stensaker, 2008; Beerkens, 2018). Measures within policy-driven frameworks have been previously identified to predominantly rely on efficiency or output signifiers of effectiveness (Elton, 2004); for example, student academic performance, student retention, graduation classification etc (Ball & Wilkinson, 1994; Barnett, 1992; Beerkens, 2015; Bogue, 1998; Johnes & Taylor, 1990; Taylor, 2020).

2.5.2.1 Relationship Between Evidence and Quality

Several previous studies have highlighted the limitations and risks associated with relying on quantitative measures to make judgments or inferences about academic quality. These studies note that common indicators associated with quality assurance processes are frequently indirect proxies, rather than direct indicators of quality (Argento et al., 2020; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Broadbent, 2007; Elton, 2004). These proxies have been argued to be "*blunt*" (Anderson, 2006) in that they do not directly measure the phenomenon under evaluation (Ashwin, 2020a), and through quantification, assume a linear relationship between educational inputs, processes, and outputs (Broadbent, 2007; Beerkens, 2018; Pettersen, 2015; Pohlenz, 2022). As blunt proxies, previous research studies have argued that they reduce the complex dynamics of educational processes to simplified metrics that fail to capture the nuanced and multifaceted nature of quality in education (Yorke, 1991; Barnett, 1992, 1994; Tam, 2001; Broadbent, 2007; Gibbs, 2010; Beerkens, 2015, 2018; Robertson et al., 2019; Argento et al., 2020; Sarrico, 2022).

A further critique of the preferencing of quantitative measures of quality is that they rely on data that is considered easily accessible and available within institutions, rather than primarily considering how and if such measures appropriately reflect their intended purpose (Yorke, 1991; Biesta, 2007; Broadbent, 2007; Chalmers, 2008; Beerkens, 2022; Sarrico, 2022; Harvey, 2024b). The prioritisation of what *"could be quantified, rather than ensuring genuine quality"* (Anderson, 2006, p. 168) has been argued to preference accessibility over validity, which risks limiting the credibility of the measures, and by implication, the credibility of the frameworks that rely on those measures (Anderson, 2006; Lodge & Bonsanquet, 2014; Harvey, 2024b).

2.5.2.2 Quantification and Embedded Realities

As a commonly identified risk of preferencing accessibility over reliability, previous studies have also noted that quantitative measures of quality are often "seized" (Harvey & Green, 1993) and given credibility within the frameworks that adopt them. Over time, these measures become embedded within institutional practices and are legitimised as authoritative indicators of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993; Patton, 1998; Gibbs, 2010; Dahler-Larsen, 2014; Barnetson & Cutright, 2000; Tam, 2001; Lewis, 2015; Hora et al., 2017; Söderlind & Geschwind, 2019; Taylor, 2020; Chun & Sauder, 2022; Barbato et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2023).

Both Chun and Sauder (2022) and Söderind and Geschwind's (2019) studies offer insight into how the embedding of quantitative metrics within institutions impacts how staff make sense of their work, and what is considered "good work". Söderind and Geschwind's study is based on academic managers in Sweden, Chun and Sauder's work relates to staff, both academic and professional, in a university in Korea. In both cases, their research examined quantification across multiple domains of university activity, including the evaluation of teaching and learning.

Both studies highlight how performance-based indicators may become reified within the social fabric and everyday practices of academic life. Despite a general recognition by the authors of the limitations of quantitative metrics to provide reliable measures of quality, their findings examine how these measures have nonetheless shaped how staff within their studies made sense of quality and

influenced what is considered important by staff in terms of quality. However, the studies also reflect contrasts in how research participants navigate quantification in measuring quality. Within Chung and Sauder's study, quantification resulted in a cultural shift towards new logics of quality and performance based on perceived quantification of quality, creating distinctive and reinforcing systems, which the authors acknowledge may be reflective, at least in part, of the cultural distinctiveness of Korean higher education. In contrast, Söderind and Geschwind identified actions on the part of academic managers to moderate the primacy of quantitative measures, through an acknowledgement of the more complex quality values and priorities that quantitative metrics were unable to assess (p. 89). However, both these studies reflect how particular knowledge resources and practice create symbolic structures, which are subsequently 'ossified' as having meaning within institutional contexts Trowler (2011b).

The legitimisation of quantitative indicators within evaluative practices in higher education has therefore been described as an example of "*conceptual technologies*" that, "*shape what issues we think about, and how we think about those issues"*(Barnetson & Cutright, 2000, p. 289). Barnetson and Cutright, along with others, argue that the implementation of quantitative measures that influence how quality in higher education is understood and prioritised risk a deterioration in academic autonomy (Barnetson & Cutright, 2000; Elton, 2004; Melo et al., 2010; Taylor, 2020), where metrics reinforce organisational logics (Elsworth, 1994; ter Bogt & Scapens, 2012; Brown et al., 2023), or policy goals (Alexander, 2000; Beerkens, 2015), rather than reflecting the quality concerns of the academics directly involved in teaching and learning.

The legitimisation of these 'conceptual technologies' in quality evaluation carries risks that indicators are selected for convenience rather than validity, contributing to what Robertson et al (2019) describe as the "McNamara Fallacy," drawing on Yankelovich's original concept. This fallacy occurs when reliance on easily accessible, yet imperfect, proxies for quality result in the neglect of more complex dimensions of quality that resist systematic or quantitative measurement. A similar concern arises when quantitative measures are applied as metrics of

performance or targets, thereby inviting judgment on practice rather than fostering improvement. In discussing the use of quantitative measures as performance indicators in higher education, Elton (2004) invoked "Goodhart's Law" (Goodhart, 1975), an adage originally proposed in reference to economic monetary policy, which suggested that, "*When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure*". This principle underscores the inherent limitations of quality measures when they shift from descriptive tools to prescriptive benchmarks or targets, or where availability of proxies may narrow the lens of the complexity of quality to be reliable measures through quantitative methods.

2.5.3 Rethinking the Measurement of Quality

Despite extensive critique on the reliability and validity of quantitative evidence in assurance-focused evaluation, such measures remain a dominant feature of formal quality assurance systems in higher education. However, a growing body of research has explored alternative approaches to evidence-informed practice that seek to address the limitations of conventional quantitative metrics while maintaining a commitment to rigorous evaluation.

These emerging approaches advocate for a rethinking of what aspects of quality are evidenced in evaluation, the methodological tools used to assess quality in higher education, and how evidence as a tool for making inferences about quality is positioned and interpreted within evaluative processes. This shift reflects a broader recognition of the need for more context-sensitive, inclusive, and meaningful forms of evidence that better capture the complexity of teaching and learning and align more closely with the values and experiences of academic work.

2.5.3.1 Reconsidering Who Decides on Measures of Quality

A first step in considering the use of evidence-informed practice is that it should be capable of drawing meaningful inferences about quality within the complex, contested contexts in which quality emerges (Biesta, 2007; Bamber, 2011b; Pettersen, 2015; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Beerkens, 2018; Ashwin, 2020a, 2020b; Taylor, 2020). In reflecting the situated meaning of quality at programme level, previous studies have argued that decisions on more meaningful measures of

quality can emerge through providing greater autonomy to key stakeholders to select, monitor, and interpret evidence to make inferences about quality (Broadbent, 2007; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Pettersen, 2015; Ashwin, 2020b; Taylor, 2020; Leiber, 2022).

2.5.3.2 Reconsidering the Types of Evidence used in Evaluative Work

A related issue in addressing the challenges of quality measurement is a consideration of the epistemological underpinnings of forms of evidence that are legitimised within evaluative work. In order to address the limitations of systems that embed quantitative measures of quality, previous literature has challenged limited framing on what legitimately constitutes evidence in evaluation, and argued for opportunities to, "*bridge the current quantitative approach focusing on structures, systems, responsibilities and duties with more qualitative research that addresses changes in teaching and learning*" (Stensaker, 2008, p. 9).

A rethinking of what constitutes credible evidence within evaluative contexts may include the need to create a more expansive definition of what represents "evidence" in evaluative practice (Perovsek, 2016; Taylor, 2020; Leiber, 2022; Brown et al., 2023), enabling the incorporation of both quantitative and qualitative data (Green, 1994; Alach, 2017b; Tam, 2001; Houston, 2008; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Perovsek, 2016; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Leiber, 2019; Taylor, 2020). This extends to legitimising the inclusion of informal or discursive forms of data and feedback from stakeholders that can be acknowledged as part of the body of evidence that supports evaluative work (Anderson, 2006; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Austen & Jones-Devitt, 2019; Hora et al., 2017; Vedung, 2010).

Previous studies by Bamber and Anderson (2012) and Hora et al (2017) have identified the potential for iterative, informal, or dialogue-based intelligence-gathering as an important and often-used source of evidence by academics in understanding and personally evaluating their own teaching practices. Both studies suggest that even in environments where other forms of systematically collected data and evidence are available, academic staff frequently value and use discursive forms of evidence gathering to inform their understanding of stakeholder perspectives of quality.

Arguments for more expansive definitions of what constitutes evidence within evaluative systems raise important questions about the role of methodological pluralism in evidence-informed practice. Such approaches have the potential to inform interpretations of quality that remain obscured by purely quantitative measures (Robertson et al., 2019) recognising that different forms of evidence offer distinct insights into the complexities of teaching and learning.

If, as these studies suggest, informal data is not only meaningful but also central to how academics understand quality and plan for enhancement, then it becomes necessary to consider how alternative forms of evidence can be credibly acknowledged and appropriately incorporated into evaluative work. This would support both the assurance and enhancement of teaching and learning in ways that reflect the realities of academic practice. One potential solution lies in the integration of less traditionally used forms of evidence alongside more commonly adopted metrics, thereby enriching evaluative processes and better reflecting the diversity of how quality is conceptualised and assessed. The incorporation of both quantitative and qualitative approaches may enable evaluative systems to accommodate a broader range of voices and perspectives (Green, 1994; Taylor, 2020), allowing for the emergence of otherwise hidden narratives (Austen & Jones-Devitt, 2019). Furthermore, the inclusion and triangulation of multiple sources of evidence offers opportunities for the improved rigour and validity of quality measurement (Yorke, 1991; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Austen & Jones-Devitt, 2019; Leiber, 2019), making evaluative systems more rigorous, and less susceptible to gaming or other erroneous conclusions (Tam, 2001; Lewis, 2015; Alach, 2017b).

To date there are relatively few empirical studies that examine this pluralistic approach to evidence-informed practice in evaluation, incorporating quantitative and qualitative, formal, and informally collected data, informs the evaluation of quality at programme level. In addressing the current gap in the literature, my thesis adopts an inclusive approach in relation to what constitutes evidence, incorporating what programme leaders, rather than systems or frameworks, define and use as evidence to inform their understanding and evaluation of quality. This is important in reflecting the experiences of those tasked with evaluating and

enhancing quality at the level of academic programmes, and enables a flexibility to move beyond how evidence is traditionally used within institutional systems for quality assurance.

2.5.3.3 Interpreting Meaning from Evidence

A central theme of this thesis is how programme leaders' experiences of evaluative practice shape their understanding of quality, particularly in supporting both the assurance and enhancement of academic programmes. In the context of evidence-informed practice, this involves examining how data and other forms of evidence are transformed into meaningful insights that inform quality-related decisions.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the complexity and contested nature of quality, coupled with the limitations of systematically gathered data to construct holistic and valid indicators of quality limits their capacity to positively contribute to the evaluation of quality. These challenges are both methodological and epistemological in that they constrain the inclusion of professional knowledge and judgement in both interpreting data and determining which evidence-informed decisions are appropriate within specific evaluative contexts (Biesta, 2007; Bloxham, 2012; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Spence, 2019).

Drawing on Head's (2008) lenses of evidence-informed policy, which identifies Political Knowledge, Scientific Knowledge, and Practical Implementation Knowledge as evidentiary sources in policy-making, the role of professional knowledge and practice-based wisdom within evaluative systems is positioned as a source of evidence in and of itself. At academic programme level, the inclusion of professional knowledge can be argued to provide an opportunity to moderate the predominance of managerial logics of formal evaluation (Saunders et al., 2011; Bloxham, 2012; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Brown et al., 2023). Further, the inclusion of professional knowledge, and the creation of space to contextualise evidence has been argued to enable the integration of professional knowledge held by academics, creating multiple logics through which evidence is interpreted (Pettersen, 2015).

In drawing meaning from evidence, the inclusion of professional knowledge as a principle of evidence-informed practice supports more active engagement of academic staff in the sense-making processes that underpin evaluative work (Minelli et al., 2015; Marshall, 2016; A. Cooper et al., 2009). This fosters richer, more context-sensitive understandings of quality (Dahler-Larsen, 2014; Stensaker et al., 2019) and enables evaluative practices to move beyond binary judgments toward more interpretative and nuanced approaches to interpreting data (Bamber & Stefani, 2016). In doing so, the role of evidence shifts "*from the metaphor of the laboratory to that of the court of law*," (Saunders et al., 2011) where multiple perspectives on data contribute to a persuasive, often inferential, picture of "*what happened or happens*" (p. 208) rather than binary judgements on quality.

2.6. Conclusion

This chapter has provided a review of literature which underpins the key themes of this thesis. It has situated the research questions within this thesis directly to the common responsibilities of programme leaders in relation the evaluation of quality in academic programmes within existing literature. It has also explored the identified challenges of developing appropriate measures of quality and considered emerging themes that support a rethinking of what constitutes valid evidence in evaluative practice within existing research.

The current body of literature reveals a complex and often paradoxical evaluative environment, characterised by tensions between assurance and enhancement, control and autonomy, and objectivity and subjectivity, reflected in academic staff's engagement with evaluative practices. However, the current body of literature tells us little about how the role of programme leader within these processes and the ways in which they experience and respond to these tensions.

In this chapter I have identified several gaps in the current body of knowledge. These include how programme leaders conceptualise quality and prioritise aspects of academic quality in the context of their programme leadership responsibilities. Secondly, given the dualistic responsibilities for progressing both assurance and enhancement within academic programmes, a gap currently exists

in understanding programme leaders' experiences of, and response to, institutionally defined formal programme evaluation processes. Finally, my research will address a gap in the current literature on evidence-informed approaches to quality evaluation by adopting an inclusive approach to how a wide range of evidentiary sources are used in evaluative work on quality by programme leaders.

My thesis therefore contributes to the existing discourse by reflecting on the specific experiences of programme leaders in evaluative systems, and how these systems contribute to their responsibilities to assure and enhance quality at programme level. Based on the existing gaps within the current literature, my research therefore asks the following questions,

1. How do programme leaders understand and prioritise the concept of quality and its relationship to programme evaluation processes?
2. How do programme leaders make sense of their experiences of engaging in programme evaluation?
3. How do programme leaders experience, position and use evidence in evaluative work on quality?
4. How do programme leaders respond to their experiences of formal programme evaluation in light of their responsibilities for quality assurance and enhancement?

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

The research questions in my study focus on how programme leaders make sense of their experiences of engaging with formal evaluative systems on the quality of their programmes. To explore these experiences, my research is guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach that prioritises the detailed examination of individual lived experiences. In this chapter, I outline the rationale for the adoption of IPA as a methodological framework for my research. I then present the fundamental elements of my research study design, including participant selection, data collection methods, and analytical procedures. The chapter then considers my positioning as an insider researcher, and how this has been reflected in my approach to this research. I conclude with a reflection on the limitations and challenges associated with the chosen methodology, and the strategies deployed to address these within the study.

3.2. Research Design

3.3. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA is a qualitative research approach grounded in the philosophical traditions of phenomenology (Hurssel, Heidegger), hermeneutics (Schleiermacher, Gadamer), and idiography. IPA emphasises the importance of lived experience and its role in shaping our understanding of the world (Richards & Morse, 2013; Smith & Eatough, 2017; Smith et al., 2022). Although IPA is most commonly used in applied and health psychology (Smith et al., 2022), it has also been effectively applied in educational research (Noon, 2018; Stolz, 2023).

IPA is underpinned by a theoretical commitment to understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences through reflective verbal accounts. These accounts are viewed as expressions of both cognitive and emotional responses to specific phenomena (Smith & Osborn, 2007). As a research methodology in this study, IPA treats participants' narratives as valuable sources of insight into how they perceive and position evaluation as a central theme of their professional selves (Alase, 2017).

Drawing from phenomenology, IPA provides a framework for an in-depth examination of individuals' experiences of events, relationships, and processes (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Eatough, 2017). Using first-person accounts, IPA focuses on revealing the unique, embodied, and situated meanings participants assign to those experiences, enabling, "*an unfurling of perspectives and meanings which are unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world*"(Smith et al., 2022, p. 17).

My study examines programme leaders' experiences of evaluative practices, particularly their engagement with formal evaluative systems on quality. As individuals who have responsibility for the oversight and coordination of academic quality for their programme, these experiences represent an element of how they make sense of their professional self and their relationship to their colleagues and the broader organisation. IPA therefore offers an appropriate methodological vehicle through which the lived experiences of research participants in this study can be explored (Alase, 2017), building an in-depth analysis based on participants personal experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Nizza et al., 2021; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2022), and informed by their unique context (Noon, 2018).

IPA is also framed as a dynamic process, involving the active engagement and participation of the researcher. Within IPA, the researcher, through interpretative analysis, is implicated in facilitating and making sense of the relationship between the participants and their engagement with the phenomenon under study (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Smith et al., 2022). IPA's phenomenological foundation therefore requires the researcher to focus on the meaning-making processes associated with the experience or object under investigation, rather than merely describing the content of the experience itself (Stolz, 2023). Within this hermeneutic positioning, IPA facilitates the interpretation of particular phenomena, firstly by participants, and subsequently interpreted by the researcher who is attempting to make sense of the participants accounts of making sense of their world; forming a double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The adoption of IPA also grounds my research within the idiographic tradition, which places an emphasis on what is particular to the individual (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Nizza et al., 2021; Noon, 2018). By focusing on the individual, IPA facilitates an examination of areas of convergence and divergence, both within the accounts of individual participants as they make sense of their individual experiences, and across the sample cohort (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Miller & Barrio Minton, 2016). IPA's emphasis on the centrality and primacy of individual participant accounts positions participants as experiential experts within the phenomenon under investigation (Smith & Eatough, 2017). As a result, IPA places a methodological responsibility on researchers to remain closely attuned to the exploration and interpretation of the situated meanings that individuals assign to their experiences (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith & Eatough, 2017; Stolz, 2023), rather than attempting to derive generalised conclusions across groups (Noon, 2018).

This presents challenges in the capacity of IPA to deliver broad generalisations about the phenomenon or the entire sample cohort. However, while IPA does not entirely reject the possibility of generalisation; instead it requires that any claims must be firmly grounded in the iterative, detailed reading and interpretation of individual accounts (Nizza et al., 2021).

3.3.1 While this research is situated within a single higher education institution and draws on participants from a broad range of academic disciplines, it is not methodologically framed as a case study. Consistent with the idiographic commitment of IPA, the study instead focuses on the particular experiences of individuals, emphasising an in-depth and nuanced exploration of participants' lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). While prioritising idiographic depth in examining how individuals make sense of programmatic review processes, the issues explored on the meaning of quality and experience with evaluative practices on quality resonate with those encountered in other institutional contexts. In this way, the study contributes to the wider body of literature by offering insight into how programme leaders engage with formal evaluation processes and how they interpret and integrate these processes within their professional practice.

Semi-Structured Interviews

IPA-based research relies on methodological approaches to data collection that enable the gathering of rich, detailed, first-person accounts of a lived experience (Wengraf, 2011; Guihen, 2020; Smith et al., 2022; Noon, 2018). The most commonly adopted methodological approach to data collection in IPA studies is through the use of semi-structured interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Smith & Eatough, 2011).

In addressing my research questions, which relate to an examination of how participants make sense of and interpret engagement with formal evaluation processes, semi-structured interviews provide a flexible approach to data collection (Cohen et al., 2011; Matthews & Ross, 2010), through which the life-world of participants can be examined through their descriptions of the described phenomenon (Kvale, 2007). Semi-structured interviews are guided by the development of an interview schedule, where topics or questions are developed by the researcher, but also allow for flexibility in the sequencing and wording of questions, based on how the conversation evolves between interviewer and participant (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Kvale, 2007; Cohen et al., 2011, 2017). The interviewer is therefore situated as a guide to the conversation, enabling the participants to exercise greater control of the flow of the interview (Wengraf, 2011;

Noon, 2018). This participant-led approach aligns to the idiographic commitment within IPA, which places the individual's story, as they wish to tell it, at the centre of the data collection process (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2022).

To facilitate a participant-led approach, and guided by my research questions, I developed a thematically based interview schedule (Appendix One: Interview Schedule) to provide a framework for the participant interviews. The themes identified within the schedule were ordered loosely in a way that was likely to make sense to the research participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2022). For instance, initial questions were developed to allow participants to talk broadly about their role, and their role's relationship to managing quality. These initial broad, descriptive questions were deployed as a strategy to put participants at ease, and to build rapport between myself and the participant (Cohen et al., 2011; Alase, 2017; Smith & Osborn, 2007; Miller & Barrio Minton, 2016; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Initial questions on the role of programme leader, and their responsibilities for quality also provided a context with which to subsequently frame themes around programme evaluation and the use of evidence in evaluation by relating these questions back to their descriptions of their role, and their relationship to managing quality on their programme.

The ordering of themes as a scaffold for the conversation was also designed to enable a funnel (Smith & Osborn, 2007) that initially focused on broad questions within each topic, before moving to more specific follow-up questions. This funnelling was designed to facilitate greater self-disclosure on the specifics of their experiences of engaging with evaluative structures as the interview progressed (Roulston, 2010). My schedule also included a number of potential open questions under each of the thematic areas that I could select from as appropriate (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Cohen et al., 2011) to move within or between themes. The themes, and potential question areas also provided space for me to probe and prompt participants in response to particular experiences as they arose in order to facilitate a rich and personalised account of participants experiences (Cohen et al., 2011).

Finally, the schedule allowed for a broad-based closing question, which offered participants an opportunity to add any further commentary or reflections based on the discussion (Kvale, 2007). This question was designed to provide additional flexibility for participants to note any additional thoughts or important aspects of their experiences that had not been fully captured during the interviews.

3.3.2 Sampling

Given that the goal of IPA is to produce an in-depth examination of a particular phenomenon rather than to generate a theory (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012), IPA studies typically emphasise the selection of a homogenous sample (Alase, 2017; Noon, 2018; Smith et al., 2022). Within this research project, homogeneity was reflected in identifying participants who were currently serving as programme leaders, and have, as part of this role, experienced the same phenomena: engagement with institutionally programme evaluation processes.

IPA studies also commonly focus on a small number of participants for whom the identified research questions have particular relevance (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith & Eatough, 2011; Stolz, 2023). Smith et al (2002) have argued that IPA studies may relate to single participant case studies up to thirty participants, while Alase (2017) notes a typical variance in sample size of between two and 25 participants.

In keeping with the idiographic grounding of IPA, which seeks diversity and convergence between participants (Nizza et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2022), I selected a sample size of twenty participants. To enable the emergence of a diverse range of voices and perspectives among the sample, individual participants were identified and invited cumulatively (Smith et al., 2022) based on a number of characteristics. These included individuals drawn from each of the institution's faculties, and included diversity across several other characteristics including, tenure as a programme leader, gender, and a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Where possible, I also attempted to target some participants whose programmes were also subject to external programme accreditation by professional, regulatory, or statutory bodies, in addition to the internal formal evaluation processes.

In addressing disciplinary spread, participants were selected initially based on organisational faculty. This approach was justified on the basis that the oversight of formal programme evaluation processes at the institution are devolved to institutional faculty. Seeking participation from each organisational faculty therefore provided an opportunity to consider if the divergence of experiences of participants may be influenced by organisational or practice-based norms within each faculty. Given the existence of a range of academic disciplines within each faculty, I further attempted to purposefully identify participants from across the disciplinary breadth within each faculty.

My approach to sampling also sought to create diversity in the gender profile and tenure as programme leader within my sample. This was based on previous research indicating that female and early tenure programme leaders consider assurance-based evaluative work more positively that their male or longer-tenure colleagues (Bamber, 2011c; Overberg & Ala-Vähälä, 2020). The inclusion of participants from programmes that were subject to external accreditation was to enable a consideration of how programme leaders' experiences of internal evaluation may be shaped by the additional assurance requirements from these external bodies, which could potentially shape their interpretation of internal programme evaluation (de Paor, 2016).

A pool of potential participants was identified by using institutional data that identified programme leaders of all taught programmes in each of the previous six years. This data was collated to enable me to identify potential participants based on their length of tenure as a programme leader, for both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and disciplinary area.

Potential participants were invited by email to participate in the research (see Appendix Two), which included participant information (see Appendix Three) and a participant consent form (see Appendix Four). Invitations to participate were sent cumulatively in batches of five, allowing me to pay close attention to how the sample was building throughout data collection. In total, 32 invites were sent to potential participants, with 20 accepting my invitation to participate. Figure 1 provides information on the participant profile, including the assigned pseudonym

for each participant. Further information on the participant profile is provided in Appendix Five.

Pseudonym	Disciplinary Area	Programme Type	Gender	Tenure	External Accreditation
Declan	Engineering	Undergraduate	M	over 10 years	Yes
Joseph	Physical Sciences	Undergraduate	M	3-5 years	Yes
Michael	Social Sciences	Postgraduate	M	6-10 years	No
Joanne	Education	Postgraduate	F	3-5 years	Yes
Catherine	Social Sciences	Postgraduate	F	3-5 years	No
Jane	Business	Undergraduate	F	6-10 years	Yes
Caroline	Computing	Undergraduate	F	1-2 years	No
Sarah	Health Sciences	Postgraduate	F	Over 10 years	No
Niall	Computing	Postgraduate	M	Over 10 years	No
Martin	Business	Undergraduate	M	3-5 years	Yes
Colin	Arts and Humanities	Undergraduate	M	3-5 years	No
Eva	Business	Postgraduate	F	6-10 years	Yes
Owen	Social Sciences	Undergraduate	M	over 10 years	No
Shane	Education	Undergraduate	M	1-2 years	Yes
Michelle	Education	Postgraduate	F	Over 10 years	No
Una	Education	Postgraduate	F	1-2 years	No
Oisin	Business	Postgraduate	M	over 10 years	Yes
Desmond	Arts and Humanities	Undergraduate	M	1-2 years	No
Emer	Physical Sciences	Undergraduate	F	6-10 years	Yes
Tiarnan	Engineering	Postgraduate	M	3-5 years	No

Figure 1 Participant Profile

3.3.3 Approach to Interviews

Prior to commencing data collection, I first discussed my interview schedule with a colleague who had previously held the role of programme leader, to elicit feedback on my approach to the interview and advice on how to best approach the themes with participants. The aim of this feedback enabled me to manage risks associated with approaching the role of a professional services member of staff, where I may have drafted questions that reflected underlying assumptions on wording that were naturalistic (Trowler, 2016) to my professional role, but were not relatable to research participants. I subsequently piloted the interview with an existing programme leader. Both discussions resulted in some refinements to the questions to make them more relatable to participants and refine the themes that could be covered within a planned 60-minute interview.

When scheduling interviews, I proposed conducting an in-person interview, offering that these meetings would take place at their normal place of work, if that was agreeable to participants. This approach was a further attempt to meet participants in a location that they felt personal ownership of, and comfortable in, with the intention that this may provide a space for them to speak freely and deeply about their experiences. Five interviews were conducted using Zoom, based on participant preference.

At the start of each interview, I attempted to construct a relaxed environment with the participant, and to also explain the purpose of the interview and my positioning as a student researcher, reiterating the confidentiality of the meeting, and explaining how data would be handled, including the process of pseudonymisation of their identity (Kvale, 2007; Cohen et al., 2011). I then asked participants if they had any questions about the interview process, before asking for permission to audio record the interview.

After each interview I made brief reflective fieldwork notes, noting non-verbal cues and contextual reflections or responses, such as the use of metaphors by participants that were particularly interesting or surprising. The fieldnotes also acted as a "work journal" (Kvale, 2007) provided a space to note down my reflections on my own approach to the interview, and advice for myself in further crafting my interview skills. Examples from my notes included reminders to myself to be comfortable in providing space for appropriate pauses before following up with probes or moving between themes; making sure to keep the structure of my questions worded as simply and openly as possible and reflecting on how I could refine and develop my probing skills. These reflections were particularly useful during my first five interviews as I honed my interviewing skills and became more confident in probing responses from participants.

3.3.4 Transcription

Audio recordings from my interviews were transcribed using word-to-text functionality to auto-transcribe recordings. Auto-transcription allowed for a first pass of the audio file to a text format, although it was poor at correctly transcribing sentence structure, and had difficulty in accurately capturing audio where

participants spoke quickly, used colloquialisms, or different accents. Therefore, following this first pass, the auto-transcription was extensively edited manually. During manual editing, which was conducted in tandem with the audio file, particular attention was paid to word errors in the transcript, but more significantly to ensure the grammatical syntax of the auto-transcription accurately reflected the narrative. Examples of this included the insertion of punctuation to ensure sentence structure was correct, and adding indicative paragraphing where participants moved between items, inserting quote marks in cases where participants spoke to quote or paraphrase others, or adding contextual notes such as when participants spoke hesitantly, or used sarcasm or humour in their response. While highly detailed and time-consuming work, this process also allowed me to be sure that the transcript offered a high-quality documentary record of the interviews.

3.3.5 Data Analysis

My approach to analysis followed that proposed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin in their 2nd edition of "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis" (2022). This framework for analysis adopted a 7-step process for analysing data, namely,

1. Reading, and Re-Reading
2. Exploratory Noting
3. Constructing Experiential Statements
4. Searching for Connection Across Experiential Statements
5. Naming the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and Consolidating and Organising them in a Table
6. Continuing the Individual Analysis of Other Cases
7. Working with Personal Experiential Themes to Develop Group Experiential Themes Across Case Studies

Having completed a 2-day training programme on the analysis software NVivo, and as part of that training, securing the potential for one-to-one support for the duration of my research project, I chose to analyse the data using NVivo software, rather than physical notetaking or colour coding of a physical copy of the transcript. Smith et al (2022) note that in adopting a screen-based, rather than

physical approach, the restrictive two-dimensional space on a computer screen may provide less flexibility and a limited visual range for data. However, based on my training, and specific advice relating to using NVivo for IPA studies, I was able to adapt various functionality within NVivo for exploratory noting and the creation of experiential statements, including the visualisation of these statements in a diagrammatic form, which allowed me to 'play' with creating and reshaping PETs in a flexible manner, overcoming some of the identified screen-based challenges of using software for this analysis.

In addition to my annotations and creating of experiential statements directly on each transcript, my analysis of individual cases also included a stand-alone memorandum on each participant. This memo included fieldwork notes, additional reflective notes from listening to the audio recordings, and visualisations of the outputs, particularly on Stage Three (generation of experiential statements), Four (searching for connections in experiential statements), and Five (naming and organisation of personal experiential statements). This memo was incredibly useful in both ensuring that all stages of the analysis on individual cases were carried out consistently and documented my thinking process as the analysis of each individual case was completed.

The following section of this chapter outlines in greater detail my approach to each stage of the analysis process.

3.3.5.1 Step One: Reading and Re-Reading

In line with the ideographical commitment within IPA, Step One involved becoming deeply familiar with the narrative provided by each participant. Inspired by the metaphor of "Lodgers in the House" (Engward & Goldspink, 2020), I attempted to immerse myself in the personal accounts of participants, and approached it as "spending time" with each participant. In addition to reading, and re-reading the transcripts, I listened to the audio recordings of the interviews on multiple occasions, including while walking or driving, or listening along while reading the transcript, to ground the transcript in the, by then, familiar "voice" of the participant. This listening was supplemented by the noting of additional reflections on each interview (Smith et al., 2022, p. 78), including noting what appeared

particularly important to participants, how they described their role or frustrations in their role, or how they positioned themselves relative to their disciplinary colleagues when undertaking evaluative work (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

3.3.5.2 Step Two: Exploratory Noting

Exploratory noting was completed electronically, directly onto the transcript document, using the annotations functionality in NVivo. By reviewing the transcript in its entirety, notes were captured throughout the transcript, where I could highlight passages or words, and associate exploratory notes to these highlighted excerpts. This process of directly annotating the transcript facilitated deeper and more sustained engagement with the data.

At this stage I focussed on capturing items that were particularly important to participants, as well as my reflections on why these were important to them. These annotations focused on three aspects of the participants' accounts. First, annotations examined participants' descriptions of their experiences and the ways in which these experiences were narratively constructed. Secondly, attention was given to participants' use of language within the transcript, such as the use of metaphors employed to in describe particular situations, processes or relationships, and the use of specific language which potentially revealed an underlying positioning or a value statement in relation to the issue being discussed (Noon, 2018). Thirdly, noting captured my interpretative reflections on participants' accounts, particularly reflections on the ways in which participants made sense of their experiences and how these meanings related to their professional lives (Smith et al., 2022).

Once the transcript had been fully annotated, this stage of analysis concluded with the creation of a separate file note to record additional reflections and analytical insights. This final reflective exercise enabled the capture of overarching interpretations from participants' account, such as key features of their sense-making processes or tensions and contradictions in their positioning and interpretations, which were identified for further exploration in subsequent stages of the research.

3.3.5.3 Step Three: Constructing Experiential Statements

Stage Three involved moving between the Stage Two annotations and the transcript to identify experiential statements reflected within the case. This marked a shift in my analytical approach, which used both the participants own words and my interpretation of the meaning of those words into short statements, with the goal of creating statements on what was central to descriptions and interpretations in the transcript, my initial note taking, and my own reflective notes. To complete this process, I again used NVivo, this time using an open coding functionality to generate an initial set of experiential statements, which related to specific aspects of the text or previously captured annotations. It is important to note that in using the coding functionality in NVivo, this functionality was not used as it would typically be used in content or thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), but instead applied to capture individual experiential statements based on particular elements of text or previously captured annotations.

Working iteratively between the transcript, the initial notes, and the reflective summary, this stage of analysis sought to generate experiential statements that were grounded in the core meanings articulated by participants, while remaining sufficiently conceptual to situate specific textual elements within the broader context of the interview manuscript as a whole (Smith et al., 2022, p. 87). In doing so, the resulting statements reflected both participants' meanings and my interpretative engagement with their accounts, reflecting the double hermeneutic central to this analytic approach; the researcher's attempt to make sense of participants' sense-making of their experiences.

This stage of analysis produced a set of experiential statements, many of which were closely linked to specific sections of the transcript. In some cases, however, similar experiential statements were identified across different sections of a single interview manuscript, indicating recurring patterns of meaning within participants' accounts.

3.3.5.4 Stage Four: Searching For Connections Across the Experiential Statements

Stage Four of my analysis involved examining the experiential statements gathered from the chronological analysis of the transcripts, and an examination of these statements with a view to drawing together statements that were related to each other in a way that allowed me to surface the most interesting or important aspects of participants' accounts (Smith et al., 2022, p. 91).

Working within the NVivo environment, I engaged with my experiential statements by creating graphical "maps," that could be moved and rearranged on screen. This enabled the grouping and configuration of clusters of experiential statements into coherent and meaningful themes emerging from the data.

This stage of analysis involved considerable time devoted to 'playing' with the experiential statements, through an iterative process of moving them between different configurations. This marked a shift in the analysis from a primarily chronological engagement with the interview transcript to an examination of themes emerging across the transcript. In organising and reorganising these statements, the analytic focus centred on examining the relationships between individual experiential statements and considering how they could be most effectively clustered to represent the participant's overall account and their lived world.

3.3.5.5 Stage 5: Naming the PETs and Consolidating and Organising then in a Table

Once I was satisfied that my clustering of experiential statements reflected an authentic analytical account of the transcript, I moved to provide each of the clusters with a named Personal Experiential Theme (PET). Using the Smith, Flowers, Larkin (2022) guidance on the creation of naming, each theme was 'personal', in that it directly related to the individual participant account, 'experiential', in relating directly to the participants experience and sense-making of the phenomena described, and 'thematic', in that it reflected an analytical outcome of the themes emerging from the analysis, rather than relating directly to specific instances within the transcript.

Again, working on NVivo, this was achieved by creating a separate coding file for Stage Five, where a PET was named as a particular code. Using my clustering of experiential statements each PET was subsequently linked to the underlying experiential statements from Stage Three, based on my clustering of experiential statements. These again were graphically depicted as a map of PETs with their underlying experiential statements. My use of the functionality within NVivo from Stage Two annotation to Stage Five PET naming, I was able to use this functionality to identify pertinent or meaningful quotes from the participant, representative of each PET. Figure 2 provides a graphical depiction of the linkages between the transcript and the development of the PETs, to provide both an auditable trail of my analytical process, and further, provide accessible access back to the original text throughout the analytical process.

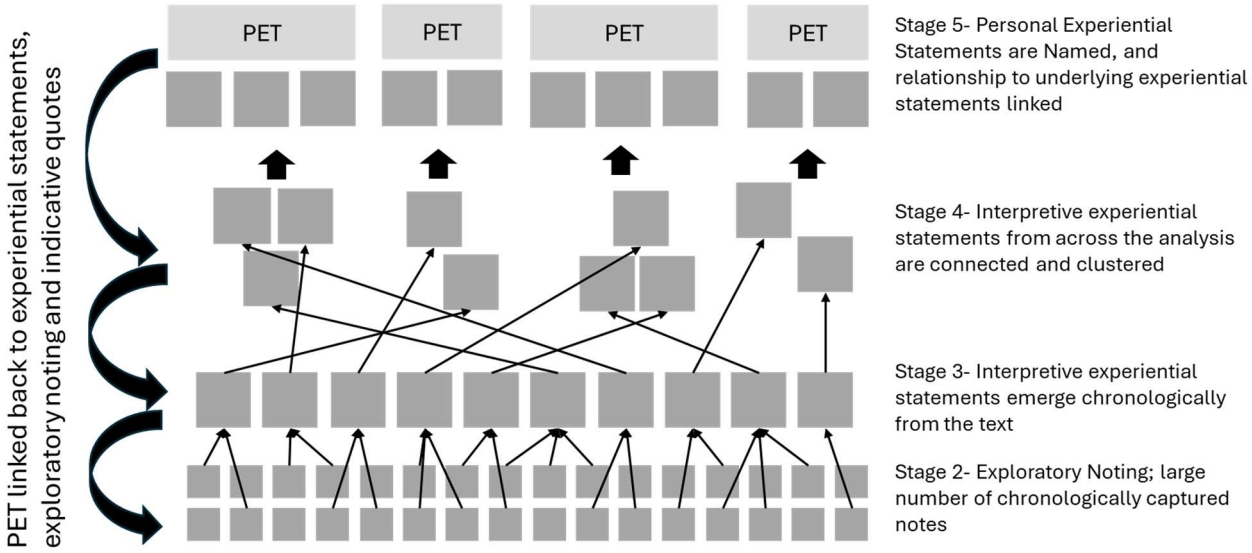

Figure 2 Analytical Process and Linking of Data between Analytical Stages on NVivo

Before progressing to the next individual case, a memorandum was created for each participant. This memorandum documented my analytic process for each case, including initial notes recorded following the interview and reflections generated during Stages One and Two of the analysis. It also detailed the development of experiential statements and included graphical representations of each iteration of theme clustering. In addition, the memorandum documented the

emerging experiential statements alongside a selection of illustrative quotations from the transcript that underpinned each statement. This memorandum served as an invaluable supplementary audit trail, demonstrating how the analysis evolved across Stages One to Five for each participant.

3.3.5.6 Stage Six: Moving onto the Next Study

In line with the idiographic commitment to individual accounts within IPA, care was taken to treat each case within my research on its own terms, in order to do justice to its individuality (Smith et al., 2022, p. 99). This meant that for each transcript, a new "lodger" (Engward & Goldspink, 2020) moved into my analytical space, where I committed to spend time with that individual and the account of their experiences, each time following the same pattern of analysis.

Given the size of my sample (twenty participants), at the mid-point of analysis, I took the opportunity to review the initial ten interviews, to consider the extent to which common themes were emerging across the initial ten interviews. For this review, the individual participant memoranda provided a useful basis for this analysis. This half-point review provided an opportunity to consider the analysis in light of my research questions and check back on how personal experiential themes were constructed, examining the convergence or divergence between individual accounts, and to ensure that a consistent approach had been adopted to each account. A descriptive summary of the emerging themes was noted before returning to the rest of my individual accounts.

3.3.5.7 Stage Seven: Development of Group Experiential Themes

Having completed individual analyses of all twenty participant transcripts, Stage Seven of my analysis shifted from an analysis of individual accounts to exploring the similarities and differences between participants, with the goal of developing a number of Group Experiential Themes (GETs) (Smith et al., 2022, p. 100). In working between the PETs generated within each participant's account, this stage of the analysis focused on examining the themes that surfaced as particularly "potent" (p.101) within the PETs, searching for patterns of experiences that may be relevant to specific groups of participants.

In working through this stage, and moving between individual accounts, I found it useful to work both on paper-based documents, as well as using NVivo functionality to bring PETs, and notes, and underlying quotes together.

I started this phase of analysis by printing out all individual participant memos, which provided the individual outputs to read the analysis to date across the full sample. This process then sought to bring the PETs together where similar phenomena were discussed, for example, how participants positioned themselves in the role of programme leader, how they thought about the concept of quality as it related to their role, and their experiences of programme evaluation, and the use of evidence to draw conclusions about quality. This process created a series of spider-diagrams (Smith et al., 2022, p. 114) on paper reflecting the key PETs emerging from across the accounts (see Appendix Six- Spider Diagrams on Key Themes), and the clustering of PETs was subsequently replicated in NVivo, to preserve the representativeness and transparency of the interpretations (Engward & Goldspink, 2020), including highlighted quotes from each transcript.

The spider-diagrams were used primarily to visualise the breadth of the data collected, and a summary of all the PETs. As a visualisation tool, they enabled an exploration of areas of convergence and contrast within these clustered PETs explored. NVivo remained useful during this process to refer back to individual accounts quickly and efficiently; for example, where I wanted to double-check the context in which participants were talking about specific themes. This allowed me to engage in "sense making" to interpret the data across the sample, while ensuring that those interpretations remained grounded within the narrative accounts of participants (Engward & Goldspink, 2020).

3.4. Insider Research

This research was conducted within a higher education institution, which, at the time of fieldwork, I had been working in for fifteen years. As an "insider researcher" (Brannick et al., 2007; Mercer, 2007; Trowler, 2011a), my research design was cognisant of the advantages and potential challenges to researching within my employer institution.

Conducting research as an insider presents both opportunities and challenges for research quality. Working within the setting in which I was researching provided me with privileged access to naturalistic data that reflects the institutional context (Trowler, 2011a, 2016) as well as cultural literacy regarding the social norms and organisational systems that shape the institution (Brannick et al., 2007; Trowler, 2011a). This insider positioning also facilitated access to participants (Brannick et al., 2007; Mercer, 2007; Trowler, 2016) and to secondary data or internal documentation that may be less accessible to external researchers (Brannick et al., 2007). Additionally, data collection was more efficient and flexible, as it did not require travel and could be integrated into my existing work schedule (Mercer, 2007).

Insider research does not represent a fixed or binary status, but rather exists along a continuum of researcher–participant relationships (Trowler, 2016). These relationships are shaped by both formal professional roles and informal interpersonal dynamics within the institution. In this study, I occupied an insider position as a "native" to the institutional setting (Brannick et al., 2007), however my role is situated within professional services, while the research participants in my study were academic staff members. This distinction is important, as it influenced my research design, cognisant of how our respective roles may be perceived by participants and how they engaged with me during interviews.

Although I positioned myself as a researcher rather than a colleague during the study, participants may have experienced ambiguity regarding whether their contributions were being made to me in my capacity as a researcher or as someone holding a specific institutional post (Brannick et al., 2007; Trowler, 2016). This potential tension necessitated a careful and reflexive approach to research design, particularly in how I communicated the purpose of the study and my role as a researcher.

Where researchers possess inherent knowledge of an institution, its roles, or processes, there is a risk that they may unintentionally impose their own assumptions about the meaning of participants' experiences, rather than allowing those meanings to emerge authentically from participants themselves. This

assumed familiarity can lead to missed opportunities to probe or interrogate contributions that fall outside the researcher's own frame of reference (Brannick et al., 2007). This challenge in facilitating and probing for experiences outside of my own frame of reference also applied to the analysis and findings of my research, where I had to consider how to reflect perspectives of participants that may be critical of the institution, or challenge existing policy (Brannick et al., 2007). In positioning this research as an IPA study, my emphasis as a researcher therefore necessitated giving voice to participants' experiences and assertations (Engward & Goldspink, 2020) through emphasising telling their story, and required reflexivity to ensure the integrity to those voices rise above other contextual considerations.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted following ethical approval from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee (reference EdRes-2023-2212-EdAp-2). Both this process, and the documents supporting the research including Participant Information (Appendix Three- Participant Information Sheet) and an Informed Consent Form (Appendix Four- Participant Consent Form) also aligned to the principles of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018).

The informed consent form was signed by all participants prior to conducting the interview and following an opportunity for participants to ask questions about my research. Prior to each interview, I also reiterated how participant data would be stored and for how long. To ensure the anonymity of participants, all transcripts were stored and analysed using a participant number, which was subsequently replaced by pseudonym for the purposes of drafting this thesis; real names of participants were stored separately in an encrypted file, accessible only to me. Pseudonyms were selected based on names selected from my extended family and aligned to the gender of the participants. Further, during the transcription process, care was taken during the transcription process to redact other potentially identifiable information from the transcript. This included redacting information or identifying features that could potentially identify the participant, or

any other third-parties mentioned by participants during their interview that were not central to the overall substance of their narrative.

3.6. Limitations

An obvious limitation of this study is that it is focused on the experiences of programme leaders within a single institution, and examines a single system for programme evaluation, which may not be directly applicable to other institutions. The sample size of twenty also represents a small proportion of the total number of programme leaders within the institution. While care has been taken to include diversity within my sample from different organisational areas and reflecting a balance in participation based on gender, tenure as a programme leader, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, it cannot be claimed to be fully 'representative' of the total cohort of programme leaders. For example, while including a small number of participants who originate from outside Ireland, my participants are predominantly white, Irish, participants.

3.7. Conclusion

This chapter rationalises the adoption of an IPA approach to the conduct of my research and the methodologies adopted in gathering and analysing data for this research. The research design developed to support this study involved the conduct of 20 semi-structured interviews, and outlines the analytical approach (Smith et al., 2022) based on the accounts of the research participants. Additionally, several considerations to the adopted methodology are explored, including positioning myself as an insider researcher, ethical considerations in the conduct of my research, and potential limitations of the approach adopted.

Chapter 4. Findings

4.1. Introduction

This research explores the experiences and interpretations of academic programme leaders in undertaking evaluative work to assure and enhance the quality, primarily through their engagement with institutional frameworks for the evaluation of academic programmes. In describing the responsibilities of their role, all participant accounts noted their responsibilities for the assurance and enhancement of quality of their programmes. Within their accounts, all participant accounts noted their engagement with programme evaluations. In ten accounts, participants noted responsibility for the coordination of both internal evaluation processes and separate engagement with external accreditation processes conducted by Professional, Statutory, and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) (Declan, Joseph, Joanne, Jane, Martin, Eva, Sean, Una, Oisin, Emer).

The findings of this research focus specifically on examining programme leaders' experiences with two internal evaluation processes: the Annual Programme Review (APR) and the Periodic Programme Review (PPR), the latter conducted every five years. All but one participant account discussed their involvement in the APR process; the exception being a participant who led a programme that alternatively engaged with a similar annual review process with partner institutions as part of an inter-institutional collaborative programme. Additionally, the accounts of eleven participants included experiences of participating in the PPR process, while two others noted that they would initiate PPR for their programmes in the coming months.

This chapter will discuss three themes in relation to programme leaders' responsibilities in the assurance and enhancement of quality. Firstly, the findings will describe how programme leaders conceptually understand quality and their quality priorities in the context of their role. The findings will then examine how participants make sense of their experiences in undertaking the evaluations of quality. I will show that institutionally defined programme evaluation processes are primarily interpreted by participants as processes for reporting and accountability,

or the validation and assurance of academic standards, and less likely to be positioned as tools for planning quality enhancement. The findings will then consider the limitations of formal evaluation processes identified within participant accounts, and the ways in which participants responded to these limitations.

Throughout the findings, participants are identified by a pseudonym. Illustrative quotations have been used throughout the chapter; in some case, as indicative quotes that reflect perspectives common to several participants, or in other cases to illustrate contrasting or individual perspectives.

4.2. Programme Leaders and the Meaning of Quality

In discussing their responsibilities for the assurance and enhancement of programme quality, all participants discussed how the idea of quality was understood and prioritised in the context of their role. These interpretations of quality reflected both participants' practice as educators and academics, and their responsibilities for coordination and oversight of programme quality. Descriptions within participant accounts can be interpreted as reflecting three primary conceptualisations: quality as *academic standards*, quality within the *programme curriculum*, and quality reflected in a *transformational student experience*. Two further secondary themes are also identified: quality characterised by the perceived *commitment of colleagues* to maintaining and enhancing quality, and quality as *intangible*.

4.2.1 Quality Reflected in Academic Standards

A major theme identified from participant accounts related to their responsibilities for assuring and maintaining academic standards in the programme, which were predominantly framed in two ways. First, quality was perceived to be associated with the academic standards related to the academic rigour of the programme (Declan, Catherine, Niall, Martin, Shane, Michelle), including mitigating against risks to academic standards associated with perceived grade inflation (Jane, Caroline, Sarah, Eva, Tiarnan). Grade inflation as an issue of academic standards, was reflected by Jane, who noted, "*I'm worried about grade inflation. I think that's*

something I'd like to see can I tackle a small bit before I leave the programme [leader role]." Secondly, four participant accounts also equated quality in academic standards with ensuring academic integrity in assessment, including mitigating risks associated with unauthorised use of generative AI by students (Catherine, Shane, Desmond, Tiarnan).

Quality reflected in academic standards was also described in the context of responsibilities that ensured the programme aligned to the broader rules, regulations, and assurance processes designed to assure quality on their programme (Declan, Michael, Caroline, Martin, Colin, Owen, Shane, Oisin, Emer, Tiarnan). This reflection of academic standards suggests a conflation between quality as a concept or definable characteristic, and quality as being synonymous with the processes of measuring and managing quality. Indicative of participants' framing of quality within these accounts, Colin described his understanding of quality as closely tied with the consistent application of programme regulations and standards. From his perspective, "*for quality, the first thing that came to mind was keep the ship on track through programme regulations and standards*." (Colin). In his role as programme leader, Colin positioned himself as a central point of knowledge among his colleagues on these rules and regulations, and considered that his role required him to, "*keep things on track, and make sure that you know your programme regulations, you know your marks and standards, so that when an issue comes up, you're able to quickly say, 'yes, we can do that, no we can't do that, we have to discuss it first.' And so, I do think that's a quality issue*."

In the accounts of ten participants, perceptions of quality as academic standards were informed by the requirements of external accreditation bodies, including professional, statutory, or regulatory organisations (Declan, Joseph, Joanne, Jane, Martin, Eva, Shane, Oisín, Emer, Una). In programmes where accreditation was mandatory for graduate entry into specific professions, these external standards were often described as the "*de facto standard*" (Declan). Programme leaders felt a strong responsibility to "*make sure that certain standards are met, and that the students will be able to qualify and then register with [the professional body]"* (Shane).

In their accounts, four participants noted that these external agencies not only defined what was understood as academic standards but also defined how quality was reflected in the curriculum (Declan, Joanne, Shane, Oisín). For some, such as Declan, these clearly defined frameworks were viewed positively, framed as curricular "*guard-rails*" that guided and focused curriculum design. Others expressed more nuanced perspectives. While acknowledging the importance of meeting accreditation requirements, some participant accounts expressed a frustration at the perceived primacy of these standards, which risked "*tunnel vision*" (Jane) in how quality was conceptualised within the programme team. Joanne's account presented a similarly nuanced view, describing a perceived contrast between internal perspectives on quality and those of external accrediting bodies. Joanne observed that, "*[accrediting bodies are] far more concerned with the academic rigour than the student experience, whereas we've always come from the student experience point of view*."

The positioning of quality as academic standards within these accounts therefore reflected a dual positioning. Firstly, the conceptualisation of quality as academic standards on issues relating to academic integrity and how the academic rigour of the programme was reflected in standards of attainment by students. Secondly, academic standards were also framed as part of the responsibilities for adherence to regulations with the institution's quality assurance systems, and in some cases external accreditors' requirements.

4.2.2 Quality in the Programme Curriculum

In discussing their responsibilities for maintaining and enhancing quality, all participant accounts referenced quality as a reflection of the structure and content of the programme curriculum. Caroline described the quality of the curriculum to be a central quality priority of her role, noting that,

> "*I see the role of programme leaders as ensuring that the programme is doing what it's supposed to be doing, and that each of the modules is of good quality*" (Caroline)

This view was shared by Sarah, who noted,

> "*I would say that the role of the programme leader is to take responsibility that the programme is of good quality. That the structure of the programme, I suppose, is fit for purpose; that the overall programme aims and objectives are in concord with the demand that's there for that programme*"

In managing programme quality, participant accounts frequently described quality in the curriculum in terms of curricular "coherence" (Declan, Joseph, Caroline, Sarah, Niall, Eva, Owen, Oisín). This framing of coherence was articulated in two ways. Firstly, it was understood as the alignment of the curriculum to the stated aims and objectives of the programme (Declan, Joseph, Caroline, Sarah, Niall). Secondly, coherence was described in more logistical terms, particularly in relation to the coordination of teaching and the avoidance of duplication across modules (Declan, Oisín, Sarah, Martin, Owen). For Declan, this involved, "*a lot of time looking through and making sure that what's going on in this module here, is not a repeat of that module there. That [students are] not seeing two people giving them the same material at the same time, and then just making sure that the timetable is big enough for it all to fit*."

Interpretations of quality as a function of the programme curriculum were also rooted in participant accounts in their perspectives on how well the curriculum demonstrated current and emerging thinking within their disciplinary areas (Emer, Michael, Desmond, Oisin, Tiarnan, Niall, Jane, Joanne, Eva, Joseph, Una). Indicative of this position, Emer's account reflected on how curricular quality was characterised by her programme's emphasis on lab-based learning, which she described as a "*unique selling point*" of the programme, which she was keen not to "*dilute*."

As with considerations of quality as academic standards, participant accounts conceptualised quality reflected in the programme curriculum from a dual perspective, based on both their stance as an educator, and the individual responsible for the effective coordination of programme delivery. This was reflected in interpreting quality in the curriculum as a function of how the programme incorporated contemporary topics and thinking within the academic

discipline, but also that the curriculum was designed and delivered in a way that ensured appropriate sequencing and avoided unnecessary duplication.

4.2.3 Quality of the Student Experience

A further major theme in how participants interpreted the concept of quality was based on how the programme contributed to a quality student experience. Within their accounts, participants described this in numerous ways. These included the extent to which students felt supported during their studies, the quality of students' interaction with the curriculum and learning environment, and the perceived impact of the learning experience on students, both during their time on the programme and post-graduation.

4.2.3.1 An Experience that is Supported

In the accounts of all twenty participants, a high-quality student experience was framed in terms of the academic support and pastoral care provided to students throughout their studies. A quality experience was one in which students, "*get what they need*" (Declan, Jane, Martin), including access to meaningful learning experiences, or the development of a learning environment that was responsive to students' personal circumstances (Joanne, Orla, Eva, Owen, Shane, Michelle).

Within some accounts, the concept of quality was also synonymous with student academic success (Declan, Catherine, Sarah), or a fulfilling learning environment (Desmond). In other accounts, quality from a student experience perspective was directly related to personal impact stories of students who were supported through personal or academic challenges to successfully complete their studies (Jane, Caroline, Eva). In describing their experiences, several participant accounts aligned a quality learning experience with one that fostered a sense of belonging among students (Joanne), or was characterised by openness (Sarah, Michelle), interaction (Eva, Michelle), and collaboration (Sarah, Oisín) between students and staff, and peer relationships among students.

Michelle, Eva, and Jane's descriptions specifically linked their understanding of quality to their commitment to pastoral care of students, viewing it as a core element of being personally effective in their role. Within both Michelle's and

Jane's accounts, this expression of quality was perceived by them to be undervalued or insufficiently recognised within the university's formal definitions of quality.

Michelle expressed this as,

> "*...the other bit that I would really see that's not written down anywhere, is the care; the care that you give to the students to make sure they stay on the programme. And that if they're struggling, that you can actually avert any problems that might happen down the line*" (Michelle)

Jane's comments echoed this sentiment, making a direct connection between her personal commitment to student support as central to her understanding of quality, and a perception that this was not reflected in what she interpreted to be the institution's definition of quality.

> "*I think the student that has struggled to get through is a quality student. The student that came in through [a widening participation entry route] and gets through, is quality. The student who never thought they would be working [at a leading graduate employer] but they will, because it's in our degree and we helped them through; that's quality. But the way that we talk about quality in terms of the university, doesn't speak to that. I think that's a mismatch*." (Jane)

4.2.3.2 An Experience that Prepares

Within their accounts, participants also described quality as being represented in how well student learning prepared graduates for their future careers. In some cases, this preparation was oriented toward specific industries or professions (Declan, Joanne, Jane, Sarah, Niall, Colin, Eva, Shane, Una, Tiarnan). In other accounts, quality was characterised by preparing students for the future by providing opportunities for them to gain transferable skills and attributes that enhance overall employability (Joseph, Martin, Owen, Oisín, Desmond, Eva). Indicative of this position, Joseph and Jane's accounts included a framing of their understanding of quality around the development of specific skills within their

programme, such as specific programming skills (Joseph), and in Jane's case, cross-disciplinary skills related to future employment.

> "W*hen I think about quality in terms of the degree… I'm thinking about it more in terms of the competencies that the student has. Can they communicate, can they critically think, can they problem solve? So, they're the things that I'm thinking about in terms of what we do with them*" (Jane)

4.2.3.3 An Experience that Changes

The quality of the learning experience was also reflected in participant accounts in descriptions of how programme quality could provoke personal or societal transformation. At the individual level, several accounts considered quality in the student experience as supporting personal transformation (Michelle, Joanne, Joanne) or growth (Eva, Oisin). Michelle described the relationship between quality and personal transformation of students as

> "*…really hav[ing] a person coming out intact, strong, and rebuilt nearly after the programme in a way that's robust, that's resilient. And that actually is quality, and a quality student in that way; and that's what you want, with good integrity. (15)*

Beyond individual impact, the accounts of participants also interpreted the transformational nature of a high-quality learning experience in terms of its potential ripple effect on broader society (Michael, Catherine, Owen, Una, Oisín, Desmond). In these reflections, quality extended beyond personal transformation to encompass the societal value of student learning. These accounts linked the knowledge and skills gained through the programme to students' capacity to contribute meaningfully to the service of others and the public good. In these cases, quality was characterised as an agent of positive societal change, positioning the programme not only as a means of individual advancement, but also as a contributor to collective well-being and social progress (Owen, Una, Oisín, Desmond, Catherine).

Owen described this as

> "*I'm more interested as the [programme leader] of this particular degree, in equipping them to change the world. Which sounds really grand, but I mean it! For me, information and the media are the kind of the lifeblood of society; if you understand how those things work, then you might understand a bit about how society works… and I would like to think that we equip students in a way to go out there and maybe change it to make it better." (Owen)*

4.2.4 Quality as Staff Commitment

While quality definitions informed by academic standards, the programme curriculum, and the student experience were identified as primary conceptualisations of quality, two minor themes emerged across the sample in a smaller number of participant accounts. The accounts of five participants (Declan, Michael, Colin, Una, Desmond) described the concept of quality as being reflective of a perceived inherent commitment of colleagues to quality practice. In some cases, this was expressed as a sense of shared motivation (Declan, Colin) towards enhancing the student learning experience among colleagues, in what Declan described as an "*implicit ownership and sense of understanding of quality.*" In other cases, quality was reflected in the perceived passion held by staff for their academic discipline and how this passion for teaching was reflected in the continuous development of the programme (Michael, Desmond). From these perspectives, quality was sustained through the professional values and dedication of academic staff involved in teaching on the programme. This was reflected by Desmond as

> "*we're seasoned performers and passionate teachers and have a lot more experience. So, we're always thinking about how to bring our experience into the classroom, and how to make that classroom experience better, and watching how the students respond, and constantly tailoring it in a micro format*" (Desmond)

Another perspective was shared by Una, who aligned staff commitment to quality as contributing to the transformative potential of graduates to society.

> "*...if you can change one teacher, think about all of the students that they would teach over their career. And it is that level of commitment and investment from the team here to make excellent teachers at the other end because we know that it will impact on their students. So, that's quality for me*." (Una)

4.2.5 Quality as Intangible

A further minor theme in conceptualising quality was the description within some participant accounts of quality as intangible, or intuited, rather than something that could be easily defined. Declan, a long serving programme leader, positioned this as a "*feeling of quality*" which was, "*not easy to put into words; but when you see it, you know it.*" Similarly, Una described quality as something she inherently sensed, but that was difficult to measure or quantify. She reflected, "*I think the quality has to be something that... it has to come from the heart; and it has to be driven by the passion of the people that are involved. But it's very hard to quantify that*."

Within their descriptions, the accounts of these participants relied on professional knowledge and experience, and a feeling of shared commitment to quality among colleagues as central to their sensing of quality. While explicit mention of the intangible nature of quality was noted within a small number of accounts, it provides insight into the complexity inherent in how concepts of quality are constructed by participants, particularly in the context of formal frameworks to measure, record and assure quality.

4.2.6 Balancing Conceptualisations of Quality

Within these thematic elements, some participant accounts noted contrasting perspectives on what constituted quality among colleagues (Declan, Joseph, Caroline). While the importance of academic standards, curriculum, and the student learning experience as general themes were uncontested, the descriptions given by some participant accounts noted discussion and debate among colleagues about how quality was defined or prioritised within these themes. An example of this was noted within Caroline's account, who reflected

that the concept of quality on her programme was likely to vary among colleagues, and could yield *different answers if I asked different people*." Similarly, Declan and Joseph's accounts described contrasting views among staff on how academic standards were defined, particularly the relationship between student attainment and ensuring the appropriate level of academic rigour and challenge embedded in the curriculum.

In overseeing academic quality within an environment where definitions of quality are multifaceted and diverse viewpoints exist, the accounts of eight participants (Declan, Una, Michael, Niall, Desmond, Oisín, Colin, Owen) highlighted the importance of balancing concepts of quality. For Colin and Declan particularly, this involved managing the relative priorities between different dimensions of quality, particularly the tension between maintaining academic standards and enhancing the student experience.

As Colin describes,

> "*So, maybe in terms of quality, it's about quality from multiple perspectives. So obviously from the sense of the outcomes, and the integrity of the outcomes, that kind of thing. But it's also the quality of the experience for students, the quality of experience for staff colleagues*." (Colin)

In describing quality, participant accounts can be seen to reflect an understanding of quality that is multi-faceted and complex, informed both by their responsibilities for coordinating the assurance and enhancement of the quality of programmes, and as educators on the programme. The next section of this chapter examines how engagement with institutional frameworks for the evaluation of quality were experienced in light of these conceptualisations of quality.

4.3. Programme Leader Experiences in Undertaking Formal Programme Evaluation

4.3.1 The Role and Purpose of Formal Programme Evaluation

Programme leader responsibilities for academic oversight of programmes were described within participant accounts as placing them as the central coordination

in quality assurance processes. Within these accounts, participants described their experiences of participation in formal evaluative processes, particularly the annual APR process, and the 5-year cyclical PPR process. While some themes were common between both these processes, in cases where distinct positions relate specifically to either the APR or PPR, these are noted in the findings below.

4.3.1.1 A Bureaucratic "Box-Ticking" Exercise

In describing their experiences of formal evaluative processes, all participants reflected on the administrative burden associated with engaging with the programme evaluation. In describing their engagement with the annual evaluation process, all participant accounts framed this evaluation process as being either wholly or partially positioned for the purposes of reporting and accountability, while a further five participants (Niall, Oisin, Colin, Desmond, Tiarnan) referred to the 5-year cyclical PPR in the same terms. In framing of the APR process, engagement was described as an administrative task, which was completed by filling out the required template (Declan, Emer, Catherine, Oisin), which Declan described as, "*a case of… pulling out the details, because most of its very factual. Most of the rest hasn't changed since the year before so you just cut and paste*." Similarly, Oisin, a long-time programme leader noted,

> "*…those APRs, I'm an expert in filling these out. It takes usually takes people 10 minutes before the [Programme] Board, and they never look at them again, nobody else knows about them…. It's all nonsense.*" (Oisin)

This emphasis on the administrative focus of the evaluative process drew broad criticism across the sample, with participant accounts often describing the formal evaluations as a "*box-ticking*" exercise (Declan, Michael, Joanne, Jane, Sarah, Niall, Owen, Shane, Una, Oisin, Desmond). This critique was drawn both from the sense that the process was largely compliance based (Catherine, Jane, Declan, Oisin) and was perceived within some accounts to be disconnected from the work of maintaining and enhancing quality (Jane, Una, Oisin, Niall). To this end, Una reflected,

> "*does it feel like a box-ticking exercise? I think the actual APR feels like a box ticking exercise for me, but that's not to say that we're not doing the work. The work is being done, but it's being done outside of the APR process.*" (Una)

Within some accounts, reference to the APR as a largely reporting and accountability process was grounded in a sense of uncertainty around the ownership of the process, and what happened to the evaluation report once it was submitted. Shane, a relatively new programme leader mused that, "*I wonder, is it more from my benefit, rather than the university's benefit? I don't really see a huge outcome in the process itself, personally*." Similarly, Una rhetorically posed the question, "*I don't know, does anybody read it beyond where it goes when I fill it in and send it off? Does anybody else look at it?*" This was also reflected in the contributions of long-serving programme leaders (Declan, Oisin), where Declan reflected that the APR was *"just a document that never seemed to go somewhere and never reflected back; we didn't really care about what was put in it very much, to be honest*."

Participants' perceptions were also informed by views shared with them by colleagues prior to engaging with formal evaluative processes. Both Michael's and Joanne's accounts noted advice received from other colleagues prior to initiating the PPR process for the first time. Joanne recalled advice from colleagues to focus on completing the template as the primary objective. Joanne noted, "*I'd been warned, "Oh, my goodness, the pain! Just get it done; just fill out the forms, it'll be fine.*"". (Joanne). However, in Michael and Joanne's accounts, while noting the perceptions of others, both inevitably decided to approach the review with an intent to make the process meaningful for themselves and the programme team. Joanne described using the PPR process to build a case for changes to the programme, deciding to use the process to

> "*make some of the changes that I wanted to make anyway, and…use* [the review] *as leverage for that. So, it's as much as you put into it, you'll get out of it. But I don't think everybody sees it like that*" (Joanne)

Michael similarly noted scepticism among academic colleagues prior to undertaking PPR. In this case, Michael rationalised his own decision, reflecting that, even if perceived as a bureaucratic process, he had elected to use the PPR as a reflective exercise that he hoped would be of value to the programme team.

> "*...other people were saying, "well what's the point, where does it go, what happens it." I guess I was of the view that even if it does just go into a black hole, and no one ever said anything about it again, it's a useful process for us to, as a programme team, to kind of reflect on the program*me" (Michael)

Michael's reflection of the report going into a "*black hole*" reinforces the uncertainty expressed within other accounts about the vague ownership of the process, and the perception that programme evaluation represented a largely bureaucratic task. However, for both Michael and Joanne, their accounts reflect an approach to engagement that sought to gain some value from the process, in one case by using it as building a case for intended changes, and in the other, the aspiration that it could be adapted as a reflective exercise for the programme team.

4.3.1.2 A Narrative on Decisions and Changes

In contrast to the predominantly critical perspective of formal programme evaluation in accounts that described the processes as largely for reporting purposes, the accounts of three participants positioned the process as an opportunity to document decisions and report on progress in the last academic year (Emer, Shane, Tiarnan). Emer noted that,

> "*My own personal opinion is I don't hate doing it or anything like that; I like to see, and to show what we're doing, because we are doing stuff*" (Emer)

Other accounts noted a consideration that the process itself was not "*invasive*" (Joseph) and could be used as a means of "*keeping the ship afloat*" (Joseph). Again, returning to the theme of documenting decisions, Joseph considered there was value in "*being forced to write things down; it means that you can no longer forget about things, intentionally or unintentionally*."

The potential value in documenting decisions and progress was echoed in the accounts of some participants in describing their experiences of PPR. In these cases, the PPR report was viewed not just as a compliance tool, but as a document that captured a comprehensive narrative of the programme's recent history and its evolution over time (Colin, Tiarnan, Michael).

Indicative of this perspective, Colin's account described the process as beneficial for making sense of the programme's development over a longer period. He noted that it offered "*a chance to look back on the last five years and see what has been done. It also kind of to some extent put all in one place… as a coherent narrative.*" Similarly, Tiarnan described his approach to PPR as "*[running] a narrative for what the programme is, and how it got there over the five years.*"

4.3.1.3 A Process for Validating and Assuring Practice

The accounts of participants also noted positioning programmatic evaluation as a tool for validation and assurance of quality particularly where quality was positioned as a reflection of academic standards. This conceptualisation reflected practice within the process that drew conclusions about academic standards based on the monitoring of student academic performance and considering feedback from external peer review provided by external examiners within their accounts.

Evidence, in the form of statistics on student academic attainment, and reflections based on feedback from external examiners were key contributing factors to positioning APR as a tool for validation and assurance among some participants (Declan, Joseph, Caroline, Sarah, Niall, Emer, Tiarnan). Indicative of this positioning, Tiarnan described examining these data during the APR process as "*a case of reassuring ourselves that everything is continuing as we expect. So, I would never assume that there aren't going to be surprises, and we should still look at the data to assure ourselves*."

Joseph linked APR to assuring quality, explaining that it helped ensure "*minor issues don't unnecessarily become major issues*." Examples of assurance-related concerns raised within participant accounts included analysing grading trends for

evidence of potential grade inflation (Jane, Caroline, Sarah, Shane, Tiarnan) or academic integrity risks, such as possible unauthorised use of generative AI by students in completing assignments (Catherine, Shane, Tiarnan).

Assurance and validation provided through the PPR process was more frequently described within participant accounts as validation and assurance of standards associated in the programme curriculum and learner experience, rather than focused on student academic performance, as was the case for APR. A contributing factor to the positioning of PPR was through the contribution of external examiners, who reviewed and provided feedback on the PPR report prepared by the programme team (Joseph, Michael, Jane, Colin, Michelle). This academic peer review contributed to PPR being described as an opportunity to "*reaffirm what we were doing*" (Michelle) and "*validating*" (Colin, Jane) changes that had been over the previous five-year period. The role of external peer review as a feature of programme review reinforced its positioning as an opportunity to validate and assure the maintenance of academic standards and the construction of a fit for purpose curriculum.

For APR, assurance and validation were primarily noted within the accounts with reference to formally documenting the input and response to external examiner feedback within the template (Sinead, Sarah, Owen, Shane, Desmond). In contrast, for PPR, the accounts of participants were more likely to reference the input of external examiner as contributing to PPR being perceived as a process for validation and assurance (Joseph, Jane, Colin, Michelle, Conor). Indicative of other accounts, the credibility of the external examiner input within PPR was noted by Joseph as being considered among his colleagues as "*quality control, but it is quality control by peers in other institutions, so it's seen as useful.*"

Colin, whose programme had undergone significant structural change in the period between periodic reviews, welcomed the role of external peer review as part of PPR, which he described in his account as "*[giving] confidence at the end that we were being holistic*." The response received from the external review of the PPR report was reflected by him to have "*validated what we've said and [they] did point out one or two things that were helpful*." However, the descriptions within the

accounts primarily positioned the feedback received by external examiners as retrospective assurance and validation rather than contributing to future enhancement planning. In the case of Colin, when asked if the PPR had contributed to enhancing the quality of his programme, he emphasised its role in validating quality of the previously revised structure and curriculum, rather than contributing to its future enhancement. To this end, he noted,

> "*I don't know that the PPR contributed to quality, but I do think the PPR helped us recognise where we were creating quality that we mightn't have realised*." (Colin)

4.3.1.4 A Process for Enhancement

The final conceptualisation of the role of formal programme evaluation within participant accounts was its positioning of formal evaluation as a tool for quality enhancement. This perspective was less frequently expressed in relation to both APR and PPR processes, with only two participants, Michael and Owen, describing the use of APR as a tool for making curricular changes. In Michael's case, his account described the changes made to the programme as a result of APR as being typically minor, and while derived from the APR process, were also influenced by other factors, such as changes to staff availability to teach on specific modules.

In describing his experiences of using APR as a tool for enhancement, Owen's approach to completing the process took a markedly different approach to other participant accounts, suggestive of a reinterpretation of the process, and developing it in line with his daily work as a programme leader. Owen framed the APR as an "*ongoing conversation*," progressed by continuous informal dialogue among colleagues about potential changes to the programme. Iterative discussions with colleagues positioned APR as a natural and evolving dialogue, rather than a static, compliance-driven task. Owen's account noted that formal decisions were "*really only limited to a couple of meetings*," while the real evaluation of quality occurred informally throughout the year.

His account described,

> "*...the autumn semester sets up what we might be doing, and then that's when the sort of the informal conversations go on. And then by the time you get to the February Programme Board, that's where you're thinking about structures; it's sort of a done deal when you walk in [to the Programme Board]. We did discuss it, and it doesn't necessarily have to proceed. But the assumption is that you have already done the work in an informal way*" (Owen)

Relative to the APR, participant descriptions of PPR were more likely to identify its potential to inform future changes to the programme. Although only four participants directly discussed using the PPR process to plan changes, a small number of accounts positioned the review as providing an opportunity to think about the future. While still retrospective in nature, Joseph described the PPR as an opportunity to "*think more broadly and deeply*" (Joseph) about the programme. For Tiarnan, although his experiences of PPR did not result in changes to his programme, his framing of the process did consider a future-focus for his programme, describing PPR as a "*good exercise to think back over a longer period, and forward into the future over a longer period*" (Tiarnan).

The positioning of PPR as an opportunity to consider enhancements was largely reflected among the accounts of two participants who had either undertaken the process for the first time or were imminently initiating their engagement with the process. Joanne, who had recently completed her first PPR noted that "*from my perspective, it was really helpful, because I got through the programme changes that I wanted to make for a long time*." Similarly, Eva, who was about to embark on her first PPR evaluation, expressed hope that the process would provide, "*an opportunity for enriching the curriculum*."

While there were a small number of cases where programme evaluation was interpreted as supporting enhancements, other participants were more sceptical about the potential of the process to support quality enhancement. Within some accounts, participants' positioning of programme evaluation as a reporting and accountability process overshadowed its potential to be used for planning future enhancement. In his account, Oisin, a long-standing programme leader, observed

a disconnect between evaluative frameworks, including programme evaluation, and the broader work of managing programme quality noting,

> "*I kind of see the value in the accreditations, and I recognise that all of these processes, procedures, accreditations all contribute to the success of the institution, and I'm happy to participate in them. What I haven't managed to do is to connect them up the chain or see it integrating in a way that adds value; so, they're almost separate, which is a pity.*" (Oisin)

This sentiment was echoed within the account of another long-term programme leader, Niall. For Niall, there was a disconnect between programmatic review, and the ways in which quality enhancement was planned and implemented within the programme.

> "*...we do change all the time internally, but ironically, it's not caused by the PPR. It's recorded in a way by the PPR. But even in the PPR, I had to go back and record all the changes we'd made, and justify them in PPR, having never needed to do that.*" (Niall)

Both these examples, indicative of other accounts, highlight a potential disconnect between formal evaluative processes and their relevance to the day-to-day management of programme quality by programme leaders.

4.3.1.5 Summarising The Role and Purpose of Formal Evaluation

When discussing the purpose and role of programmatic reviews, participant accounts included a range of perceptions in how they positioned the role and purpose of programmatic evaluation. Three themes emerge that represent a diversity of how programme evaluation is positioned by participants,

- Formal Programme Evaluation as Reporting and Accountability
- Formal Programme Evaluation for Validation and Assurance.
- Formal Programme Evaluation for Planning for Enhancement

My findings suggest that the APR process represented the dominant conceptualisation of the annual programmatic evaluation as a process for

reporting and accountability, with smaller numbers of participants framing it as a process for *validation and assurance;* and very few accounts positioning APR as a tool for planning enhancement (see Appendix Eight: Participant Positioning of the Role and Function of Annual Programme Review). The findings indicate no clear patterns emerging on the predominance of specific conceptualisations or combination of conceptualisations of APR based on gender, undergraduate or postgraduate programmes, disciplinary area, or length of service as a programme leader.

Within accounts where participants had undertaken or were about to embark on the 5-year cyclical PPR process, the pattern of conceptualisations differed from that of APR. In these cases, participants were more likely to position the process of programme evaluation as *validation and assurance*, in combination with framing PPR as either a process for *reporting and accountability* or *planning for enhancement* (see Appendix Nine: Participant Positioning of the Role and Function of Periodic Programme Review).

The findings suggest some variance in how PPR is conceptualised based on length of tenure as a programme leader. Both Niall and Oisin, both of whom had over 10 years of experience as a programme leader, strongly positioned the PPR process within their accounts as processes for *reporting and accountability,* emphasising the process's bureaucratic and administrative focus. The accounts of participants who were more likely to position PPR as having a role in planning for enhancement (Eva, Michael, Caroline, Joanne) tended to have shorter tenures as programme leader and were undertaking or had undertaken the PPR process for the first time. This pattern may be suggestive of a weariness toward programmatic evaluation among longer serving programme leaders relative to participants with less years of experience in the role.

4.3.2 Approaches to Evidencing Quality in Formal Programme Evaluation

Participant approaches to using evidence in formal programme evaluation were largely driven by specific quantitative indicators defined within the proforma

templates provided to programme leaders for completion of the programme evaluation process. These templates included requirements for the analysis of quantitative information relating to the programme, including the total number of registered students, trends in numbers of programme entrants, and a number of metrics on student academic progression and completion. Additionally, the PPR process required a reflection by programme teams on feedback received from several stakeholder groups, including students, graduates, and graduate employers. However, the most frequently cited source of evidence used by research participants focused on the requirement to provide a reflection based on their examination of student academic attainment metrics, particularly grading patterns at programme and module level.

4.3.2.1 Consistency in Student Grading Patterns

The accounts of thirteen of the twenty participants discussed their experiences of analysing and reviewing statistical data on student academic attainment. This included an examination of student attainment within a single academic year, and over academic cycles.

The most frequently cited theme emerging from participant accounts was attempting to understand and rationalise unexpected variances observed in grading distributions. In the absence of a defined or prescribed "measure" of quality, consistency in patterns of student academic attainment were often suggested to represent evidence of the maintenance of academic standards. Reflective of the approach taken, Niall described this analysis as,

> "*looking at the individual spread marks within modules, so the comparator values of modules, in the hope that none of them are very different from others, that there's a kind of a general spread that is acceptable, and none of them having too many failures, and basically to put it very bluntly, none of them have been too many firsts*". (Niall)

A frequent inference drawn from examining patterns in academic grading related to how variance in grading patterns between programme modules may provide evidence of the relative academic challenge of the modules across the programme

(Declan, Caroline, Sarah, Niall, Shane, Emer, Tiarnan). The concept of "fairness" was also noted by Owen, Declan, and Colin when examining student academic performance across modules, where consistency in patterns of student achievement across all modules was interpreted as being indicative of a consistency in the level of both academic challenge, and a common approach to grading standards across all modules. In contrast to Owen, Declan and Colin, Martin's account positioned variance in academic grading variance as a positive and necessary feature of an academic programme, enabling a more accurate measurement of students' relative academic performance across the programme. He reflected,

> *"Personally, I think it's important to have difficult modules, because a degree is not given, so, the student has to work… to do an accurate assessment of a student, you need modules that are easy modules, modules that are medium, and modules that are hard. So, knowing that a module is really hard, for me that's OK to leave it as it is, just to warn the students that it's [difficult]."* (Martin)

In addition to examining student academic performance data between modules, variance in the average and range of student academic attainment over time was also positioned within some participant accounts as evidence of threats to academic standards and academic integrity. The accounts of five participants (Jane, Caroline, Sarah, Shane, Tiarnan) noted interpreting upward trends in student grade achievement over time as a possible indicator of "grade inflation", which was considered a threat to maintaining academic standards. A further three accounts (Catherine, Shane, Tiarnan) also noted concerns that unanticipated upward trends in grading patterns could be suggestive of unauthorised use of generative AI by students in completing assessments, also a threat to academic integrity within the programme.

4.3.2.2 The Perceived Value of Quantitative Metrics in Understanding Quality

The requirement to analyse and comment on patterns and trends in student performance was often described within participant accounts in terms of embedded organisational practice and norms. The accounts of participants across

all disciplines typically described similar patterns of engaging with the data on student academic performance. While the use of these measures tended to be accepted as an element of quality assurance, the value of these measures as a meaningful indicator of quality were contested within a number of participant accounts.

When asked if they ever used quantitative data, Owen noted, "*We have the numbers, and we do look at them. I suppose to a certain extent, you kind of wonder what to do with them?*" This commentary was offered as a rhetorical question, reflecting a hesitancy or scepticism on how to reliably interpret student academic performance data as a measure of quality. For Owen, the question, "*what do with [data]*" can be interpreted as both a reflective question on what could be meaningfully drawn from the quantitative data about quality, and a lack of clarity how quantitative data was expected to be interpreted for the purposes of completing the programme evaluation.

Several participants directly challenged the value of academic attainment statistics as evidence of quality in academic standards. Some accounts highlighted the limited statistical validity of statistics in cases where cohort sizes were too small to accurately compare variance over time (Niall, Una, Tiarnan). However, in other participant accounts, the limitations of quantitative statistics were grounded in a perceived lack of relationship between the metric and what constituted quality (Caroline, Sarah, Joanne, Una). Indicative of participants' reflections, Caroline's account identified perceived flaws in using these metrics to make assertations about quality.

> "*The percentage of students in grade categories; the first-year progression rates. I'm not sure if that tells you much about the quality of the programme; it's more like whether for the students there might be one or two modules that are genuinely difficult; that can be a sign of quality, and could also be some sort of mismatch between what the students thought they were signing up to, and what they got*" (Caroline).

This sentiment was also shared by Jane, whose account revealed a perceived paradox in using student attainment as a meaningful indicator of quality of teaching. She described a perceived underlying assumption that while high student achievement was sometimes synonymous with evidence of quality, student attainment should not be perceived as *too* high, as to potentially suggest a deterioration in academic standards.

> "*Pass rates, and CAO points, and number of firsts to me don't necessarily speak to the success of the programme, because an awful lot of it is just numbers. Like, even the numbers of firsts and 2:1s. Now I'm nearly looking at them, and I'm not happy with them when they're too high!... But I don't look at those stats or those things. I don't think they speak to the quality of what we're doing, particularly well*" (Jane)

Jane's reflections therefore reveal two tensions in how the data related to quality; firstly, a perceived disconnect between the data and how Jane interpreted the concept of quality, and secondly in terms of a paradox in how the meaning of "quality" can be interpreted from the data.

4.3.2.3 Meaning Through Contextualisation

Although the inclusion of statistical metrics within templates for formal evaluative processes conferred legitimacy on their use as organisational norms for assessing academic standards in programme evaluation, participants rarely regarded these data as credible indicators of quality. To address this limitation, eleven participants described engaging in processes of sense-making through collegial discussion, in which statistical patterns of academic attainment were contextualised and interpreted in order to develop causal explanations for observed variance. These eleven participant accounts described these discussions as contributing to a collective interpretation on the likely causes of variance in student academic attainment, both between modules on the programme, and over multiple academic cycles.

In describing these discussions, participant accounts frequently emphasised their exploratory and explanatory nature. They were used to "*ask the question, why*"

(Owen) there may be observable differences in patterns of academic grading. Emphasising the explanatory emphasis of these discussions, Emer reflected that "*It's not a, "something must be done". It's just a, "is there a reason? Is it just the natural variation of the class? Or did something happen?""* Emer's commentary positions these contextualising discussions as critical in both understanding why variation may have occurred, but also the possibility of addressing issues that may arise from these discussions. She concluded,

> *"Because it's the, "did something happen", we want to know about piece; if something genuinely happened that needs someone, somewhere, to address it; someone needs to know that. So, that would be the type of discussion. It's not "this needs to change," it's just we need to understand why."* (Emer)

These contextualising discussions described within accounts occasionally brought forward ideas to address issues; for example, a collective effort to consider assessment approaches that mitigate academic integrity risks associated with the unauthorised use of generative AI (Tiarnan), or a consideration of the structure of the curriculum; for example, how material that may be particularly challenging to students was introduced into the curriculum (Joseph, Tiarnan).

Participant accounts also described how discussions on academic performance uncovered experiences of contrasting perspectives among colleagues on the relationship between levels of academic attainment and perceptions of quality. Examples of this, described in three participant accounts (Declan, Joseph, Caroline), noted contrasting perspectives among colleagues in balancing how high academic standards were reflected in pass rates and attainment by students. These tensions were framed as a frustration (Declan) and a challenge (Joseph), with participants often describing their responsibility to navigate these contested ideas of what constituted quality in academic standards. Declan described this as,

> "*One element that frustrates me; there are a few people around whose understanding quality is high failure rate, and that's the one mismatch*

sometimes that's in there. For the most part we know who they are, and we work to compensate (laughs) but, you know, it's a challenge." (Declan)

Declan reconciled this positioning of academic performance statistics by framing quality as one of balance, where statistical data forms part of a broader understanding of quality and academic standards. For Declan, this balancing was framed as "*[ensuring] that you're upholding the quality of the programme from an academic integrity point of view, balanced with the quality of the programme from a student experience point of view, and balanced then with the expected progression rates*."

These findings suggest that the requirements for analysis of statistical data as a tool for monitoring and assuring quality focused participants towards framing the evaluation as prioritising quality as academic standards. However, the experiences reflected within participant accounts suggest that the perceived value of these data is nuanced, rather than absolute. While some accounts embraced the use of data as a tool to identify potential grade-inflation, possible infringements to academic integrity, or indicative of academic challenge within the curriculum, their value as a tool for measuring and understanding quality more generally was limited. Significantly, participant accounts frequently highlighted the use of dialogue with colleagues to interpret and contextualise these data as part of the process to rationalise and interpret trends within the data.

4.4. Programme Leader Experiences of Locally Developed Evaluation

In discussing their experiences of managing both quality assurance and enhancement, several participant accounts referred to forms of evaluation and enhancement that were conducted external to formal programme evaluation.

The accounts of nine participants (Joseph, Michael, Colin, Caroline Jane, Martin, Owen, Michelle, Desmond) discussed implementing quality enhancement through iterative or ongoing processes that were woven into everyday practice within the programme, independent of formal evaluation processes. A further five (Niall, Una, Oisin, Emer, Tiarnan) discussed the development of more structured, locally developed evaluative processes, which were developed in parallel to formal

programme evaluation, and specifically undertaken with a view to implementing enhancement-focused change.

Not all participant accounts described developing locally developed frameworks for evaluation, or other iterative enhancement planning. Among the accounts that did not describe these practices, four were programme leaders of programmes that were subject to external PRSB accreditation, where quality assurance and programme change was largely dominated by alignment to the requirements of the accrediting body (Declan, Jane, Joanne, Shane). In one other case, the programme curriculum had been developed in direct response to an external funding call, where the programme curriculum was significantly shaped by the learning development needs identified by an external funder of the programme (Sarah). In the final case, where local enhancement planning was not discussed, the programme leader was responsible for a relatively new programme that had been active for less than two academic years (Catherine).

4.4.1 Drivers for Enhancement Focused Evaluation and Planning

The accounts of participants suggested a significant commitment to enhancement by participants as part of their overall approach to programme leadership. These accounts framed change within the programme in positive terms, linking a commitment to ongoing enhancement as reflecting quality in and of itself. Within these accounts, enhancement was described as a way to avoid becoming "*complacent*" (Niall) and reflected a culture that continually wanted to "*do better*" (Michael). Changes to programmatic structures and curriculum variably described as "*updating*" (Michael), "*enriching*" (Eva), "*reimagining*" (Shane), "*modernising*" (Declan, Oisin, Emer) or "*enhancing*" (Michelle) the programme.

Drivers for change were described within participant accounts as often emerging from within the academic area and as a response to discussions among the programme team (Una, Colin, Michael, Emer). Una's account noted a locally led structural evaluation she was currently undertaking emerged from concerns raised by colleagues on the sustainability of the teaching workload, given the resources available to deliver the programme curriculum.

> *"And so, you're asking how did I how did I know, the evidence piece? We knew from speaking to colleagues that this was a considerable problem in terms of workload management for staff. It was something that we talked a lot about in our own meetings here in the School."* (Una)

Similarly, Michael's account reflected a perceived shared commitment of colleagues to the discipline area, which he considered to be a driver for ongoing enhancement of the programme curriculum.

> "*All of the staff teaching on this programme here, like our students, we're all committed to the topic as well; we're not just going through the motions. So, we're keen to improve the programme offering where we can.... So, there's a kind of an intrinsic motivation there.*" (Michael)

Participant accounts therefore suggest a relationship between change and the meaning of quality. Efforts to enhance programme quality within the accounts suggest that the drivers for change tended to emerge from within the programme team, rather than precipitated by formal evaluation processes, and are positioned as a function of colleagues perceived intrinsic motivation and commitment to quality and excellence in teaching.

4.4.2 The Relationship Between Local and Institutional Evaluative Processes

Some participants, whose accounts described their experiences of locally developed evaluative processes were clear to distinguish these from formal programme evaluation, and position local evaluative work as independent and parallel processes. An example of this separation was described in Una's account, which described seeking faculty leadership permission to postpone her scheduled PPR until after the locally developed structural evaluation was completed. Permission for this was granted on the basis that, given the anticipated change expected as a result of the local evaluative process, simultaneous or consecutive completion of formal programme evaluation was of little value. Emer's account also made a distinction between the role of locally developed evaluations and formal programme evaluation, where formal evaluation was described for

reporting purposes; in contrast, the local evaluation was positioned for the purposes of planning future enhancement. She noted,

> "*…the other meetings that I described, where we want to look at the content, we want to revise the labs, we want to revise those things, we bring together the relevant people. You couldn't do that simultaneously with the PPR. One is actually enacting the quality improvement, and the other is reporting the exact state of play in this year, where we are in quality*" (Emer)

One account (Niall) described developing his own internal evaluation as a direct response to his frustration at the PPR process, which he considered was unable to deliver on meaningful change, describing the formal process as "*broken*." Niall described plans to imminently initiate his own evaluation, noting,

> *"I am now starting a review, nothing to do with the university… So, it's an internal review and a big thing as in it's going to be a structure review. I completed the PPR I think two years ago, got no feedback on it… I got nothing back; it wasn't even commented on, I don't know why. I think the PPR process is broken; I have actually no idea what happens."* (Niall)

These perspectives, indicative other accounts, represent a distinction between the roles of formal and locally developed processes; one for the purposes of reporting, assurance, and accountability to the institution, and the other to evaluate quality for the purposes of enhancement planning, respectively.

4.4.3 Ownership and Inclusion in Locally Developed Evaluation

Participant approaches to enhancement planning, either through informal and iterative processes or locally developed evaluation processes were commonly described within participant accounts as being characterised by strong local ownership within the disciplinary community or programme team. Reflective of almost all accounts, local evaluation processes were described as inclusively bringing colleagues together (Niall, Una, Oisin, Demond, Emer) with a view to coalescing colleagues towards an agenda for change (Niall, Oisin, Una). This was often described as reflecting cultural norms within the programme team. Indicative of this view, Una's description of the inclusive approach adopted noted,

"*In our School, [individuals] don't really make those kinds of decisions … it's very much, we built everything together, so we'll dismantle it together*."

4.4.4 Parameters and Focus in Locally Developed Evaluation

In contrast to formal programmatic review processes, where an institutional template was used to guide the process, the use of templates in descriptions of locally developed evaluation within participant accounts were entirely absent. The described scope of local evaluation processes by participants focused on a number of different programme-specific themes or topics, from a consideration of programme structure (Una, Niall, Oisin), or reviewing the coherence of the overall programme curriculum and identifying areas of duplication or redundancy (Oisin, Emer, Owen), to more detailed examination of specific aspects of the curriculum or approach to teaching (Emer, Desmond, Joseph, Michael).

Emer's account described two separate local evaluations; one which had recently been completed, and one that was current underway. Both these evaluations adopted an approach that she noted was typical within her academic area. One evaluation focused on an examination of a core element of the programme curriculum, with a view to ensuring that programme content was both coherent across modules and reflected contemporary issues in that discipline. Emer's description of the approach adopted by colleagues emphasised bringing together disciplinary experts who taught on the programme, and involved

> "*talk[ing] about the priorities, talking about what did we think was missing, what did we think we were doing well, what did we think could be done better, what did we think was redundant at this point that we could move to have smaller significance*"

Similarly, as a discipline with a significant laboratory component, her account also described a separate evaluation that was currently ongoing, this time focused on the approach to lab-based components of the programme, which had adopted a similar approach. Emer noted,

> "*At the moment, we're undergoing another review for one of our programmes, where the same thing: programme [leader] has assembled*

the team, brings people together, talking about the labs; how are we managing the numbers in labs? What are our key objectives for what students will achieve in their labs? How will we achieve these? And bringing together everyone to get ideas on how to get the optimal lab experience now."

These descriptions of locally developed evaluations, amongst others, suggest an approach to evaluation that is designed and implemented to meet the specific needs of each programme, based on locally identified issues, and are motivated by a shared commitment among colleagues to address these.

4.4.5 Methodologies used in Locally Developed Evaluation

While the scope and scale of local evaluative practice described in participant accounts was highly variable, the methodological approach adopted was broadly consistent among participants. Evaluation of quality within locally developed processes prioritised bringing groups of staff together (Niall, Emer, Oisin, Una, Tiarnan), with a focus on an open and inclusive exploration of issues (Niall, Emer).

Niall, who had planned his own self-initiated structural evaluation of his programme following frustrations with the formal PPR process, was clear that this process would be,

> "*...completely open to [colleagues'] interpretation. I want it to be very open, and very much a case of getting opinions and views of what's working and what's not working. The classic thing what should we continue, and what we should get rid of. And trying to look to the future a bit and trying to look structurally*."

Participant accounts suggest this collaborative approach was considered central to ensuring a sense of collective ownership among colleagues, which was a crucial element of bolstering acceptance for curricular change (Joanne, Niall, Una, Oisin). In describing his approach to a major structural and curricular change in his programme, Oisin's account spoke of the value of working groups to develop new ideas, which served both as inputs into the process and to reflect the importance of creating a collective commitment for change.

> "*We had working groups looking at it…And so, we were given the full meeting, and we got great input on all sorts of great ideas about how could update, upgrade, and enhance the programme*" (Oisin)

Outside of defined evaluation processes for change, informal and ongoing conversations between colleagues within the accounts of a smaller number of participants described a culture of iterative curricular change to plan enhancements to programmes (Owen, Eva, Michael, Desmond). This approach was most vividly described by Desmond, who discussed programmatic change as an evolving process, informed by informal discussions among colleagues who continually discussed the programme curriculum and its relevance to the broader industry in which programme graduates would be working.

> "*I'm in constant conversation; about the programme, about the industry, about everything. … And we're discussing how the music industry is evolving, and how that feeds into teaching. And what should we be teaching? What's the relevant for students today compared to what we studied? And we go, "well, what about this idea for this thing?" We should be trying this?" Most of those changes we can implement the next day. We just do it; it's incremental*." (Desmond)

4.4.5.1 Barriers to Change

The experiences of initiating discussions or processes to build a case for enhancement focused change were not always straight forward, and several participants spoke about limitations to their capacity to instigate local evaluations or enhancement planning. These included instances where any programmatic change was subject to external accrediting bodies or had to be negotiated with partner institutions, (Joanne, Jane, Martin, Shane, Oisin), or where changes would have additional resource implications (Michael, Caroline, Niall, Demond). However, some participant accounts also identified perceived barriers based on internal resistance to change among colleagues (Eva, Owen, Una, Oisin, Emer). Reflecting on the programme leaders' lack of managerial authority to lead the instigation of enhancement-focused evaluation, Emer reflected this as a limitation, noting,

> "*I do feel a limitation in terms of quality in that [I] may say, "oh, it would be nice to review this strand of the programme, modernise it, have a look at it." And you could bring together the group, and they could meet and say, "no I don't think you should change anything*." (17)

These limitations are suggestive of careful navigation of local-evaluation initiatives by programme leaders, and the importance of adopting an approach to evaluation that coalesced colleagues around an agenda for change.

4.4.6 Evidencing Quality in Locally Developed Evaluation

In addressing the ways in which evidence-informed practice shaped their evaluative work, several participant accounts reflected on how both quantitative and qualitative evidence played a role in shaping their understanding of quality in the context of both formal and locally developed evaluation. The accounts of all participants noted their awareness and variable use of common statistical data sets on programme demand, enrolment patterns, and student achievement more generally as part of their role. When undertaking locally developed evaluative work, participant accounts also frequently referenced gathering feedback from several stakeholder groups. This was, in part, to address what Joseph described as "*the problem that every institution probably has is that the numerical, quasi-objective data can only get you so far*" to fully evaluate quality. Feedback was therefore used to supplement participants' inherent knowledge of what Colin described as "*the numbers*", with richer narratives on how quality in their programme was perceived by stakeholders.

In addition to gathering feedback from colleagues, participant accounts also included perspectives on their experiences of gathering feedback from students and graduate employers. Student feedback was noted within these accounts as a central source of evidence in considering the rationale for programmatic change. Several participant accounts discussed purposefully eliciting critical reflections from students, which were considered the most useful in understanding where change was required (Michael, Joanne, Michelle). Reflective of this approach,

Michael explained his approach to purposefully seeking critical perspectives to surface issues that could contribute to enhancing quality. He noted,

> "*... we went into the focus group; we said, "let's just take it as read that you're all happy with lots of parts of the programme. It's not helpful for us to spend an hour hearing how good we are; we want to hear critical feedback*." (Michael)

A similar reflection was presented within Michelle's account, who positioned the value of critical feedback both as useful in the context of quality improvement, but also to authentically demonstrate to students that the programme existed in a learning culture that is willing to adapt and change. This approach served to model change as practice in the context of the discipline being taught on the programme. Therefore, from Michelle's perspective, feedback played a dual role: to both inform future change, and to additionally role-model the importance of openness to critique and change to her students.

> "*So, you'd be looking for feedback in order to enhance what you're doing, even if it meant it was uncomfortable. Because you could get complacent, and you want to take on board what they have to say... but you're teaching about change... this is what you're teaching about: the importance of change and culture and change management. And so then, if you can't do it yourself, well, then, it's a bit kind of false*." (15)

Two participant accounts (Una, Emer) while noting the value of feedback from students, also reflected a perception that students had a relatively limited frame of reference for gauging quality in curriculum as they, "*only know the environment they're in*" (Emer), and "*don't necessarily see the bigger scheme that they're fitting into*" (Una).

Informal gathering of feedback was often prized within participant accounts for its perceived authenticity (Sarah), and ability to provide new insights from students. The nature of informal data collection often relied on taking "*temperature checks*" (Catherine) or "*checking in*" (Joanne, Michelle, Eva, Emer) with students. Joseph

positioned the importance of trust as a key enabler to opening authentic pathways of communication between colleagues and students, noting,

> "*There is a huge amount of anecdotal evidence and especially in the science subject, where academics and technical staff get to talk to students in Labs where you are really together, for you know, three hours a week, or six hours a week, 12 weeks in a semester. Much more personal and informal pathways of communication open up.*" (02)

Within some accounts, informal feedback from students served to ensure that emerging issues were responded to in a timely way when issues arose. Examples were provided of feedback from student representatives in cases where students may be experiencing difficulties or challenges with the curriculum or assessments during the teaching semester (Caroline, Colin, Shane, Una, Tiarnan), and awareness of these enabled participants to work with colleagues to resolve issues in a time-sensitive manner.

Thirteen of the twenty participant accounts also noted the role of graduate employers as an important source of feedback and insight on the relevance of their programmes' curricula, particularly when considering changes to reflect the knowledge and skills needs of graduates for employment. The credibility of employer feedback was based on the perceived legitimacy of their voice as a stakeholder, which was formalised in the case of three participants (Eva, Oisin, Emer) through industry advisory panels within their disciplinary area. The views of graduate employers were further given credibility in participant accounts where the conceptualisation of quality by participants was aligned to preparing students for success in their future careers. These conceptualisations of quality, informed by input from graduate employers were synonymous with attempting to ensure that the programme curriculum remained "*current*" (Eva), "*unique*" (Emer), or "*fit for purpose*" (Sarah).

Engagement with industry or employer stakeholders was sometimes described within participant accounts as going "*outside*" (Niall) or into the "*real world*" (Jane, Owen). Within their accounts, some participants also described themselves and

colleagues as "*working with*" (Colin, Tiarnan) industry and employer stakeholders, where engagement with employers was positioned as an ongoing relationship. An example of this was expressed within Tiarnan's account, which noted,

> "*…we've good ties with [company name], and a number of colleagues would work closely with them. So, we'd know what they're talking about at the moment in terms of skill sets that they need, that they don't have, and we'd keep this in mind when redesigning the majors.*" (Tiarnan)

Feedback from employers and industry was positioned as a useful source of evidence to generate new ideas that led to changes in the curriculum (Joanne, Colin, Tiarnan) or for Emer and Eva, provided a way of 'sense-checking' proposed changes to the curriculum to ensure their alignment to the needs of employers in what Eva described as, "*test[ing] some models or some ideas that we might have for modules to get their feeling on it, if it would be a good fit or not*".

Insights from employers or other external stakeholders were also gleaned from informal discussions with graduate employers at industry events or during work placement supervision meetings on some programmes. Joanne's account echoed the previously cited sentiments of Owen in his discussions with programme colleagues, in describing informal conversations with employers as "*rich*", offering an opportunity to elicit feedback that would otherwise remain undisclosed in more formal meetings.

> "*Nothing will ever beat that off-the-cuff conversation where someone tells you something that they've never planned to tell you, you know? And sometimes they might be the third person to tell you, and then it really begins to hit home*." (Joanne)

4.4.6.1 Challenges to the Legitimacy of Evidence Gathered

While valued for its richness and authenticity, the accounts of some participants described challenges in legitimising informally provided feedback as evidence in formal evaluative work and planning. These issues tended to focus on concerns about the representativeness of informally gathered evidence (Sarah, Jane), perceived limits of the legitimacy of informal data within formal evaluative

processes (Tiarnan, Joanne), or its credibility as a source of evidence when attempting to influence senior leadership (Joanne).

Joanne's account reflected in detail about nurturing and building informal relationships with external stakeholders as a means of understanding how her programme could adapt to the rapidly changing needs in the employment sector in which many of the programme graduates worked. The reflections within her account revealed a tension between the personal value she placed on informal evidence, and a perception that this feedback potentially lacked credibility as evidence to inform planning or decision-making.

> *"I often wonder am I doing it the right way? Because it's all very much colloquial and conversations; and I don't do formal research. And yet it's worked for us to date. But it's very difficult then, when you're sitting in front of the Dean, and you're saying I need extra staff for x, y, and z, because I had seven conversations, and six of those people said it would be great for me to do "this"."* (Joanne)

These accounts identify the adoption of a feedback-based approach to evidence gathering, using both structured forums and informal discussions with staff, students, and stakeholders to draw meaning about quality in the programme during local evaluation processes. However, while recognised as inherently valuable to participants, some participant accounts reflected on a perceived lack of credibility afforded to narrative-based feedback, making it difficult to leverage for formal evaluation or broader decision-making.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter outlines the primary themes emerging from the analysis of interviews with programme leaders on their experiences and interpretation of managing evaluative work on quality on academic programmes.

The findings uncover the varied ways in which programme leaders interpret and prioritise quality of academic programmes. In reflecting on the meaning and purpose of formal programme review, the participant accounts tended to position

these processes as frameworks for reporting and accountability, or validation and assurance of quality, rather than as tools to enhance programme quality.

Formal programme evaluation interpreted as a tool for reporting and accountability is based on participants' perceptions of the processes as bureaucratic reporting exercises, completed quickly by programme leaders, and used to provide accountability of ongoing monitoring of their academic programme. Participant descriptions of a lack of transparency in the ownership of formal programme evaluation resulted in engagement with the processes being characterised by compliance and documentation, rather than contributing to broader discussions on the quality in the programme. The accounts of participants suggest that formal programme evaluation, particularly the 5-year cyclical review was more likely to be positioned as a process for validation and assurance. A key element of this validation of quality emerged from participant descriptions of engagement with appointed external examiners who reviewed the report generated from the evaluation.

In seeking meaning on quality from evidence-based sources, participant accounts emphasised the prioritisation of quantitative measures of quality within formal programme evaluation, which some accounts argued were imperfect proxies of programme quality, including the capacity of those indicators to provide meaningful evidence about the quality of the academic programme. In attempting to relate these data to quality, programme leaders used contextualising discussions with colleagues to make sense of the data and create explanatory narratives on the reasons for grade variation observed in the data.

In response to the limitations of formal programme evaluation to support the planning of future quality enhancement, several participant accounts described the design and implementation of parallel, locally owned evaluative work. The approach to undertaking these local evaluations was characterised by distinct methodological approaches that contrasted to those adopted for formal evaluation. These included the rejection of structured templates; an intent to plan for future enhancement; an emphasis on sensemaking and consensus building

among colleagues; and the embracing narrative-based and informally gathered feedback from stakeholders as evidence to inform decision-making.

Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the main findings of my research, and their relationship to existing research in the area. Specifically, this chapter considers how programme leaders interpret the concept of quality relative to traditional definitions of quality in higher education described in existing literature. This section will also consider how programme leaders interpret the quality priorities they perceive to be embedded in formal programme evaluation. The chapter will then consider how programme leaders make sense of their experiences of engaging with formal programme evaluation frameworks and relate these interpretations to existing studies of academic staff engagement with assurance-based evaluation. I will also examine and discuss the role played by evidence in the evaluation of quality, and how inferences on quality are derived from evidence within formal programme evaluation processes. The chapter will conclude by considering how programme leaders within my study have responded to the limitations and challenges of formal programme evaluation, including the development and implementation of parallel evaluative processes to support planning on quality enhancement.

By examining the interconnected dynamics of quality, institutional evaluative systems, and the use of evidence to support making inferences about quality in evaluative work, my findings contribute insights into how programme leaders navigate and respond to evaluative systems in practice. My findings highlight the nuanced, practice-based strategies deployed by programme leaders through alternative evaluation practices, which can be argued to counterbalance some of the limitations of formal programme evaluation. These findings raise important questions about usefulness of externally driven, institutional-level evaluative frameworks in supporting both the assurance and enhancement of academic programmes. Furthermore, as coordinators of academic assurance and enhancement for their programmes, my findings also ask questions about how programme leaders are supported in managing these dual responsibilities for coordinating the assurance and enhancement of quality within their programmes.

5.2. Programme Leader Conceptualisations of Quality

In exploring how participants interpreted the concept of quality in their role as programme leader, my findings identify three primary, and two minor conceptualisations of quality identified by participants: academic standards, quality reflected in the content and coherence of the curriculum, quality of the student learning experience, commitment of colleagues to quality, and quality as intangible.

Traditional definitions of quality applied in a higher education context, particularly those previously identified by Harvey and Green (1993), are reflected within my findings. The construction by participants of quality as being characteristic of academic standards aligns to the definition of quality as "*Excellence*" identified by Harvey and Green. Similarly, quality reflected in the student experience in my findings and its capacity to effect positive change in students through their learning experiences, similarly aligns with Harvey and Green's definition of quality as "*Transformation*".

The conceptualisation of quality as curricular excellence within my study has some alignment to descriptions of quality related to "*Fitness of Purpose*" as defined by Harvey and Green or "purposeful", as categorised by Schlinder et al (2015). Traditionally, *fitness for purpose* refers to the extent to which a service successfully fulfils its intended objectives. However, the interpretation of quality as curricular excellence in this study extends beyond this functional perspective. It encompasses both the structural coherence of curricular design and delivery, and the degree to which the curriculum demonstrates disciplinary relevance and engages with emergent developments within the field. Quality in the curriculum at programme level can therefore be described as traversing both idea of meeting intended purpose, but also distinction in terms of academic excellence.

My findings also identify several less frequently identified approaches in how programme leaders understand and prioritise the concept of quality. Cheng (2017) specifically argued for the inclusion of "professional practice" as a virtue quality; the intrinsic value of staff commitment to quality as an enabler of quality

enhancement is also referenced in several other studies (Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Cartwright, 2007; Kleijnen et al., 2013; Overberg, 2019). My findings also identify the perceived inherent commitment to quality by programme leaders as a definitional element of quality. Cheng's argument relates professional practice within the frame of a moral virtue that is central to the concept of quality. However, in this study, among those that expressed this view, this commitment also had a pragmatic impact, in that it was related to a commitment to the continual evolution of quality and a willingness to seek opportunities for further enhancement, thereby linking it to the other studies above.

One explanation for this is that from the perspective of programme leadership, the perceived shared commitment of colleagues is linked to the organisational context in which programme leaders operate. As a role within higher education that relies on '*interactional leadership'* and '*directed collegiality'* (Knight & Trowler, 2000), a perceived commitment by colleagues to a shared vision of the programme represents an important expression of quality for programme leaders who rely on this collective commitment as a tool for planning enhancement. The importance of this collective common goal of maintaining and enhancing quality is potentially heightened from the perspective of a programme leader, given both their cross-programme lens and responsibilities, contributing to it being considered an element of quality in and of itself.

Similarly, the conceptualisation of quality as intangible is less commonly associated with traditional definitions of quality, but has precedence within existing literature (Pirsig, 1974; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011). When described by participants in this study, quality as intangible was often described in the context of the relationship between colleagues and students engaged in learning or linked to staff commitment, where quality was intuited or sensed, rather than defined and quantified. This 'sensing' of quality echoes Shield's assertation that quality is "*found in the processes that connect student and knowledge (processes that, hopefully, contain imagination)*" (Shields, 1999, p. 167).

My findings therefore present a picture of how quality is understood that includes both traditional conceptualisations of quality with additional interpretations of

quality that are reflective of the positioning and priorities of the programme leadership role.

In discussing quality, my findings also suggest an acknowledgement by participants of the complex and multifaceted interpretations of quality described in previous studies (Watty, 2003; Marshall, 2016; Leiber & Seyfried, 2025). Participant accounts acknowledged the presence of competing and contrasting perspectives on how academic quality is defined, echoing previous findings on the complex and conflicting perspectives that shape how quality is interpreted and defined in evaluative work (Barnett, 1992; Tam, 2001; Watty, 2003; Houston, 2008; Newton, 2010; Ashwin et al., 2015).

Participants' nuanced and multifaceted approach to conceptualising quality reflected a consciousness of the diversity of how educational quality was interpreted among academic colleagues and differed between stakeholders (Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Bettinson et al., 2024; Dicker et al., 2019; Gibbs, 2010; Giller, 2023; Green, 1994; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Harvey & Green, 1993; Houston, 2008; Krause, 2012; Lemaitre, 2002; Udam & Heidmets, 2013; Vettori & Lueger, 2010). This diversity provides a useful illustrative example of programme leaders' appreciation of multiple definitions of quality and contrasting perspectives create a "*network of discourses*" (Filippakou, 2011) through which quality is evaluated. My findings suggest that when considering the meaning of quality, programme leaders described an understanding of programme quality that both reflected the priorities of the policy and institutional goals of quality assurance, specifically academic standards, student success, and coherence in the curriculum, in tandem with values of quality grounded towards educational processes within their programme (Ashwin et al., 2015; Gibbs, 2010; Lackner, 2023; Udam & Heidmets, 2013). These included how quality is reflected in personal the transformation of learners (Gibbs, 2010; Harvey, 2002; Nabaho et al., 2017) and the commitment of colleagues to the delivery of quality (Cheng, 2017). This balancing of perspectives, and in some cases contrasting views about what constitutes quality between policy and practice, is characteristic of what Leiber and Seyfried describe as '*quality literacy'* (2025), where programme leaders

demonstrate a capacity to move between and within both policy or institutionally based definitions of quality, and the multiplicity of quality concepts expressed by staff, students and external stakeholders at the level of practice.

5.2.1 The Meaning of Quality in Formal Programme Evaluation

Existing research on how the concept of academic programme quality is embodied within quality assurance processes often critiques formal quality assurance frameworks for their overreliance on techno-rational perspectives of quality (Melrose, 1998; Bloxham, 2012; Perovsek, 2016; Blanco Ramírez, 2013), aligned to cultures of institutional control rather than professional autonomy and discretion in how quality is interpreted (Hoecht, 2006; Stensaker, 2008; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Kleijnen et al., 2013; Mårtensson et al., 2014; Haugen et al., 2024b). My findings suggest that participant experiences of formal programme evaluation predominantly interpreted quality within these frameworks as prioritising academic excellence (Harvey, 2002; Schindler et al., 2015; Giller, 2023) and consistency in student attainment, fuelled by a focus on output measures of quality prescribed within the evaluation template.

As identified within previous studies, this emphasis on output measures of quality risks the creation of distorted interpretations of the conceptual richness of quality in teaching and learning towards a limited set of institutionally developed outcome indicators (Barnett, 1992, 1994; Tam, 2001; Broadbent, 2007; Gibbs, 2010; Beerkens, 2015, 2018; Robertson et al., 2019; Argento et al., 2020; Ashwin, 2020b; Sarrico, 2022). The disconnect between the interpretations of quality within formal evaluation (Harvey, 2024a; Tavadze, 2023) which foreground academic excellence, contrasts with the complex ways in which quality is understood and interpreted by programme leaders in my study, and may have contributed to the positioning of formal evaluation as an exercise in reporting and accountability (Marshall, 2016), rather than a holistic exploration of programme quality for the purposes of assuring and enhancing quality.

This finding is indicative of a disconnect between how quality is defined by the “senders” of evaluative processes (in this case the institution), which focus on

narrower conceptualisations of quality, and the "receivers" of the evaluative processes, in this case the programme leaders, who have a more complex and nuanced approach to conceptualising quality (Saunders & Sin, 2015). The implication of this finding is that that these differing understandings of what constitutes quality contributes to a disconnect between how the concept quality is perceived within formal evaluation processes and how quality is lived by programme teams. (Saunders & Sin, 2015; Overberg, 2019; Lackner, 2023)

5.3. Making Sense of Formal Programme Evaluation Processes

My findings identified three broad conceptualisations in how programme leaders made sense of the processes of formal programme evaluation. The two primary conceptualisations were programme evaluation as a process for reporting and accountability, or validation and assurance. A further, lesser theme, which positioned programme evaluation as a process for planning enhancement was also identified. The following section outlines the distinct characteristics under each conceptualisation and relates these to existing literature on the experiences of academic staff undertaking quality assurance and evaluation work.

5.3.1 Programme Evaluation as Process for Reporting and Accountability

The interpretation of formal programme evaluation by participants in my findings positions these processes for the purposes of reporting and accountability based on institutional requirements and aligns them as systems for compliance, rather than enhancement. This positioning echoes the predominant experiences of academic staff in previous studies who interpret formal quality assurance as the imposition of bureaucratic and compliance-based processes for quality assurance identified in a number of previous studies (Newton, 2000, 2002; Anderson, 2006; Stensaker, 2008; Bers, 2011; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014; Kallio et al., 2016; Overberg, 2019; Seyfried & Reith, 2019).

This conceptualisation of formal programme evaluation identified within my findings can be argued to be a function of both the structure and scope of programmatic review, and the methodological processes involved in fulfilling the

requirements of these institutional systems. The following section examines in greater detail how participants' experiences described within their accounts contributed to the conceptualisation of formal programme evaluation in my findings, and the relationship between these and the existing body of literature.

5.3.1.1 External Ownership

The procedures for formal programme evaluation deployed at the institution in my study are aligned to guidelines from national and international regulatory bodies responsible for quality assurance in higher education, reflecting institutional approaches to evaluation processes described in a number of previous studies (Beerkens, 2015; Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025). While positioned by the institution as internal processes, my findings suggest that programme leaders often interpreted formal programme evaluation as external to their practice (Watty, 2003; Saunders et al., 2011), rather than being locally owned, and embedded into the rhythms of programme management and development.

This interpretation of formal programme evaluation as an external imposition can be attributed, in part, to some participants perceived lack of clarity regarding the ownership and the broader implications of these processes. Among participants, the absence of a clear understanding about how the outputs of programmatic review contributed to broader institutional decision-making on quality resulted in programme evaluation being understood primarily as a process for compliance and accountability, rather than as a mechanism for quality enhancement (Hoecht, 2006; Newton, 2000; Skolnik, 2010).

Previous studies have argued that a lack of local ownership in assurance based evaluative frameworks can contribute to resistance on the part of academic staff to these processes (Newton, 1999, 1999, 2000; Cartwright, 2007; Westerheijden et al., 2014; Vettori, 2018), particularly where externally-imposed assurance is interpreted as a threat to academic autonomy and decision-making (Agasisti et al., 2019; Cardoso et al., 2018; Giller, 2023; Hoecht, 2006; Newton, 2002). This perceived threat was largely absent in participant accounts in my study. Instead, while many pragmatically accepted the existence of formal programme evaluation as an institutional requirement, the unclear ownership and lack of broader impact

of formal programme evaluation contributed to participants' positioning these processes primarily as bureaucratic or administrative reporting exercises, rather than having broader implications for decision-making by the programme team, or contributing to broader discussions on educational quality.

In contrast to the "feeding the beast" metaphor used by Newton (2000) to describe the perceptions of staff in engaging in responding to QA systems, a more apt metaphor in this study was the description by one participant of the outputs of programme evaluation going into a "black hole". The use of this metaphor may suggest a lower-level threat in contrast to Newton's "beast" metaphor and arguably mitigate against some of the more destructive consequences associated with threats to autonomy. These potentially destructive consequences of resistance behaviours described in previous research include game-playing or selective presentation of information (Anderson, 2006; Elton, 2004; Harvey, 2002; Liu, 2015; Newton, 2002; T. Cooper, 2003; Liu, 2015), which were largely absent among my participants in my study. However, the "black hole" metaphor is not without implication. Particularly among more experienced programme leaders, the absence of meaningful response or connection between formal programme evaluation and broader quality concerns contributed to a sense of cynicism, where participation was perceived as a "box-ticking" exercise, reflecting sentiments of tokenism or ritualistic participation described by previous authors on academic engagement with institutionally mandated assurance processes (Newton, 1999, 2000; Minelli et al., 2015).

5.3.1.2 Highly Defined Structures

Within the institution, formal programme evaluation processes were implemented using an institutionally consistent proforma template, which programme leaders most frequently completed on behalf of the broader programme team. Institutions may develop standardised templates with a view to demonstrating alignment of their evaluation systems with national or international guidelines for programme evaluation, as well as to provide cross-institutional consistency, clarity, and transparency to evaluative processes (Wickham et al., 2017).

As described in the Bamber's 'Discretion Framework' (2011c, p. 167) the implementation of an institutionally consistent template, implemented across the institution, created a context for formal programme evaluation where both, "*what to evaluate, and how to evaluate it*" (Bamber, 2011c, p. 167) were both highly controlled and externally defined. This tight control and focus of formal programme evaluation process is reflected in participants' broad adherence to the institutional templates provided for the process, which were complied with by participants as normalised institutional processes as part of the broader quality assurance architecture and practice (Trowler, 2011b) .

Previous studies have indicated that the imposition of top-down implementations, particularly in cases where prescribed quantitative indicators of quality are incorporated into assurance of performance frameworks, creating embedded cultures which shape how quality is understood and interpreted (Harvey & Green, 1993; Patton, 1998; Gibbs, 2010; Dahler-Larsen, 2014; Barnetson & Cutright, 2000; Tam, 2001; Lewis, 2015; Hora et al., 2017; Söderlind & Geschwind, 2019; Taylor, 2020; Chun & Sauder, 2022; Barbato et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2023). However, when positioning formal programme evaluation as a reporting and accountability process, the participants in my study were more likely to reference adherence to the template as an act of compliance, rather than assimilating these practices into how they understood and interpreted quality.

A possible explanation for this is that programme leaders may hold an implicit recognition of their responsibilities in coordinating a response to the broader institutional quality assurance procedures on behalf of their academic area (Ladyshewsky & Jones, 2007; Cahill et al., 2015; Aitken & O'Carroll, 2020; Haugen et al., 2024a, 2024b). Under these circumstances, they may hold a sense of obligation to comply with established institutional norms and structures for quality assurance, which they position as forming an aspect of their professional identity, but are compartmentalised as only one aspect of quality management.

This positioning may represent an example of managerial-collegial duality (Clegg & McAuley, 2005), where programme leaders work with the alternating currents of institutional rules and regulations alongside local practice (Haugen, et al, 2024).

Under this positioning, while programme leaders comply with requirements of the process, they engage with them based on compliance and accountability, rather than as an authentic tool for holistically managing and enhancing quality.

Previous studies have pointed to the risks associated with highly defined evaluation systems in that they create "*closed discourses*"(Filippakou, 2011), often reflecting dominant models of quality assurance, and as a result reflect a "*limited number of readings of reality*" (2011, p. 21). The findings of my research uncovered perspectives among some participant accounts that align with the concept of an interpreted "*decoupling*" (Anderson, 2006) between the presentation of institutional values on quality expressed within the prescribed template, and participants' reflections on the meaning of quality (Tam, 2001; Watty, 2003; Cartwright, 2007; Abdulaziz Aldhobaib, 2024; Leiber & Seyfried, 2025). These were particularly evident among participants who talked about their conceptualisations of quality in their own practice which they considered largely absent from formal programme evaluation, particularly on the quality and impact of pastoral care and support provided to students as part of the programme leadership role (Aitken & O'Carroll, 2020).

Another theme emerging from the institutional template suggests that some participants felt formal programme evaluation did not adequately reflect the priorities and responsibilities involved in the day-to-day management of quality by programme leaders. This sentiment was particularly evident amongst the most experienced programme leaders, who explicitly described these processes as disconnected from their ongoing work of assuring and enhancing quality. Other participants echoed this view, noting that formal evaluation frameworks failed to capture the 'work' of managing quality, which they described as occurring largely outside these processes. This finding can be argued as relevant to the programme leadership role as it highlights how both the concept of quality and the practicalities of 'quality work' (Mårtensson et al., 2014; Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Lackner, 2023) are reflected, or not, within formal evaluative processes.

5.3.1.3 A Bureaucratic Task

The external, and often unclear, ownership of the formal programme evaluation process, coupled with its highly prescriptive template can be argued to both contribute to the positioning of these processes as bureaucratic reporting processes. Previous empirical studies on the experiences and interpretations of academic staff engaging with institutionally prescribed quality assurance processes conclude that they are frequently perceived as instruments of bureaucracy rather than authentic evaluation (Newton, 2000, 2002; Anderson, 2006; Stensaker, 2008; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014; Kallio et al., 2016; Overberg, 2019; Seyfried & Reith, 2019). Within my study, participants' descriptions of formal programme evaluation as a "box-ticking" exercise echo previous findings (Hoecht, 2006; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014), and contribute to formal programme evaluation being perceived to be for the purposes of reporting (Newton, 2000, 2002; Hoecht, 2006; Cahill et al., 2015; Stensaker, 2008; Haugen et al., 2024a), rather than an assurance or quality or a tool for enhancement planning.

Engagement with a process that is perceived to reflect a "box-ticking" process has further implications for how the engagement with the process is internalised by programme leaders, given the breadth of responsibilities held by programme leaders in coordinating assurance and enhancement activities (Cahill et al., 2015; Haugen et al., 2024a; Ladyshewsky & Jones, 2007; Milburn, 2010; Weenink et al., 2022; H. H. Yang, 2024). Where processes are interpreted as largely bureaucratic without further meaning in relation to their responsibilities, a small number of participants, particularly more experienced programme leaders, expressed frustration and cynicism with the requirement for engagement, particularly when these tasks were perceived to divert time away from more meaningful work (Newton, 2000, 2002; Anderson, 2006; Hoecht, 2006; Zohrabi, 2012; Kallio et al., 2016; Vettori, 2023).

The findings of my research identify that this emphasis on bureaucratic form filling in formal programme evaluation contribute, at least in part, result in its interpretation as a reporting and accountability process. Additionally, formal

programme evaluation was positioned as a requirement that was external to the programme, and with a perceived lack of clarity on its relationship to institutional quality priorities. Defined by an institutionally prescribed template, the scope of the evaluation was contained, but was considered to not fully reflect the breadth of the quality values which underpinned educational practice on academic programmes. As a result, the process was interpreted as largely bureaucratic, characterised by the completion of documentation, with little broader impact on decision-making or enhancement.

5.3.1.4 Engaging with Formal Evaluation as a Reporting and Accountability Process

The positioning of formal evaluation as a process for reporting and accountability had an impact on how programme leaders engaged with the process, and how they integrated and made sense of these processes in the context of their broader role. My findings identify that, in line with previous studies, participants' engagement with formal evaluation took on a variety of forms (Newton, 2002; Cartwright, 2007; Overberg & Ala-Vähälä, 2020; O'Siochru et al., 2023).

As processes for reporting and accountability, some participants expressed a pragmatic acceptance of the existence of formal programme evaluation, and in a small number of cases, understood the value of these formal evaluative procedures as a necessary part of their role (Anderson, 2006; Newton, 2002; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Hoecht, 2006; Overberg, 2019; Overberg & Ala-Vähälä, 2020; O'Siochru et al., 2023). For some participants, engagement with formal evaluation in this study can be argued to reflect embedded practice, forming part of the temporal norms within the annual cycle of academic oversight (Vettori, 2023). In considering why this might be the case, it is interesting to note that this acceptance tended to be most frequently expressed in cases where formal evaluation was perceived to provide a vehicle to demonstrate ongoing practice on quality and a means of formally documenting decisions. These were described by some participants as providing an official institutional narrative of the programme and served as a reference source for ongoing oversight. This finding is relatively novel in the context of previous research. One potential explanation for this may be

that the documentation of activities and decisions created a document that in turn reflected accountability for the programme leader with respect to their own effectiveness in the role. It may also reflect that in the institution where this research is situated, the programme leader role is a three-year appointment. For current programme leaders, formal documentation of the programme's lifespan through evaluation processes helps to create an institutional memory that extends beyond the knowledge and experience of individual post-holders. In creating an official record of decision-making and the rationale behind those decisions, programme evaluation can be viewed as potentially supporting continuity and oversight throughout the life of the academic programme.

For other participants who positioned formal programme evaluation as a reporting and accountability tool, the disconnect between formal evaluation and broader decision-making and quality enhancement resulted in a minimalist approach to engagement. One participant's description of "cutting and pasting" (Perovsek, 2016) content between templates from year to year provided a particularly vivid description of this minimalist approach. This finding is consistent with the experiences of academic staff involved in assurance-based activities in previous studies, where the minimalist engagement of academic staff participating in these processes is interpreted as symbolic (Hoecht, 2006; Westerheijden et al., 2014; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014; Greatbatch, 2016; H. Borch, 2020; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025) or tokenistic (Newton, 1999, p. 225, 2000, p. 157; Minelli et al., 2015), rather than fully embraced by programme leaders.

5.3.2 Programme Evaluation as a Process for Validation and Assurance

The second interpretation of the role and function of formal programme evaluation was as a system for validation and assurance. Under this positioning, formal programme evaluation was perceived by participants to provide a tool that contributed to the ongoing monitoring and assurance of academic standards, and in some cases, assurance of the coherence and relevance of the current programme curriculum.

5.3.2.1 A Tool for Quality Management

Within this conceptualisation, several participants positioned formal programme evaluation as an organisationally embedded process, which facilitated planned engagement and discussion with colleagues about programme quality at the programme level. This interpretation of the process aligns with findings described in previous studies as a pragmatic acceptance of assurance processes (Newton, 2002; Anderson, 2006; Hoecht, 2006; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Overberg, 2019; Overberg & Ala-Vähälä, 2020; O'Siochru et al., 2023), whereby programme leaders use these processes to ensure pre-planned or regular discussions about quality amongst the programme team, particularly on the maintenance of academic standards.

When considered in light of programme leaders' responsibilities for quality assurance and enhancement, particularly in the absence of managerial authority (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Milburn, 2010; Sanderson, 2018), formal evaluation can potentially be viewed as leveraging the required institutional processes to ensure that regular and planned discussions about programme quality take place, enabling the programme team to maintain an active, watching brief on aspects of academic standards, including identifying issues such as potential grade-inflation or risks to academic integrity.

5.3.2.2 Assurance Through Stakeholder Input

A significant driver for participants in establishing programme evaluation as a process for validation and assurance was the integration of diverse stakeholder perspectives on quality, which was incorporated into the five-year, cyclical evaluation. Participants perceived that incorporating feedback from various stakeholder groups enriched reflections and discussions on quality, echoing the value of stakeholder-based approaches to evaluation identified in some previous studies (Iacovidou et al., 2009; Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Leiber & Seyfried, 2025). Within the validation and assurance positioning, this was particularly evident in the perceived legitimacy and value of feedback from appointed external examiners as an important source of both assurance of academic standards and validation of curriculum development.

Participants' descriptions of external examiner feedback were considered credible based on their perception that external examiners brought an understanding of quality that was sensitive to the disciplinary context of the programme. A possible explanation for this legitimacy is that participants perceived external examiners as being more likely to share similar values on quality, and as such, their perceptions of quality were more likely to be aligned to the context-sensitive conceptualisations of quality within their disciplinary area (Gibbs, 2010; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Krause, 2012; Leiber & Seyfried, 2025; Skelton, 2004). In addition to disciplinary-based contextual knowledge, external examiners were also perceived to have legitimacy as senior academic colleagues involved in teaching and learning with their own institutions, again reflecting similar educational perspectives on quality to those of the programme team. This echoes the findings of previous studies that argue that tension in quality assurance is less likely in environments where quality values between the evaluator and the evaluated are perceived to be aligned (Abdulaziz Aldhobaib, 2024; Overberg, 2019; Tam, 2001; Watty, 2003). External examiner involvement was therefore perceived to offer a neutral, yet contextually informed perspective to inform conclusions about academic standards and the coherence of the curriculum on programmes.

The role of external examiners can also be interpreted in light of descriptions of formal evaluation being described as a "black hole", with unclear ownership and a lack of feedback on the reports generated from the process. Among those who discussed the role of external examiners, feedback from external examiners was positioned as a form of peer-validation of quality that was provided directly to participants and the programme team. In a context where participants noted a lack of clarity in both ownership of the process and insufficient articulation of how the outputs of programme evaluation were used, the perceived value of external examiner input can be argued to have greater significance, in providing validation of the programme curriculum and educative practice directly to the programme team in the absence of institutional feedback.

5.3.3 Programme Evaluation as a process to Support Enhancement

The existing body of academic literature on evaluating quality on teaching and learning in higher education highlights a persistent tension, both conceptually and methodologically, between quality assurance and quality enhancement (Henkel, 1998; Cartwright, 2007; Stensaker, 2008; Filippakou & Tapper, 2008; Kleijnen et al., 2013; Williams, 2016; Mårtensson et al., 2014; Giller, 2023). This tension between the capacity of formal programme evaluation to support both assurance and enhancement is reflected within my findings, where participant accounts largely reflect programme evaluation as an assurance-based process formal programme reporting and accountability, or validation and assurance of academic standards, while relative few participants noted using the process as a tool for planning quality enhancement.

The small numbers of participants who used formal programme evaluation for planning enhancement typically engaged with these systems in ways that could be interpreted as reconstruction of the process to serve their own professional goals or to reflect local norms and practices more adeptly. These approaches can be interpreted as an attempt to leverage the legitimacy of the institutionally mandated framework, and repurpose it as a tool making changes, echoing the idea of policy reconstruction identified by Trowler (1998) and reflected by Newton (2002) in relation to his findings on responses to quality assurance systems by academic staff.

5.4. Evidence-Informed Practice in Formal Programme Evaluation

A central focus of this research has sought to examine how different forms of evidence are positioned, used, and interpreted by programme leaders as part of evaluative work on quality. When considering participant approaches to the gathering and using evidence, my study adopted a broad stance on what constituted ‘evidence’ in the evaluation of quality, encompassing a definition of evidence that was guided by participants’ own interpretations of what constitutes evidence or feedback to inform their inferences or judgements about quality. This approach has enabled my research to adopt an inclusive approach to the use and interpretation of evidence-informed practice through the eyes of participants,

particularly in understanding practice-based approaches to the types of evidence used in understanding quality.

Existing literature on quality measurement in assurance-based formal programme evaluation frames the adoption of evidence-informed practice as being largely grounded in instrumental logics (Henkel, 1998; Pettersen, 2015) that rely on quantitative indicators as objective or comparable measures of academic programme quality.

The implementation of an institutionally-consistent template for formal evaluation within the institution where this research was conducted included a requirement for interpretation and commentary on a range of quantitative measures on student attainment and other numerical indicators in line with national guidelines on programme monitoring and evaluation (QQI, 2016b). These can be viewed as reflective of the instrumental logics described in existing studies on assurance frameworks on measuring quality in teaching and learning (Ball & Wilkinson, 1994; Barnett, 1992; Elton, 2004; Beerkens, 2015; Bogue, 1998; Johnes & Taylor, 1990; Taylor, 2020).

5.4.1 Quantitative Metrics and their Relationship to Quality

The adoption of evidence-informed practice that relies on quantitative measures of quality for assurance purposes are frequently critiqued as reductionist measures within existing literature (Beerkens, 2018; Taylor, 2020), and have been previously suggested to poorly reflect the complexity of how quality is characterised in educational processes (Barnett, 1992, 1994; Tam, 2001; Broadbent, 2007; Gibbs, 2010; Beerkens, 2015; Kairuz et al., 2016; Beerkens, 2018; Robertson et al., 2019; Argento et al., 2020; Sarrico, 2022). These perceptions are echoed in my findings, which identify a disconnect between the interpretations of quality associated with quantitative metrics and the more complex interpretations of quality prioritised by programme leaders. This disconnect included a sense that the prescribed quantitative measures in programme evaluation failed to address the quality priorities of participants and are consistent with Stensaker et al's (2018) finding that student attainment, progression, and completion rate indicators of

student success are not considered important drivers of quality enhancement by academic staff.

A number of existing studies critique the use of quantitative proxies as indirect, and therefore potentially invalid indicators of quality (Elton, 2004; Broadbent, 2007; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Argento et al., 2020; Harvey, 2024b). The impact of a reliance on a limited number of imperfect or proxy measures of quality embedded within formal programme evaluation systems is that they are unable to reflect complex and nuanced interpretations of quality, and may have unintended negative consequences (Patton, 1998; Elton, 2004; Bamber, 2011a; Dahler-Larsen, 2015; Hora et al., 2017; Ashwin, 2020a; Beerkens, 2022). These unintended consequences are reflected in my findings where some participants spoke about examining trends in grading patterns. Frequently among these participants, unexpected variance in grading patterns were interpreted as a signal for further examination and discussion. In contrast, where consistency was observed in grading patterns, this was more frequently interpreted as an indicator of stability in academic standards. This resulted in observed stability in grading patterns being adopted as a proxy measure for the maintenance of academic standards. By constructing a link between grading consistency and the assurance of academic standards in this study, student attainment patterns can be observed as being as being co-opted as a measure of academic standards within the discourse of formal programme evaluation (Vettori, 2023).

However, the limitations of student attainment measures to support meaning in terms of quality were evidenced in cases where participants noted the existence of a paradox in the use of student attainment as a marker of quality. It was suggested that while trends of increasing student grades may signal improved quality of educational attainment, they could equally be interpreted as evidence of grade inflation, and declining academic standards. These findings speak to the argument that the application of measures that are inadequate in supporting stable and consistent inferences about quality (Elton, 2004; Patton, 1998; Spence, 2019) and are indicative of the risks of attributing meaning to measures that are disconnected from the educative processes that generate them (Ashwin, 2020a).

5.4.2 Quantitative Metrics and Embedded Practice

A further implication of the use of quantitative measures to measure quality in evaluative systems is that, once implemented, they construct and legitimise particular realities of what constitutes quality within the institution (Harvey & Green, 1993; Patton, 1998; Gibbs, 2010; Dahler-Larsen, 2014; Barnetson & Cutright, 2000; Tam, 2001; Lewis, 2015; Hora et al., 2017; Söderlind & Geschwind, 2019; Taylor, 2020; Chun & Sauder, 2022; Barbato et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2023). Once embedded within quality assurance processes, these indicators can create self-reinforcing systems (Chun & Sauder, 2022), where particular forms of evidence are reified (Söderlind & Geschwind, 2019; Taylor, 2020) at the expense of aspects of quality that are not systematically measured, or are difficult and complex to quantify (Beerkens, 2022).

Despite critical reflections by some participants to the validity of quantitative measures of quality, the experiences of participants indicate a broad adherence to the institutionally defined template used for programme evaluation, and the requirement within the template for commentary on quantitative metrics included in the template. The potential dichotomy between the widespread engagement with quantitative metrics, and the critique of their relationship to quality by some participants may be suggestive of the navigation undertaken by programme leaders to traverse managerial and academic perspectives in fulfilling their responsibilities (Haugen et al., 2024b, 2024a). In engaging with the quality measures included with the template, programme leaders arguably attempt to comply with the requirements of the evaluation process, even when doing so symbolically (Hoecht, 2006; Westerheijden et al., 2014; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014; Greatbatch, 2016; H. Borch, 2020; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025) in order to fulfil their responsibilities for engagement with institutional assurance processes that form part of their role.

5.4.3 The Role of Contextualising Quantitative Metrics

One approach used by participants to address the limitations of quantitative measures in evaluating academic quality was to engage in contextualising discussions with colleagues. These conversations were described within

participant accounts as an important aspect of drawing meaning from patterns in the student attainment data, facilitating the inclusion of professional knowledge to contextualise the quantitative measures.

The integration of professional knowledge in the sense-making of quantitative evidence in formal programme evaluation served multiple purposes. Firstly, these discussions provided a means of drawing contextually relevant insights from quantitative data, thereby enhancing their interpretive value (Biesta, 2007; Bloxham, 2012; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Spence, 2019). Viewed as a source of evidence, discussions with colleagues can also be interpreted as a form of triangulation to strengthening the robustness of data analysis (Yorke, 1991; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Austen & Jones-Devitt, 2019; Leiber, 2019), and mitigate against the epistemological limitations of quantitative measures alone, including the risks of erroneous or reductive interpretations from the quantitative evidence (Tam, 2001; Lewis, 2015; Alach, 2017b).

In noting some participants' experiences of navigating differing interpretations and conclusions drawn from quantitative measures of quality by colleagues, my findings suggest that these contextualising discussions can also be interpreted as processes that acknowledge the contested nature of how quality is interpreted and understood, facilitating the emergence of richer interpretations of quality as a result (Dahler-Larsen, 2014; Sloan, 2015; Stensaker et al., 2019). Participant descriptions of these contextualising discussions can be positioned as representing an analytical approach by participants and the programme team to shift the interpretation of data from a "*laboratory*" metaphor to that of a "*court of law*," described by Saunders et al (2011, p. 208), where multiple perspectives on data contribute to a more inferential approach to explaining or hypothesising on the meaning of the measures discussed.

The involvement of colleagues in interpreting quantitative measures can also be considered in the context of programme leadership. As individuals responsible for coordinating engagement with quality assurance frameworks, programme leaders may use these discussions as a form of collaborative practice (Cahill et al., 2015)

reflecting an approach to fulfilling their responsibilities through interactional leadership (Knight & Trowler, 2000).

My findings also identify that these contextualising discussions on quantitative metrics of student attainment were frequently used as a tool to discuss the relative academic challenge within different subject areas in the curriculum. This may be suggestive of contextualising discussions being adopted by programme leaders as a means of translating and mediating (Saunders & Sin, 2015) the institutionally defined measures of quality into more locally-relevant issues of quality as they relate to delivery of the programme curriculum. In doing so, contextualising discussions arguably shift the meaning of these output indicators of student attainment to a discussion that focuses on educational processes. Further, these discussions may represent programme leaders navigating the formal evaluation process by shifting the lens of the analysis from one focused solely on techno-rational or instrumental logics (Henkel, 1998; Melrose, 1998; Harvey, 2007; Bloxham, 2012; Pettersen, 2015; Blanco Ramírez, 2013), to an approach that is more inclusive of educational social practice and professional logics (Pettersen, 2015).

5.5. Responding to the Limitations of Formal Programme Evaluation

Previous research on the tensions between quality assurance and quality enhancement have raised concerns that a unitary model, which attempts to both assure and enhance quality, may be incapable of reconciling the distinct value of each goal (Houston, 2008; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Beerkens, 2015). However, within the existing discourse, other authors have suggested that quality assurance and enhancement have the potential to be reconciled (Kaçaniku, 2020), and tensions addressed methodologically to emphasise enhancement, rather than control (Hoecht, 2006; Pohlenz, 2022).

My findings suggest that in practice, programme leaders predominantly positioned institutional evaluative processes as mechanisms for reporting, accountability, and the assurance or validation of academic standards, rather than as tools for

enhancement planning, with relatively few positioning the process as having potential to support the planning of future enhancement.

In the next section of the chapter, I will consider one of the responses by participants in this study to the limitations of formal programme evaluation: the development of parallel, locally designed evaluation processes, designed by some participants with the specific intent of planning enhancements to their academic programmes. These locally developed approaches differed from formal evaluation processes in several ways: the definition of ownership and scope, the aspects of quality examined in these evaluations, and the role and positioning of evidence-informed practice within these local processes. I also discuss the experiences of programme leaders in coordinating these initiatives and situate these local evaluation practices within the broader discourse on quality evaluation.

5.5.1 The Meaning of Quality within Locally Developed Evaluation

Among participants who described local evaluative practice, the concepts of what constituted quality were less likely to focus on academic achievement, and instead emphasised and evaluation of the curriculum, and the ways in which learners interacted with the curriculum to support learner transformation. The articulation of these priorities foregrounded concepts of quality aligned to educational values of participants, and echo the values of quality identified among academic staff in several previous studies (Newton, 2002; Watty, 2003; Houston, 2008; Dicker et al., 2019; Udam & Heidmets, 2013; Nabaho et al., 2017; Ashwin et al., 2015; Harvey, 2002).

Constructed for the purposes of exploring potential enhancements, the self-driven processes described in participant accounts approached quality reflexively (Bamber, 2011c; Bamber & Anderson, 2012), and embraced the complex (Houston, 2008; Krause, 2012), stakeholder specific (Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Bettinson et al., 2024; Dicker et al., 2019; Gibbs, 2010; Giller, 2023; Green, 1994; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Harvey & Green, 1993; Houston, 2008; Krause, 2012; Lemaitre, 2002; Udam & Heidmets, 2013; Vettori & Lueger, 2010) and emergent

(Shields, 1999; Giller, 2023) nature of how quality was understood among multiple stakeholders.

5.5.2 Characteristics of Locally Developed Evaluation

A consistent theme described within the accounts of those who conducted local evaluation processes was that these processes were characterised by strong local ownership (Harvey, 2007; W. Yang, 2017) and a collective commitment to undertaking the evaluative work (Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Harvey, 2007). This emphasis on local ownership and self-developed scope aligns with the flexible, self-directed control described in Bamber's 'Discretionary Framework' (2011, p. 167) on locally developed evaluations.

Local processes often prioritise context-specific concerns (Harvey & Newton, 2004; Mårtensson et al., 2014; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025), emerging from within programme teams, students, or other stakeholders. In contrast to the institutionally consistent format of formal evaluations, they can be argued to be more responsive to the immediate needs and experiences of those directly involved in the programme, reflecting previous research findings which support the use of "bottom-up" processes to support quality enhancement (Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Mårtensson et al., 2014).

In the absence of formal managerial authority, programme leaders were seen to facilitate these processes by leveraging collegial goodwill among colleagues (Milburn, 2010; Irving, 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Sanderson, 2018; Weenink et al., 2022; Haugen et al., 2024a), rather than through directive leadership. As such, these processes relied on the perceived intrinsic commitment of academic colleagues to quality enhancement (Cartwright, 2007; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Kleijnen et al., 2013). The collaborative nature of these processes also echoes programme leaders' conceptual understanding of quality as 'staff commitment' whereby a commitment from colleagues to examine and enhance quality was interpreted as not only a means to plan enhancement but also as a defining characteristic of quality itself.

Unlike formal evaluation processes, these local processes did not adopt a highly structured or a standard template approach to guide their evaluation. Even among participants who accepted the use of templates in formal programme evaluation, their approach to local evaluation intentionally adopted open-ended methodologies when designing their own evaluative frameworks (Bamber, 2011c; Bers, 2011; Zohrabi, 2012). This open-ended and flexible approach enabled ongoing adaptation of the scope and potential outcomes by those directly involved in the evaluation process (Bamber, 2011c; Bamber & Anderson, 2012). Across both locally developed processes and more informal or iterative efforts to identify opportunities for improvement, participants expressed a clear desire to approach the examination of quality with colleagues creatively and flexibly. This orientation reflected a commitment to fostering meaningful change, rather than complying with external standards (Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Filippakou, 2011).

In accord with the findings of prior studies, my findings suggest that enhancement-focused change occurred in environments where the programme team assumed shared ownership for the outcome of evaluation, and more critically, the successful implementation of change (Harvey & Newton, 2004; Saunders et al., 2011; Vettori & Lueger, 2010; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Kleijnen et al., 2013). My findings therefore contribute to the debate in asking questions about how institutions can address the tension between compliance with regulatory guidelines and support for both programme leaders and academic staff involved in the delivery of academic programmes in their efforts to progress enhancement focused change.

5.5.3 The Role of Evidence in Locally Developed Evaluation

My findings identify that programme leaders, when conducting local-evaluation processes, tended to draw from a rich and varied portfolio of evidence, which was predominantly qualitative in nature, and derived from their engagement with key stakeholder groups. This evidence was collected through a range of approaches, including structured feedback, forums, and informal discussions, and was interpreted collaboratively and iteratively with colleagues. Evidence was used not only to make inferences and judgements about quality but also to strengthen the

rationale for enhancement-focused change among colleagues. The collection and analysis of stakeholder perspectives within local evaluative frameworks often relied on narrative accounts of stakeholder experiences, an approach that resembles what Melrose (1998) described as the "*transactional paradigm*" of evaluation, or reflecting what Vedung (2010) referred to as the "*dialogue-oriented wave*" of evaluation.

Previous research has argued that such dialogue-based data from a range of stakeholders adds value to evaluations of quality by enabling a holistic reflection of the multi-dimensional and context-specific nature of quality (Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Chalmers, 2008; Watty, 2003). Moreover, the use of qualitative data has been argued to provide a means of triangulating pre-existing quantitative evidence with stakeholder perspectives, thereby providing richer insights into quality (Austen & Jones-Devitt, 2019, 2019; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Chalmers, 2008; Tam, 2001; Yorke, 1991).

The emphasis on qualitative evidence to inform perspectives on quality in local evaluation in this study is arguably informed by experiences of engagement with formal evaluation processes. Programme leaders and their teams likely entered local evaluations with an existing awareness of quantitative indicators previously discussed during formal programme evaluations. Consequently, when drawing conclusions about quality, participants may have relied on this pre-existing knowledge and awareness of quantitative measures, enabling them to prioritise stakeholder insights as complementary evidence. Therefore, while quantitative metrics were not directly employed as evaluative tools in these locally developed processes, they arguably functioned as a backdrop for locally developed evaluations.

Among the stakeholders consulted in local evaluations of quality, my findings consistently found an emphasis on feedback from colleagues as the primary source of both evidence and interpretation within participant accounts. Academic colleagues can be described as playing a dual role in providing feedback on their experiences of teaching on the programme (Spence, 2019) and as a co-evaluator in interpreting and navigating the evaluative processes to understand quality

based on their professional and contextual knowledge (A. Cooper et al., 2009; Saunders et al., 2011). These findings echo arguments put forward by Bamber and Stefani (2016), which propose the positioning of practice-wisdom as a form of tacit knowledge and professional judgement, which they argue is central to evaluative work on quality.

While some previous studies on the role of evidence-informed practice argue the value and power of narrative accounts to create relevant and compelling narratives on quality (Green, 1994; Alach, 2017b; Tam, 2001; Stensaker, 2008; Houston, 2008; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Perovsek, 2016; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Leiber, 2019; Taylor, 2020), a number of previous studies suggest that qualitative forms of evidence, particularly those collected through discursive or informal processes, can be delegitimised within evaluation frameworks (Hora et al., 2017; Austen & Jones-Devitt, 2019). These tensions were reflected in my findings in cases where programme leaders valued informal conversations for the insight they offered into how quality was interpreted by others but were also conscious that these narratives could be perceived as excessively anecdotal and lacking in rigour when presented as the basis for recommending change. When both what will be evaluated and how it will be evaluated is locally determined (Bamber, 2011c), informally gathered feedback was more readily legitimised as a source of evidence for evaluative purposes, and interpreted collectively by programme teams to form inferences about quality (Bamber & Anderson, 2012).

This finding contributes to the debate on the appropriateness of different forms of evidence and how that evidence is positioned in the context of evaluative practice. It reinforces the argument for a need to combine rich and varied sources of evidence with professional judgement to support programme teams in both forming inferences about quality and making decisions on future enhancements (Dahler-Larsen, 2015; Stensaker et al., 2019). In terms of good decision-making, my findings reinforce the importance of a consideration of both the positioning of evidence and the role of professional judgement as being critical to good decision-making, or as Spence (2018) concludes, "*the issue is not ultimately metrics or*

judgement, but ensuring that the former inform, and are ultimately subservient to, the latter."

5.6. Conclusion

My findings conclude that the deployment of a singular, institution-level evaluative instrument designed in response to policy-driven goals, lacks the flexibility and responsiveness needed to address the complex and context-specific quality concerns central to programme leadership. As highlighted by previous research (Beerkens, 2015; Houston, 2008; Bamber & Anderson, 2012) the implementation of singular structures may fall short of simultaneously supporting the assurance and enhancement of academic programmes, which form a core element of the responsibilities of programme leaders.

These findings concur with the themes identified in several previous studies on the tensions evident in the implementation of top-down quality assurance frameworks. This research contributes to this body of work by linking together the experiences of programme leaders to three elements of evaluation: its construct and structure, the prioritisation of particular quality lenses in evaluation systems, and the experiences of using evidence-informed practice within evaluations of quality.

Previous research has highlighted how frustration among academic staff to imposed assurance frameworks leading to them being positioned as bureaucratic compliance-based activities and potentially resulting in passive resistance to engagement with these processes. While these interpretations and response to formal programme evaluation are evident among some participants in my study, my findings shed light on a further and more active response to these frustrations: the development of locally owned parallel processes to support programme teams in planning future enhancement.

This finding is particularly important in the context of the programme leadership role. Protecting and enhancing the quality of academic programmes is reflected as a priority that is "*fully alive*" (Kleijnen et al., 2013, p. 9) in the mind of participants within my study. However, as Kleijnen and colleagues note, and as is also

reflected in my findings, formal quality assurance processes, while contributing to meet the requirements of highly regulated assurance environments, are limited in their capacity to meaningfully support academic staff to plan enhancements.

My findings suggest that the response by participants to the limitations for formal programme review are not wholly a conceptual tension between assurance and enhancement (Barnett, 1992; Henkel, 1998; Tam, 2001; Stensaker, 2008; Filippakou, 2011; Kleijnen et al., 2013; Williams, 2016). While accountability to the policy-driven guidelines of external agencies may require an emphasis on compliance and accountability, they do not provide the flexibility to support context-specific explorations on quality for the purposes of enhancement planning. Instead, programme leaders position formal programme evaluations and local enhancement-focused evaluative work as separate processes, each is shaped by different interpretations of quality and informed by different forms of evidence.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

This thesis set out to advance our understanding of the ways in which institutional frameworks for quality evaluation are experienced and interpreted by programme leaders tasked with coordinating them. By focusing specifically on evaluations of academic programmes, this research also provides an opportunity to examine how top-down, policy-driven expectations of quality evaluation meet the context-dependent, stakeholder-specific quality priorities of academic practice.

Chapter One provided the context for the study and outlined my personal and professional interest in the topic. Having reviewed the key themes emerging from the existing literature in Chapter Two, I have traced the contested history of how quality is defined in higher education contexts, the rise of formal evaluative processes to monitor and assure quality, and the use of evidence-informed practice within these processes.

Chapter Three outlined the methodological approach adopted in the design of this research study, while Chapter Four presented the findings from twenty in-depth interviews, analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis. These findings examined the conceptualisations of quality prioritised by programme leaders, their engagement with institutional programme evaluation processes, and experiences of evidence to draw inferences about quality. My findings also uncovered a range of responses to formal programme evaluation, including the development of parallel, locally developed evaluative practices, designed with the specific aim of planning future enhancement of academic programmes. My findings were subsequently discussed in light of the existing body of knowledge in Chapter Five.

This concluding chapter synthesises my findings to directly address the overarching research questions that have guided this study. I reflect on how the findings of this research contribute to the existing body of knowledge and our understanding of the practical realities of academic programme leaders' experiences of formal programme evaluation processes. I also reflect on the

limitations of my study, my personal reflections on my research, and the implications of my findings to both practice and future areas of research.

6.2. Addressing My Research Questions

This study was guided by four primary research questions aimed at describing and interpreting the experiences of programme leaders in formal programme evaluation. The following section addresses each of these questions as they relate to my findings.

1 How do programme leaders understand and prioritise the concept of quality and its relationship to programme evaluation processes?

My study reveals a contrast between how programme leaders understand the concept of quality, and how quality is prioritised within institutional programme evaluation processes.

My findings indicate that programme leaders understand quality as a multi-faceted concept, which traverses concepts of academic standards, the design and coordination of the curriculum, and quality reflected in the student experience. Two additional minor themes were also identified, which conceptualised quality as a characteristic of the perceived shared commitment of the programme team to quality, and interpreting quality as something intuited, but essentially intangible.

My findings suggest that programme leaders interpret the meaning of quality in formal programme evaluation processes to emphasise quality as academic standards and reflected in a focus on how student academic outcomes are positioned as providing assurance of continuing academic standards. These interpretations have contributed to participants' perception of programme evaluations, particularly annual monitoring processes, as one-dimensional in nature, which fails to capture the complex interaction of curricular and student-focused understanding of quality held by programme leaders. The emerging dichotomy between the complex and multi-faceted nature of quality in practice and the more narrowly defined perceived construct of quality within formal programme evaluation contributes to a disconnect between the priorities of

quality assurance in formal programme evaluation, and the rich tapestry of what constitutes quality, as understood by programme leaders.

My findings on the broad conceptualisation of quality by programme leaders aligns with some of the traditional definitions of quality in higher education described within the existing body of literature (Harvey & Green, 1993), and reflects programme leaders' understanding of quality as a contextually-nuanced and multi-faceted concept (Watty, 2003; Marshall, 2016; Leiber & Seyfried, 2025). The importance of collegial commitment as a definition of quality has also been previously referenced by Cheng (2017) as quality reflected in the *virtue of professional practice*, and more obliquely referred to in a number of previous studies (Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Cartwright, 2007; Kleijnen et al., 2013; Lackner, 2023; Overberg, 2019), that draw on the moral and professional commitment of academic staff to quality as an argument for academic ownership of evaluative work in quality. This study supports the argument offered by Cheng and others that frames the virtue of professional commitment to quality as an important factor in both delivering on more traditional definitions of quality, and as an enabling factor in supporting enhancement efforts at programme level.

The identified dissonance between how the concept of quality is understood by programme leaders and interpreted in their reflections of institutional programme evaluation is foundational to understanding of programme leaders' subsequent engagement with formal evaluation, and how they make sense of these processes. This finding echoes the previously identified disconnect between how quality is interpreted between institutionally designed assurance processes and practice-based priorities shapes how those tasked with implementing them (Vettori & Lueger, 2010; Blanco Ramírez, 2013; Beerkens, 2015; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025).

This thesis contributes to our understanding of the inherent tension navigated by programme leaders in reconciling how quality is conceptualised with the programme team, and how they interpret how quality is defined and prioritised within institutional systems. It speaks in particular to an empirical example of how programme leaders leverage 'quality literacy' (Leiber & Seyfried, 2025) to navigate

different interpretations of quality, and provides further insight to the duality of their positioning in quality evaluation, and their awareness of the tensions that exist between how quality is prioritised institutionally and more locally within their academic area.

2 How do programme leaders make sense of their experiences of engaging in programme evaluation?

This second research question addressed the operational experiences of programme leaders engagement with formal programme evaluation processes. My findings identify three distinct conceptualisations in how programme leaders make sense of institutional programme evaluation programmes. The two predominant conceptualisations of formal programme evaluation processes are that they constitute a mechanism for *reporting and accountability*, and the *validation and assurance* of academic standards. A third, less dominant conceptualisation, identified by a small number of participants, positions formal evaluation as a tool for *planning enhancement*.

This thesis therefore argues that despite the ambition of policy-level frameworks (e.g. ESG, QQI) that programme monitoring and evaluation can both assure the quality of academic programmes and contribute to the continuous improvement and modification of academic programmes, in practice, these frameworks for evaluation do not provide a vehicle for enhancement planning. My findings suggest that in this study, the translation of policy goals on programme monitoring at institutional level, and further implemented at academic programme level, results in their transition as largely *reporting and accountability* and for *validation and assurance*, rather than *planning for enhancement*.

In making sense of the meaning of these frameworks to their practice, my findings echo those of existing studies in framing engagement with quality assurance processes as largely bureaucratically-focused, compliance-based activities (Hoecht, 2006; Bjørnholt & Larsen, 2014), which have a limited relationship to the complex and multi-faceted understanding of quality within academic communities (Leiber & Seyfried, 2025; Marshall, 2016; Watty, 2003).

However, this thesis contributes to the current body of literature by suggesting a more nuanced approach to engagement with programme evaluation than the resistive practices or "game playing" identified in previous studies on academic engagement with quality assurance (Anderson, 2006; Elton, 2004; Harvey, 2002; Liu, 2015; Newton, 2002; T. Cooper, 2003; Liu, 2015). My thesis argues that in the case of this study, while programme leaders understand the limitations of institutional evaluative systems, they are less likely to adopt a "game playing" approach. Instead, while less like to engage in "game-playing", they do "play the game". This is indicated in their pragmatic engagement with their programme teams to fulfil the requirements of formal programme evaluation, while attempting to extract value from the process for themselves and their academic area. Examples of this include an openness to external examiner feedback as a source of peer validation of practice, and using the templates provided to record decisions and contribute to a formal institutional record of the management of the programme.

Therefore, while my findings echo the risks of lack of agency, prescribed focus, and misalignment of quality values in creating largely bureaucratic, compliance-based interpretations of formal programme evaluation frameworks, they add an additional layer of complexity to understanding the response to these systems. My thesis positions programme leaders not passive recipients, but as pragmatic strategists in their engagement with programme evaluation. Both working within assurance-based frameworks and through the development of parallel evaluative processes (described in detail in response to research question four below), programme leaders navigate these processes as active agents who absorb the bureaucratic burden of formal programme evaluation, while working collaboratively with colleagues on enhancement through separate processes.

3 How do programme leaders experience, position and use evidence in evaluative work on quality?

This research question explored the role played by evidence in the evaluation of quality, particularly in formal programme evaluation processes. This thesis argues that the emphasis on quantitatively based, output-measures of quality relating to

student attainment shaped programme leaders positioning and interpretation of programme evaluation and contributed to their understanding of the process as predominantly focused on quality, grounded in the concept of academic standards.

My findings suggest that while programme leaders used the statistical metrics specified within the proforma template to report on changing patterns in student achievement, their use rarely drove meaningful change within the programme. The findings suggest that the disconnect between the defined statistical measures within formal programme evaluation processes and their limited capacity to measure quality as understood by participants contributed to the positioning of programme evaluation as a process for reporting and accountability and the assurance of academic standards, rather than comprehensive evaluation of all aspects of quality.

In response to these limitations, the findings again reveal a pragmatic response by programme leaders to formal programme evaluation. In this instance, programme leaders, reflecting the duality of their role between managerial and academic perspectives (Haugen et al., 2024b, 2024a), navigated between adhering to the requirements of the institutional frameworks for programme evaluation, while understanding the limitations of relying on quantitative measures to fully describe and reflect quality on their programme. In seeking meaning from quantitative data, they attribute variance in grade attainment to the identification of potential academic standards issues, such as academic integrity or potential indicators of grade-inflation. However, more substantively, to address the limitations of quantification, programme leaders used contextualising conversations with programme colleagues to incorporate professional knowledge and triangulate the quantitative data with context-specific knowledge.

This thesis contributes to our understanding of how programme leaders, while attempting to navigate evaluative systems, mediate the recognised limitations of proxy indicators of quality. The findings demonstrate that programme leaders are aware of the limitations and challenges of adopting purely quantitative measures to reflect the fullness and complexity of programme quality identified in existing

studies (Yorke, 1991; Barnett, 1992, 1994; Tam, 2001; Broadbent, 2007; Gibbs, 2010; Beerkens, 2015, 2018; Robertson et al., 2019; Argento et al., 2020; Sarrico, 2022). However, my findings extend beyond a critique of the validity of quantification in the measurement of quality, to provide insight into how programme leaders deal with these limitations within formal frameworks. While mitigating against the risks associated with singular sources of evidence through triangulation and the inclusion of professional knowledge is well recognised within the existing body of knowledge (Yorke, 1991; Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Austen & Jones-Devitt, 2019; Leiber, 2019), my findings draw attention to the actions of programme leaders in attempting to mitigate against the risks of potential erroneous conclusions, while working within the bounds of the evaluative system.

4 How do programme leaders respond to their experiences of formal programme evaluation in light of their responsibilities for quality assurance and enhancement?

My final research question is central to the existing debate on the potential for quality assurance and enhancement to be reconciled. My findings suggest that in the context of this study, the assurance and enhancement of quality within a single evaluative framework remains unreconciled and operates at programme level as a distinct and parallel process, both coordinated by programme leaders.

My findings reveal the adaptive practices in a small number of cases, where engagement with the institutional framework for formal programme evaluation is adapted for the purposes of enhancement. However, the predominant pattern among programme leaders was compliance with formal programme evaluation, and the coordination of parallel, iterative, or planned local evaluation processes, through which enhancement was planned. This thesis argues that these locally developed practices are not merely supplementary to quality assurance; they are the primary engine for enhancement planning among programme teams. As evaluative activities, these contrasting evaluative practices run on parallel tracks, one serving the requirements of institutional compliance with regulatory requirements, and the other where the 'real' work of evaluating quality takes place.

This third response represents a departure from previous studies on the experiences of academic staff and their engagement with QA processes, which frequently focus on tension between compliance and resistance in relation to the implementation of evaluations of teaching and learning (Newton, 2010; Williams, 2016; Harrison et al., 2022). While my findings indicate evidence of a tension between the goals and priorities of quality assurance and enhancement in formal programme evaluation, echoing those of previous studies, they also reveal evidence of a proactive response to the limitations of formal programme evaluation to support quality enhancement at a programme level.

The development of local evaluation processes in parallel to formal programme evaluation contributes to our understanding of how programme leaders experience the dual responsibilities of programme leaders in operating between two different systems. Programme leaders' experiences in this study suggest that while they respond to formal programme evaluation by complying with the defined requirements of the process for accountability purposes, they simultaneously invest their time and energy in developing parallel evaluative processes to support programme enhancement.

The design and development of locally evaluative processes described within this study are substantively different from formal programme evaluation, in their ownership, focus, and use of evidence. Local processes were more likely to be characterised by strong local ownership in the scope and methodological choices deployed to evaluate quality. In contrast to the reliance on quantitative measures of quality in formal evaluations, local processes adopted a more inclusive approach to legitimise narrative and informally gathered intelligence and feedback to inform evaluation. These findings support the arguments offered by Bamber and Anderson (2012) on the separating of evaluation for assurance and evaluation for enhancement, based on their distinctive goals and purpose. Further, it demonstrates at a programme level the distinctive methodological and evidence-based practices that are proposed within their subject level application of the evaluation Discretionary Framework (Bamber, 2011b), in this case, at programme level.

In addition to the contrast in the types of evidence used within local processes, this research also reveals differences in how evidence was positioned as part of the evaluation. In contrast to the proposed instrumental positioning of evidence to provide summative judgements on quality in formal evaluations, this research suggests that local evaluative practices positioned evidence as a discursive, rather than a diagnostic tool, and was used as an input to, rather than a determinant of quality.

This research contributes to our understanding of the practical implications of tensions between quality assurance and quality enhancement. It suggests that programme leaders, in managing responsibility for both assurance and enhancement of academic programmes, do not merely resist or comply with the processes; instead, they actively contribute to the construction of alternative systems for enhancement. However, these findings ask questions about how programme leaders can be supported in these dual roles. As highlighted by this research, the demands of the accountability 'track' and the maintenance of the quality assurance 'engine' require a considerable investment of time and energy to assurance based processes, a temporal challenge identified by Vettori (2023) in relation to the regularised scheduling. Vettori's study on the 'chronopolitics' of temporal normalities of assurance-based systems asks questions about the time and resources attributed to the temporal sequencing of assurance scheduling. My thesis contributes further to this debate, by introducing a further temporal challenge: that of creating time and space for enhancement-focused evaluative practice that delivers real change.

6.3. Reflection on the Research Journey

When initially scoping this study, my intent had been to ground my research in the realities of evidence-informed practice in the professional lives of programme leaders through their engagement with programme evaluation. Processes for formal programme evaluation in the institution required programme leaders to engage with a range of quantitative evidence aligned to policy-based indicators of quality and performance in higher education. Programme evaluation therefore provided me with a useful context through which I could examine the experiences

of evidence-informed decision making, and how it was evidence was used and interpreted in a programme level context.

However, during the analysis of participant accounts, my analytical lens shifted significantly. As I analysed the data, it became evident that the concept of evidence-informed practice in programme evaluation held little intrinsic value for participants in the absence of broader contextual interpretation of what quality meant; and further, that the analysis of data formed only part how quality was interpreted and evaluated by programme teams.

Participants' critique, and occasional frustration on the scope and experiences of engaging with formal programme evaluation, and in contrast, the ways in which they described local evaluative practices prompted a shift in my thinking. This moved the focus of my analysis away from "evidence" as the central pillar of analysis, to instead focus on how quality itself was defined and interpreted by participants and how evaluative practice contributed to programme leaders' priorities in managing programme quality. The role of evidence-informed practice in evaluation moved to playing an important, but more supporting role.

Separately, this thesis has also been a challenge in positioning me as a researcher working within the institution, rather than contributing as a professional analyst of a phenomenon or process in the institution. Professionally, the emphasis of my work is to frame my conclusions based on institutional priorities and practice, often detached from my own interpretations. Given my commitment to the methodological approach to this study (IPA), my approach demanded my active participation as part of the hermeneutic approach that characterises IPA studies. I initially found this experience somewhat uncomfortable, given my automatic predilection to analyse as an institutional analyst, rather than an academic researcher. I reflect on this challenge not just as an intellectual one, based on rigour of IPA, but also one challenged by my professional modus operandi, where my analysis is required to serve the decision-making needs of others, rather than myself. In discussing my frustration informally with a more experienced academic researcher, their suggestion was to reorient my positioning towards a sense of personal responsibility to interpret and give voice to the experiences of my

participants on their behalf. Reflecting on this advice provided a break-through moment, which gave me permission to take a deeper interpretative stance on the data, and focus on the critical meanings of participants' experiences and the important themes emerging from their accounts.

6.4. Limitations

As a study that adopted an IPA approach to understanding the meaning and interpretations of programme leaders' experiences, my approach has not sought to make generalised claims about how programme evaluation is experienced. Instead, it sought to understand themes emerging from the individual experiences of participants, and the perceptions and understandings of those experiences within a particular study.

As research situated within a single higher education institution, the findings of this research are inevitably shaped by the organisational and social norms of the institution, and therefore make no claim to be representative of other Irish, or indeed international institutions that are subject to the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area, or the Quality and Qualifications Ireland Statutory Guidelines for higher education providers in Ireland. While the general principles under which programme evaluation is developed may be similar, the findings of this research may have limited generalisability to other contexts.

6.5. Implications for Practice

In setting out to examine the experiences of programme leaders' engagement with formal evaluative systems for academic programmes, my findings raise several important issues about how policy-led, institutionally defined systems for quality evaluation contribute to the assurance and enhancement of quality within programmes.

My findings ask questions about how institutions should best respond to policy-driven guidelines and regulations on programme evaluation and consider the expectations of what these processes seek to delivery to those tasked with implementing them. Within a prescriptive regulatory environment, individual

institutions may be limited in their capacity to disregard defined regulatory requirements. However, institutions do have a responsibility to provide clarity on the purpose and role of these processes, recognising how these processes frame the concept of quality, and their contribution to the broader management of quality within the institution. Further, it is also incumbent on those responsible for developing evaluative processes to acknowledge and address the limitations of a "one-size-fits-all" model of evaluative practice for programmes.

Finally, this thesis argues that the notion of evidence-informed practice within evaluation must evolve beyond a reliance on quantitative measures and metrics of quality. My findings support an argument for the broadening of what is legitimised as evidence within evaluative work and argues for inclusive approaches that include both statistical and narrative-based data, and feedback received in both structured and more informal settings.

In developing definitions or measures that reflect quality, the findings of this study also lend weight to the argument that in order to be meaningful, evidence used to inform decision-making on quality need to rely less on proxy indicators of quality, and more directly reflect the aspects of quality that they seek to address, and crucially that can be managed and shaped by programme teams. Given the complexity of quality as a concept, and the potentially contextually sensitive interpretations of quality, the challenge of creating these measures is complex. Therefore, in addition to considering "what" we gather evidence on, evaluation processes must also consider how evidence is positioned as a tool to support decision-making. My thesis argues that evidence should support, rather than direct decision-making, affording the opportunity for colleagues to incorporate their contextual knowledge to interpret meaning from evidence in-situ.

6.5.1 Contribution to Institutional and National Practice

Programme leaders' interpretations of formal evaluation frameworks are fundamental to understanding how these evaluations can be developed to more clearly articulate the purpose of programmatic evaluation and to clarify how evaluation findings are intended to be used by both programme leaders and the

wider institution. Within the institution in which this research is situated, these findings have the potential to make a significant contribution to ongoing discussions regarding the evolution of existing formal programme evaluation frameworks. Such discussions should seek to clarify the role and purpose of formal evaluations and to explore ways of minimising the bureaucratic burden associated with responding to regulatory requirements.

More importantly, this research has the potential to contribute to institutional discussions aimed at increasing the visibility of local evaluative practice and strengthening support for programme leaders and programme teams to engage meaningfully in enhancement-focused evaluation. Such institutional support must include explicit recognition of the time required, and the autonomy necessary, for programme teams to work collaboratively. It should also support programme leaders in initiating and sustaining agile and iterative approaches to examining quality, with a clear focus on continuous enhancement.

At a national policy level, this thesis may also contribute to sector-level discussion and debate on the balance between assurance and enhancement within evaluation processes. This contribution may be realised through the dissemination of findings in national academic journals focused on quality in teaching and learning in higher education, as well as through engagement with sector-level forums on quality in higher education in Ireland. In addition, this research has the potential to inform debate within sectoral communities of practice concerned with quality, teaching and learning enhancement, and institutional research on evaluation, planning for enhancement, and redefining the role of evidence-based practice in evaluation.

6.6. Implications for Further Research

This thesis is based on research conducted within a single institution. Therefore, comparable studies on how the experiences of the programme leaders' engagement with formal quality assurance processes in other institutions would provide further weight to the arguments presented in this thesis, particularly those

also subject to similar regulatory frameworks for programme monitoring and evaluation.

This research study has also uncovered distinctive practices in the evaluation of quality for assurance and enhancement at programme level within a single institution. Further research may explore these practices in other settings and examine if these parallel processes manifest in different institutions or within different quality regimes. This may also include a more detailed examination of how locally developed evaluative practice emerges, and the challenges experienced by programme teams in navigating these processes outside of formal quality assurance frameworks.

6.7. Concluding Remarks

This thesis provides an examination of the experiences and interpretations of quality evaluation from the perspective of academic programme leaders. It considers a range of dualities in quality processes in how the meaning of quality is interpreted, the dual reality of quality management of academic programmes, and distinct paradigms in how evidence shapes and informs judgements on quality by programme leaders.

In managing these processes, programme leaders are revealed as holders of a distinctive 'quality literacy,' which enables them to navigate between the tensions of quality assurance and enhancement. In doing so, their interpretations and response to formal quality assurance processes moves beyond the previous binary of 'compliance vs resistance' to a more sophisticated navigation of both institutional and local evaluation processes.

However, the thesis also argues that this navigation is not without cost, in terms of time and focus for programme leaders. As such it calls for a consideration of how compliance with policy-based assurance requirements could be reimagined to minimise the opportunity-cost of bureaucratic reporting and provide renewed acknowledgement and support of locally owned processes to holistically evaluate quality and plan for future enhancement.

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Appendix One: Interview Schedule

The Role of Programme Chair and Quality:

- Can you talk me through your main responsibilities in your role as a Programme Chair?
- What do you consider to be the role of a programme chair in managing the quality of a programme?
- How would you describe your approach to managing "quality" generally in your programme?

Undertaking Programme Review as a Programme Chair

- In your role as a Programme Chair, have you ever undertaken an evaluation of your programme, such as annual or periodic programme review of the programme?
- Can you talk me through how you approached the review process?
- What aspects were particularly important for you to understand?

Use of Evidence in Programme Review

- Did you use any data or other types of evidence to complete programme review?
- How did you go about choosing or selecting data or evidence that you used? Were you able to choose and access the data you felt was most important?
- What types of information have you used? (e.g. statistical, student feedback, benchmarking data, case studies, discussion with peers)

Using Evidence and its link to an understanding "quality"

- What did you consider to be the purpose of using evidence as part of your review of your programme?
- What questions did you ask yourself when examining the data you had collected?
- Why did you use the data/ information in this way?
- How did any evidence you collected help you understand the quality of education in the programme? What was the basis for this?
- Are there types of data that were not useful? What were they? Why were they less useful?
- In examining evidence about the programme, have you uncovered new insights into quality that were new or surprising to you?

Gaps/ Appropriateness of Using Evidence

- Is there any data or evidence missing that you would like to use? Is there data that should be made more accessible?
- Are there particular aspects of understanding quality in the programme that have been difficult to capture using evidence? What are these? How might these be aspects be better integrated into programme review?

Implications for Practice/ Meeting Unmet Needs

- From your experience, does the current programme review process support programme chairs in improving quality? Explore
- Do you know of any approaches to evaluating quality that are used elsewhere that may be useful at [this institution]?
- What is your experience of using evidence in programme reviews and its relationship to enhancing quality of teaching and learning?

Closing Question: From our discussion, are there others issues that you wish you raise, or other elements of your experiences of evaluation that I did not ask that are important to you that you may wish to talk about

Appendix Two Participant Invite

Dear Programme Chair,

I am writing to you in my capacity as a doctoral student of the HEREE Programme at Lancaster University (https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/educational-research/study/phd/phd-in-higher-education-research-evaluation-and-enhancement/) where I am currently undertaking my doctoral thesis.

The topic of my research aims to understand the experiences of programme chairs in using data and evidence to evaluate and enhance the educational quality of programmes. As an individual with experience as a programme chair and in conducting programmatic review, I was hoping that you might be willing to participate in this research.

Participating in this research will involve taking part in a 50-minute interview. During the interview you will be asked questions about your perspectives on understanding and managing the quality of a programme as a Programme Chair, and your experiences of undertaking programmatic review. The interview will also explore the role that data and other evidence plays in evaluating and planning enhancements to the educational quality of programmes at [this institution].

If you are willing to participate, I would be pleased to schedule the interview at a time and location convenient to you.

If you have any questions or wish to seek more information on this research before participating, I am happy to respond to any queries you might have about what is involved.

With best wishes,
Aisling

Appendix Three Participant Information Sheet

Participant information sheet

Evidence use in Programmatic Review- understanding the experiences and needs of Academic Programme Chairs

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am a PhD student at Lancaster University, and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to understand the experiences of those conducting programme reviews in their use data for the in completing programmatic review.

Why have I been invited?
I have approached you because of your role as a Programme Chair at [this institution], and experiences you may have had in conducting programme reviews.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decided to take part, this would involve the following:
Taking part in a one-to-one interview. This interview, with your permission, will be audio-recorded, and is expected to take 50-60 minutes.

During the interview you will be asked questions about using data as part of your role in leading the delivery of academic programmes at [this institution], and the role of data and other evidence plays in evaluating and planning enhancements to the educational quality of programmes at [this institution].

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
Taking part in this is study will provide you with an opportunity to talk about your experiences of undertaking programmatic review, and the role that information has played in evaluating and planning enhancements to programmes. The research will also collect feedback on how programme chairs and others can be supported

in undertaking programmatic evaluation and the role that data and information should play.

Do I have to take part?
Participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and your participation will remain confidential between you and I, as the researcher.

I acknowledge that as colleagues in the same university, it is likely that we are either professionally known to each other already or may work together in the future. Participation in this research forms part of my doctoral research and, as such, is entirely separate to my role within the University. As a researcher, I am grateful for your participation and will ensure that your contributions to the research remain confidential and separate to our respective roles.

What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised, pooled, or analysed together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 4 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part, beyond the investment of your time to participate in the interview, which is anticipated to take 50-60 minutes.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview only I, the researcher conducting this study, will have access to the information you share with me.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is, I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:

The primary use of this study is for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and potential publication of findings in research publications. I may also present the results of my study at academic and practitioner conferences to inform other professionals in the higher education sector or policymakers about this study.

Additionally, the findings of this study will also be shared within the institution and may contribute to the future development of information provision to support programmatic review, and procedures to support the evaluation and review of academic programmes at [this institution].

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in our publications.

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with university guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself Aisling McKenna (aisling.mckenna@dcu.ie) or my doctoral supervisor, Professor Paul Ashwin, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University (Paul.Ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk)

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact: Prof Paul Trowler, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University (Paul.Trowler@lancaster.ac.uk).

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee. (Reference: EdRes-2023-2212-EdAp-2)

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix Four Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Evidence use in Programmatic Review- understanding the experiences and needs of Academic Programme Chairs

Name of Researchers: Aisling McKenna
Email: amckenna1@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 4 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 4 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed. If I am involved in focus groups and then withdraw my data will remain part of the study.	☐
3. If I am participating in the focus group I understand that any information disclosed within the focus group remains confidential to the group, and I will not discuss the focus group with or in front of anyone who was not involved unless I have the relevant person's express permission	☐
4. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications, or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included, and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	☐
5. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles, or presentation without my consent.	☐
6. I understand that any interviews or focus groups will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
7. I understand that data will be kept according to university guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
8. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____ _____
_____
Name of Participant Date Signature

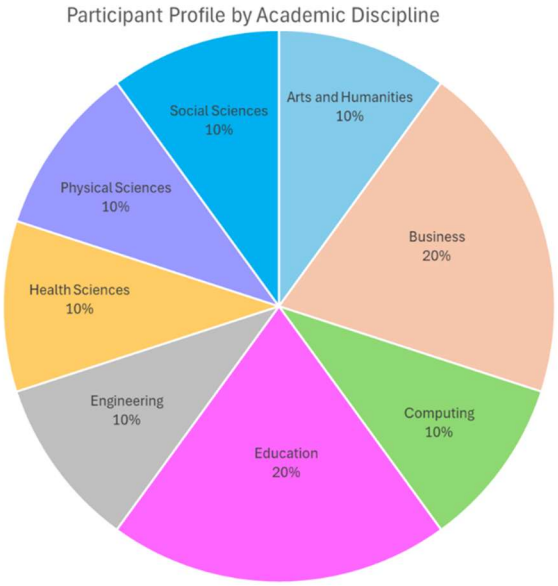
I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

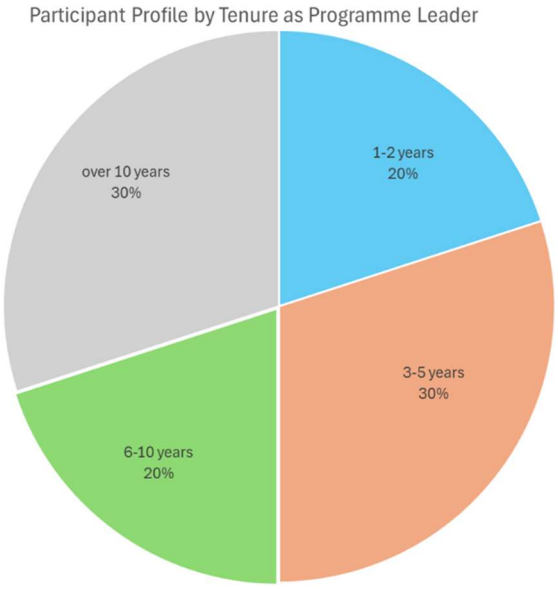
Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____

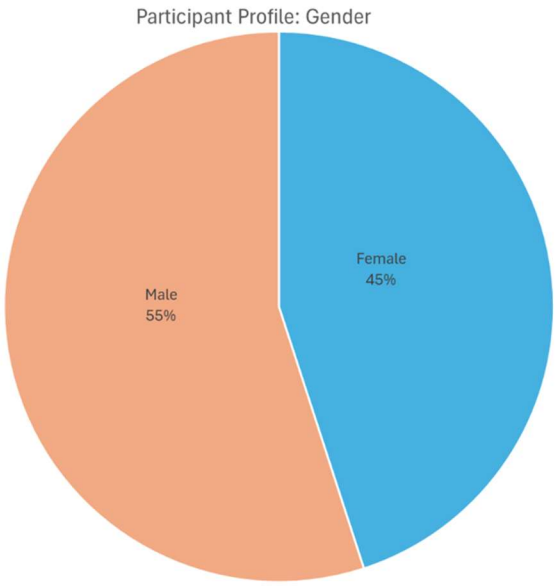
Date _____ Day/month/year

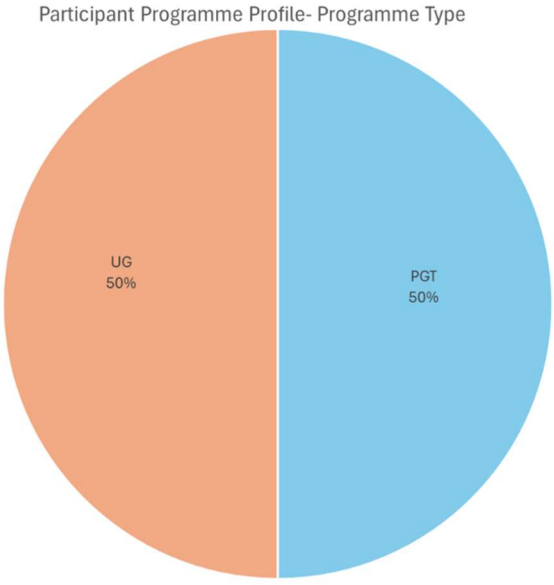
One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University.

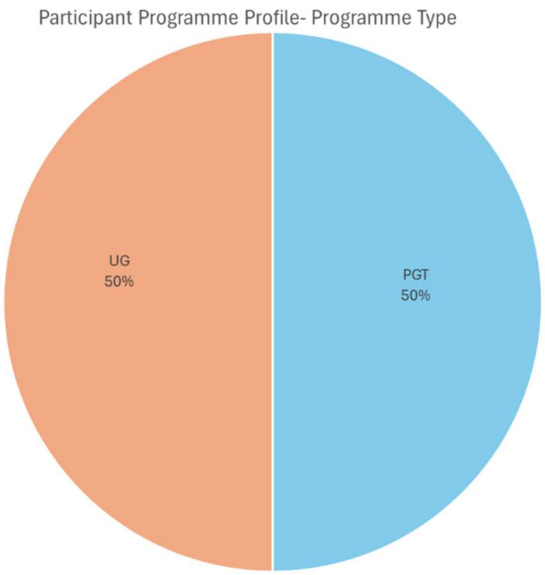
Appendix Five Participant Profile

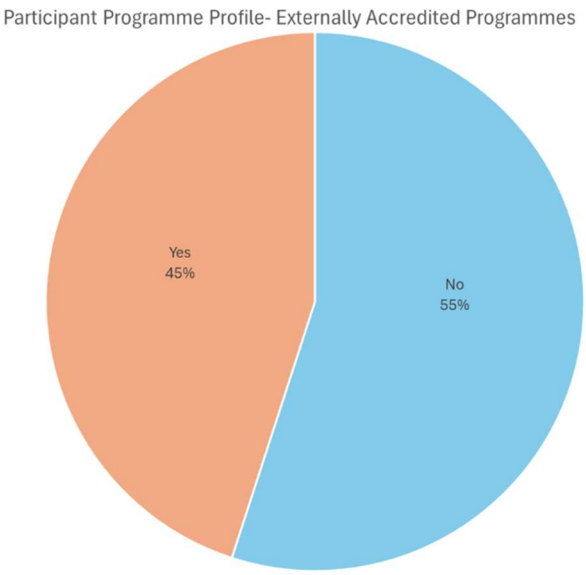




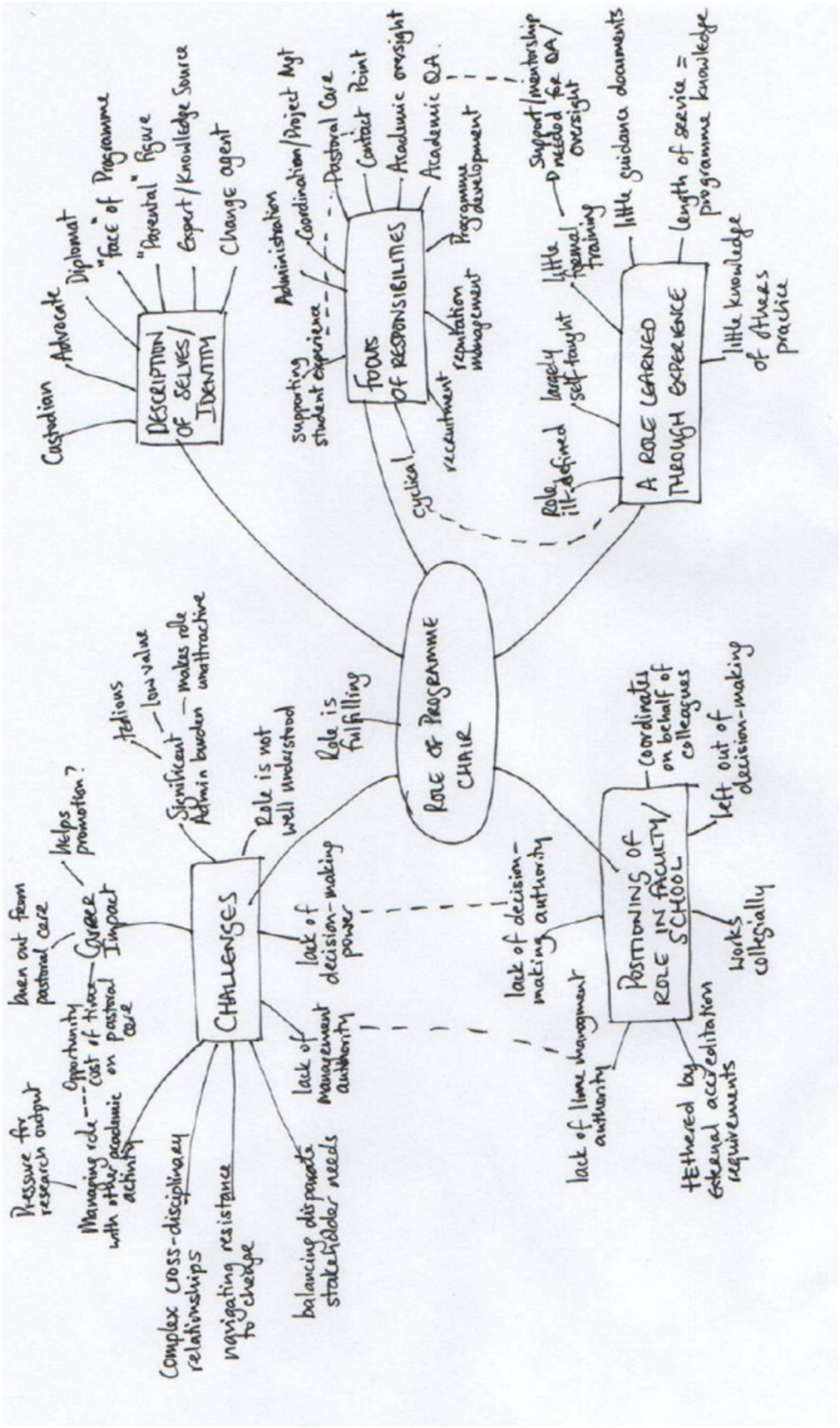


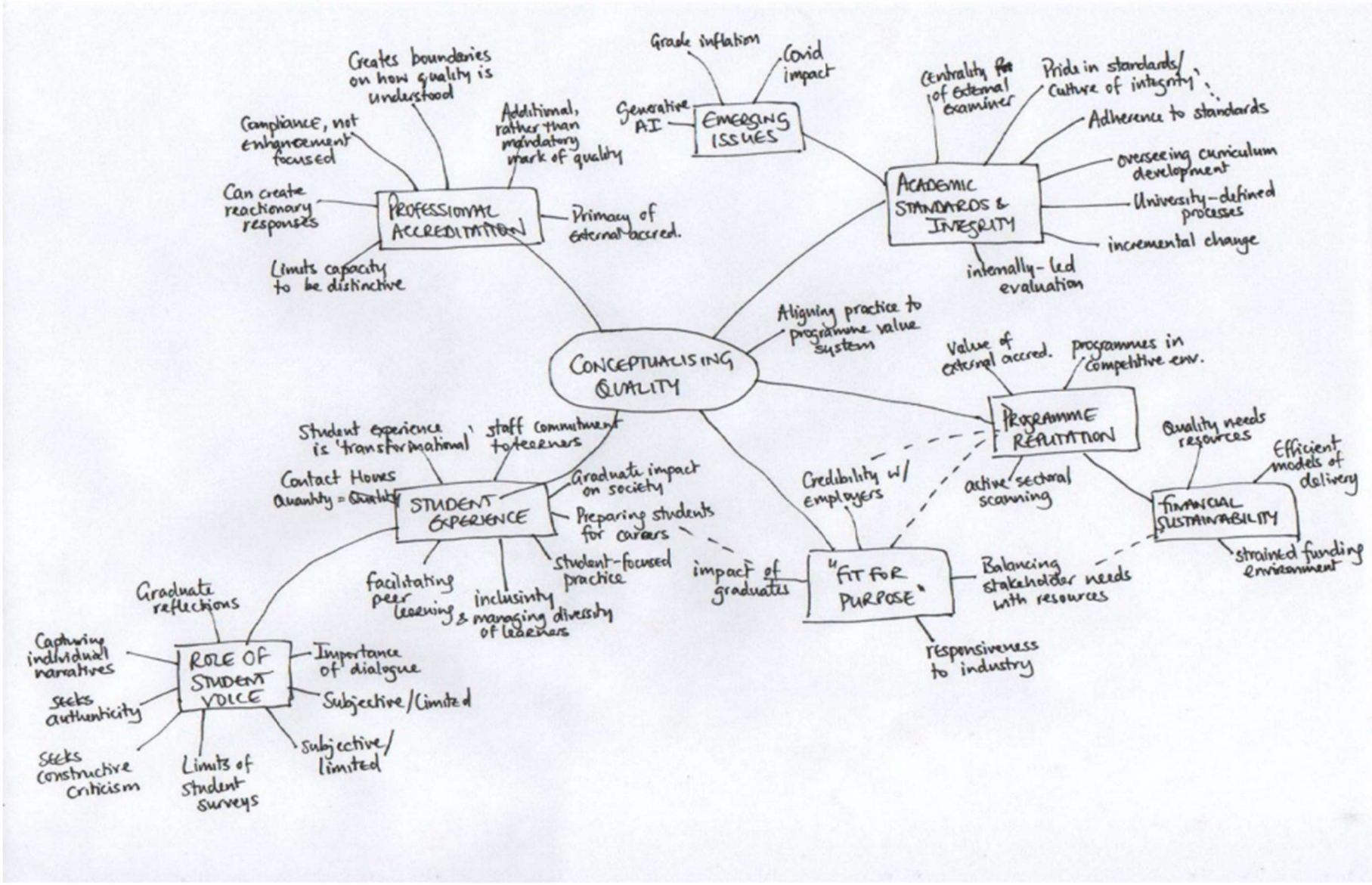


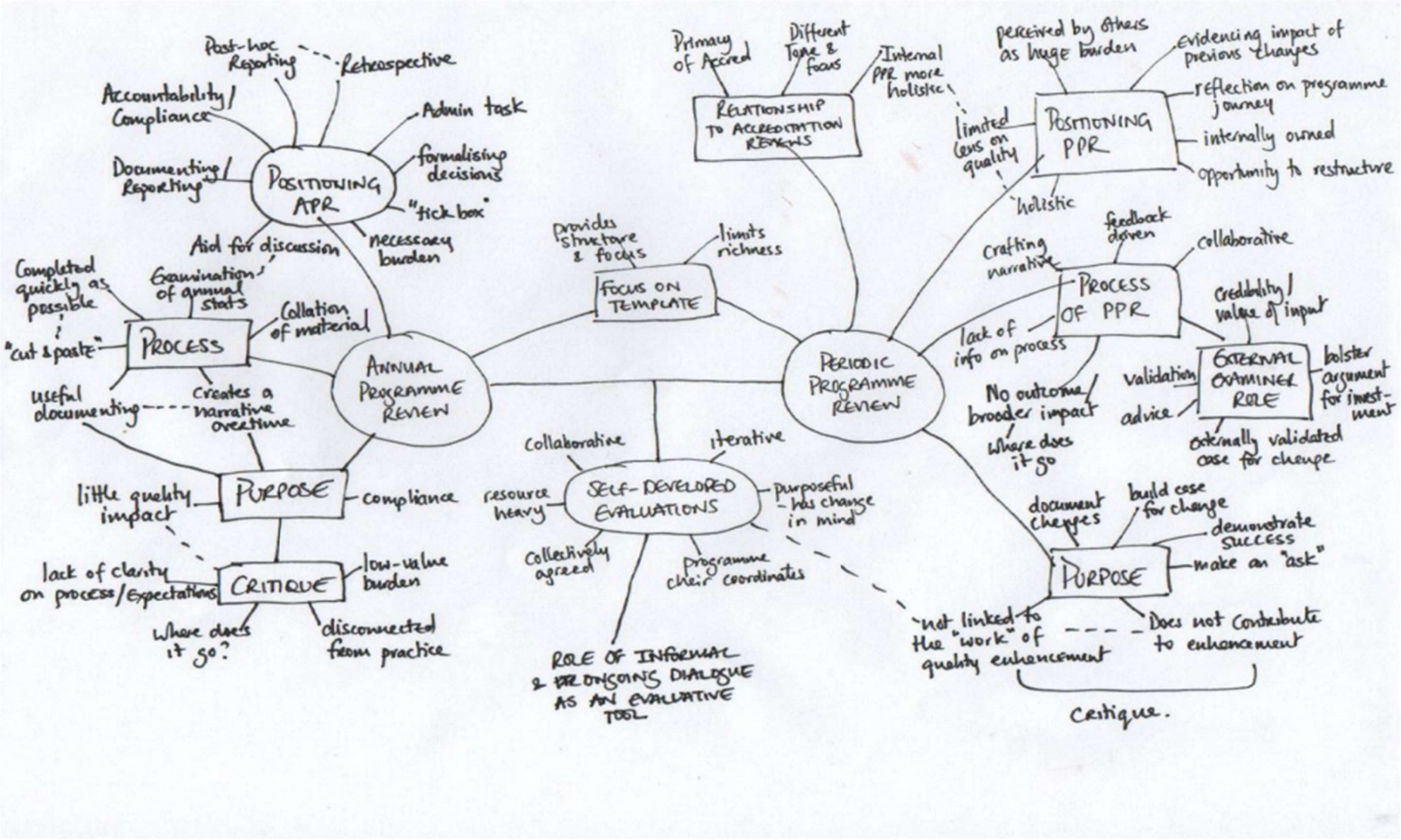

Participant Programme Profile- Programme Type
UG
50%
PGT
50%

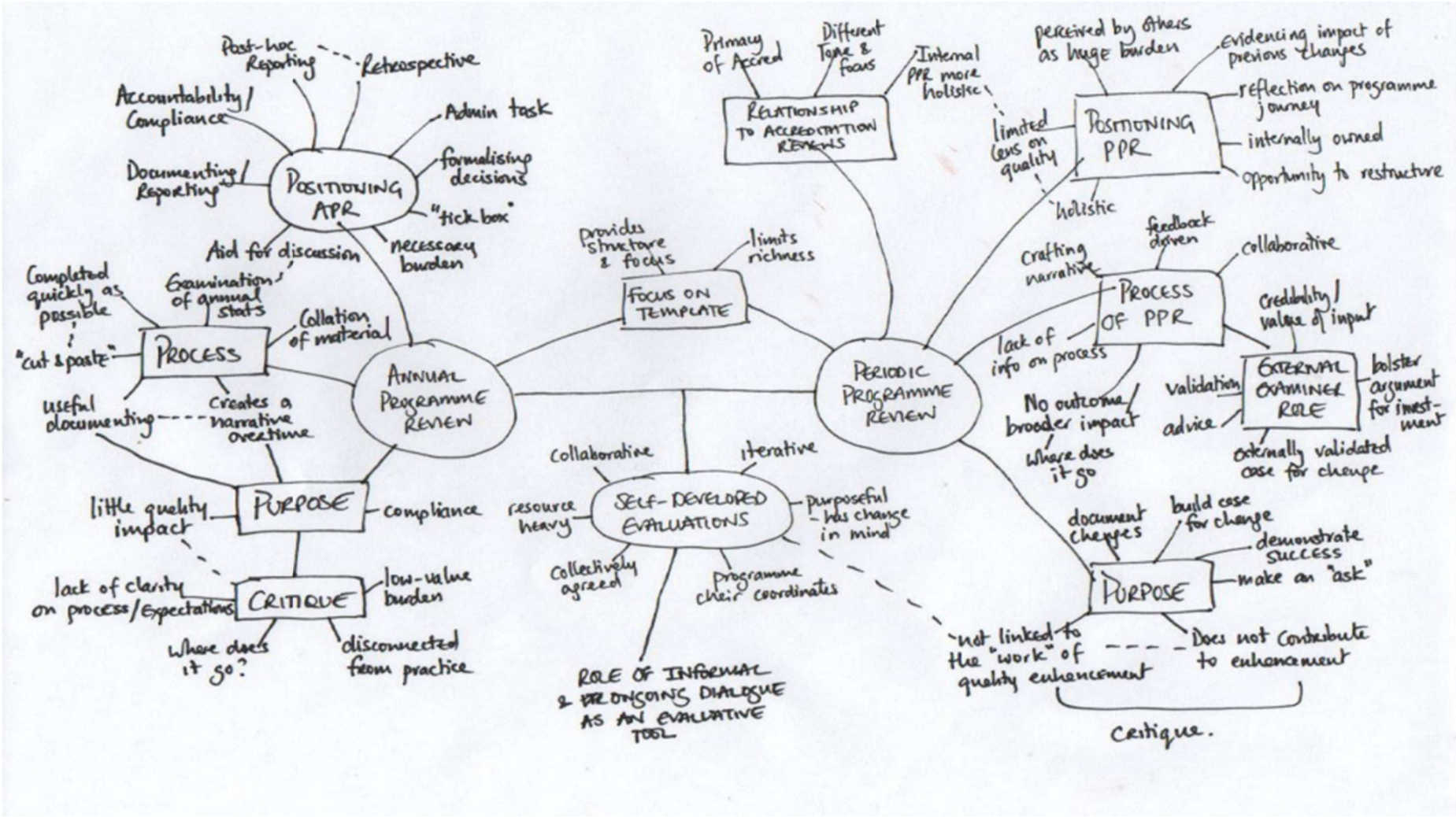

Participant Programme Profile- Externally Accredited Programmes
Yes
45%
No
55%

Appendix Six Spider Diagrams on Key Themes




CONCEPTUALISING QUALITY
PROFESSIONAL ACCREDITATION
Creates boundaries on how quality is understood
Compliance, not enhancement focused
Additional, rather than mandatory mark of quality
Can create reactionary responses
Primacy of external accred.
Limits capacity to be distinctive
EMERGING ISSUES
Grade inflation
Covid impact
Generative AI
ACADEMIC STANDARDS & INTEGRITY
Centrality of external examiner
Pride in standards/ Culture of integrity
Adherence to standards
overseeing curriculum development
University-defined processes
incremental change
internally-led evaluation
Aligning practice to programme value system
PROGRAMME REPUTATION
Value of external accred.
programmes in competitive env.
active sectoral scanning
Credibility w/ employers
STUDENT EXPERIENCE
Student experience is 'transformational'
staff commitment to learners
Contact Hours
Quantity = Quality
Graduate impact on society
Preparing students for careers
facilitating peer learning
inclusivity & managing diversity of learners
student-focused practice
"FIT FOR PURPOSE"
impact of graduates
Balancing stakeholder needs with resources
responsiveness to industry
FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY
Quality needs resources
Efficient models of delivery
strained funding environment
ROLE OF STUDENT VOICE
Graduate reflections
Capturing individual narratives
seeks authenticity
seeks constructive criticism
Limits of student surveys
Importance of dialogue
Subjective/Limited
Subjective/ limited


Post-hoc Reporting
Retrospective
Accountability / Compliance
Admin task
Documenting / Reporting
POSITIONING APR
formalising decisions
"tick box"
Aid for discussion
necessary burden
Completed quickly as possible
Examination of annual stats
Collation of material
"cut & paste"
PROCESS
useful documenting
creates a narrative overtime
ANNUAL PROGRAMME REVIEW
little quality impact
PURPOSE
compliance
lack of clarity on process / expectations
CRITIQUE
low-value burden
Where does it go?
disconnected from practice
Primary of Accred
Different Type & focus
Internal PPR more holistic
RELATIONSHIP TO ACCREDITATION REGIMES
provides structure & focus
limits richness
FOCUS ON TEMPLATE
PERIODIC PROGRAMME REVIEW
Collaborative
Iterative
resource heavy
SELF-DEVELOPED EVALUATIONS
purposeful - has change in mind
Collectively agreed
Programme chair coordinates
ROLE OF INFORMAL & PROVISIONS DIALOGUE AS AN EVALUATIVE TOOL
perceived by others as huge burden
Evidencing impact of previous changes
reflection on programme journey
limited lens on quality
POSITIONING PPR
internally owned
opportunity to restructure
holistic
crafting narrative
feedback driven
Collaborative
PROCESS OF PPR
Credibility / value of input
lack of info on process
Validation
EXTERNAL EXAMINER ROLE
bolster argument for investment
No outcome broader impact
advice
Where does it go
externally validated case for change
document changes
build case for change
demonstrate success
make an "ask"
PURPOSE
not linked to the "work" of quality enhancement
Does not contribute to enhancement
Critique.


Post-hoc Reporting
Retrospective
Accountability / Compliance
Admin task
Documenting / Reporting
POSITIONING APR
formalising decisions
"tick box"
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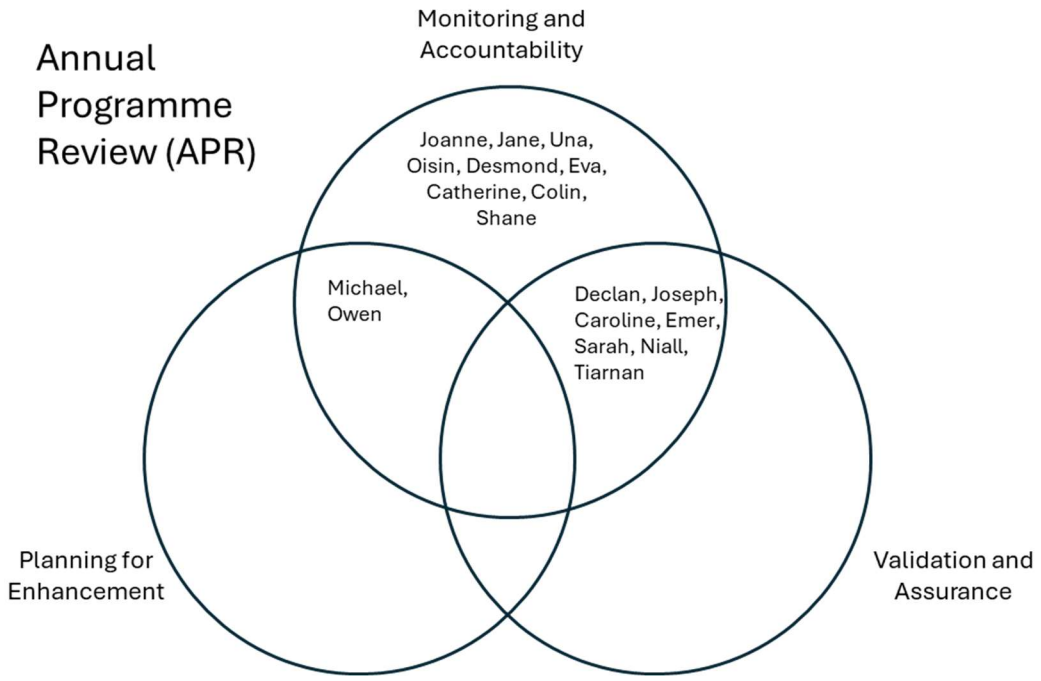
where does it go?
disconnected from practice
Primary of Accred
Different Tone & focus
Internal PPR more holistic
RELATIONSHIP TO ACCREDITATION REVIEWS
provides structure & focus
limits richness
FOCUS ON TEMPLATE
PERIODIC PROGRAMME REVIEW
Collaborative
Iterative
resource heavy
SELF-DEVELOPED EVALUATIONS
purposeful - has change in mind
collectively agreed
programme their coordinates
ROLE OF INFORMAL & ONGOING DIALOGUE AS AN EVALUATIVE TOOL
perceived by others as huge burden
evidencing impact of previous changes
limited lens on quality
POSITIONING PPR
reflection on programme journey
internally owned
opportunity to restructure
holistic
crafting narrative
feedback driven
collaborative
PROCESS OF PPR
credibility / value of input
lack of info on process
No outcome broader impact
where does it go
validation
advice
EXTERNAL EXAMINER ROLE
bolster argument for investment
externally validated case for change
document changes
build case for change
demonstrate success
make an "ask"
PURPOSE
not linked to the "work" of quality enhancement
Does not contribute to enhancement
Critique.

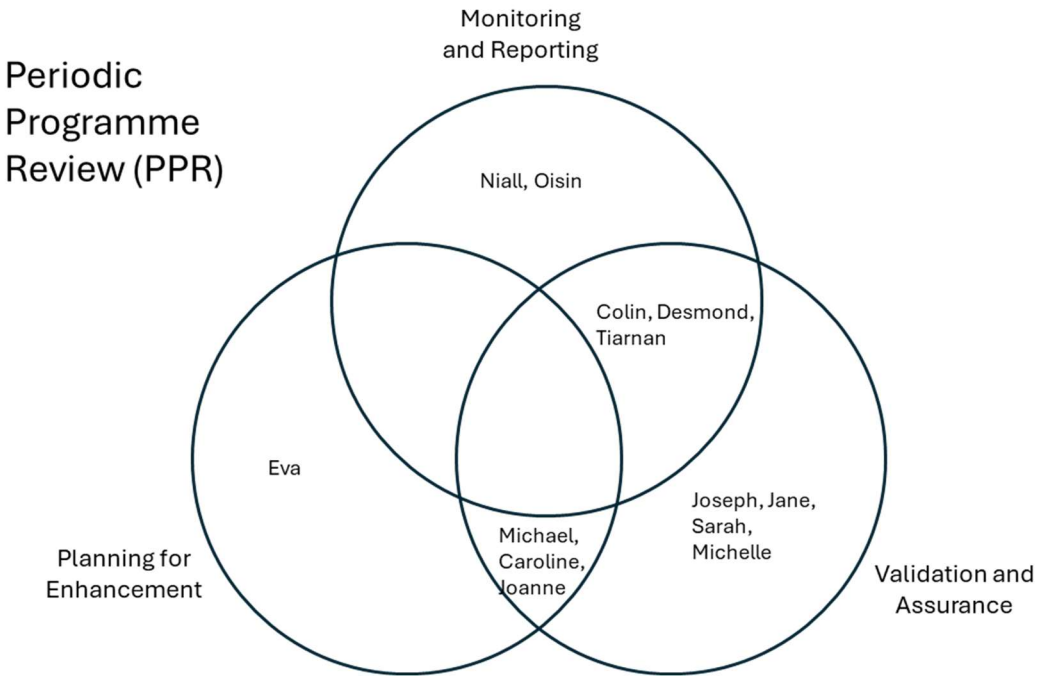
Appendix Seven Quality Conceptualisations among Participants

	Standards (18)	Curriculum (20)	Student Experience (20)	Commitment of Colleagues (5)	Intangible (4)
Standards (18)		18	18	5	4
Curriculum (20)	18		20	5	4
Student Experience (20)	18	20		5	4
Commitment of Colleagues (5)	5	5	5		3
Intangible (4)	4	4	4	3	

Appendix Eight Participant Positioning of the Role and Function of Annual Programme Review (APR)



Appendix Nine Participant Positioning of the Role and Function of Periodic Programme Review (PPR)



Appendix Ten: Use of Evidence in Formal Evaluation and Locally Developed Processes

Evidence Category	Evidence Type	Evidence in Formal Evaluation (APR + PPR)	Evidence in Local Evaluative Processes
Student Data	Student Profile Data	15	
	Student Academic Attainment	13	
External Examiners	External Examiner Reports	18	10
Colleagues	Staff Meetings	15	15
	Informal Staff Dialogue		11
Student Feedback	Student Focus Groups	4	
	Student Surveys	7	
	Observations of students		3
	Class Representative Meetings	5	8
	Informal Student Dialogue		14
	Graduate Feedback	6	2
Employer Feedback	Employer Meeting/ Fora	6	6
	Informal Employer Dialogue		8