

THE DEFINITION OF QUALITY

It is clear that “with the Bologna Process, the quality of university education has gained an increasing importance and today, with the reorganization of studies into cycles that has begun in Europe, quality has probably become the main objective.”⁵

Without a doubt, quality is a complex concept, and an extremely controversial one, defined in a variety of ways. At least six definitions of quality have been identified by Lee Harvey⁶:

(1) Quality understood as *exceptional* refers to the traditional concept of ‘excellence,’ usually operationalized as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. Quality is achieved if the standards are surpassed.

(2) Quality seen as *perfection, or consistency*, focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet. Quality in this sense is summed up by the interrelated ideas of zero defects and getting things right first time.

(3) Quality evaluated in terms of *fitness for purpose* (aim, mission) refers to the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose. The purpose may be customer-defined to meet requirements or (in education) institution-defined to reflect the institutional mission (or course objectives).

(4) Describing quality as *fitness of the purpose*, one does not define quality *per se*, but is concerned with whether an organization’s quality-related intentions correspond with its purpose, also considering the context.

⁵ Alfredo S q u a r z o n i, “Qualità, assicurazione della qualità, valutazione della qualità, accreditamento della formazione universitaria,” *Il Mulino*, no. 2 (2013), <https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.12828/74734> (translation mine).

⁶ See Lee H a r v e y, “Evaluation for What?” *Teaching in Higher Education* 7, no. 3 (2002): 245–64.

(5) Quality as *monetary value* (investment) focuses on return on investment or expenditure. At the heart of the value-for-money approach in education is the notion of accountability. Public services, including education, are expected to be accountable to the funders.

(6) Definition of quality in terms of *transformation* refers to a process of change, which in higher education adds value to students through their learning experience. Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of the transformation of the participant. This leads to two notions of transformative quality in education: enhancing the consumer and empowering the consumer.

Following careful reflection, it was agreed that the definition of quality that most suits the ends of AVEPRO is “fitness for purpose (aim, mission),” but due attention must be paid also to the “fitness of the purpose.” Hence, quality can be judged in relation to the extent to which an activity or service achieves the aims expressed in the institution’s vision and mission.

THE TRIANGLE OF COMPETENCIES AND INTERDEPENDENCE

It is therefore of great importance to take into serious consideration not only the academic educational contents and processes—which remain fundamental and central—but also the ways in which the educational process is ‘governed.’ These ways must conform to the considerations regarding each institution’s and faculty’s ‘being the Church’ and to the aims indicated in *Sapientia Christiana* (teaching, research, service to the Church/society) and *Veritatis Gaudium* (evangelization, dialogue, transdisciplinarity, networking).

The situation of ecclesiastical institutions of higher education which are called to ‘be the Church’ can be represented as a ‘triangle’ involving three ‘subjects’: the institution in question, the higher governing bodies (the Secretariat of State, the Congregation for Catholic Education, the Episcopal Conferences), and the evaluation agency (AVEPRO).

Three types of relationships between the subjects involved in the triangle may be identified: firstly, and foremostly, the relationship between the institutions (universities or faculties) which enjoy institutional autonomy and the higher governing bodies which regulate the activities of these institutions; secondly, the relationship between the governing bodies and the evaluation agency, which enjoys the independence of judgement and operational autonomy, but conducts its activity to support the governing bodies (by aiming at the improvement of the institutions) and for the purpose of their consultation; lastly, the relationship between the agency and the institutions which define the modes of evaluation (internal and external) and its schedule.