

## Empty Quality?

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*“Mam, could I check your handbag please?” A guard was asking me to open my handbag as he was using his flashlight to quickly screen through what was inside.*

*“What exactly are you looking for?” It was my turn to ask.*

*“Oh! My boss told me to check all the visitors’ bags.”*

His answer shocked me and led me to ask similar questions to a few guards at different buildings. Amid the more prudent security measures, many guards had no idea what they should have looked for and how to search effectively.

The mission was to open handbags, wave the flashlights, and let visitors go! Empty mission completed with serious objectives unfulfilled!

Like the guards, many higher education institutions do not know what they are doing as they simply follow ‘the instructions’. For all Thai higher education institutions, they are now free to choose the QA systems of their preference like IQA (Internal Quality Assurance developed by the Office of the Higher Education Commission), or EdPEX (Education Criteria for Performance Excellence). Yet, the old habits, developed from almost two decades of imposed IQA, have already shaped their thinking and actions, reflecting empty quality as quite a number of institutions continue to respond to some specific requirements with an answer, “Yes! (We’ve done it!)”

Well, let us all go back to square one, pondering on the true meaning of ‘quality’.

In our education circle, what could “quality” mean?

Does it mean our students and graduates will be able to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for them to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to function in more than just one job in their whole lives?

Does it mean our faculty members are capable of delivering suitable lessons while equipping students with the right learning tools?

Is it clear what goal we wish to reach?

Are the indicators we’re assigned to manage worth the efforts to take up, and why?

What processes are the most important to be developed and implemented?

Any improvements are needed and why?

How could we be sure that our senior administrators and faculty members realize what and how to carry out their assigned responsibilities?

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Many questions continue to be asked. Unfortunately, not so many are answered. In some cases, the answers only add on confusion and stress or more paperwork.

From my viewpoints, the following are some of the aspects I wish to see happen:

- **Step back to rethink of the true meaning of 'Quality'**-- Create another round of mutual understanding of what it is that will best serve our national, institutional, and local contexts, following our own roles as higher education institutions.
- **Ask a key question of, "Why's" we need quality assurance systems**-- Make sure that whatever systems are offered/imposed, they are meant to help check our own levels of maturity of implementation for many more steps to pursue. **The "Why's"** must include key questions like, 'Why do we need to have IQA and EQA?', 'Why is the ranking race important?', 'Why are we entering this ranking race?', 'Why can we not survive and prosper with/without it?'
- **Believe in institutional autonomy and academic freedom**—Each institution has its proper distance with national authorities, which should provide appropriate policy recommendations and resources. The freedom for institutions to choose what is best should challenge them to think for their own development, strategic objectives and actions without spending loads of time and energy on fulfilling the imposed indicators that could be of minimal value to their organizational growth.

The national bodies, i.e. the Ministry of Education/the Office of the Higher Education Commission, and the Office of the National Education Standards and Quality Assessment together with senior leaders of higher education and basic education institutions must collectively identify key issues and set options for future implementation of the overall desirable quality of education at all levels and types.

- **Be committed to quality without compromising with imposed indicators**-- Most at the institutional/faculty/departmental level must feel empowered to think of their strategies, their own action plans that are most responsive to their contexts....something that the national authorities know much less!
- **Appreciate the processes and honor the results to maximize learning**-- All in the circle have to realize that their efforts will be revealed by the results shown. Whether they are favorable or unfavorable, institutions must be true to their own selves to accept the fruit of their own labor. Such genuine acceptance will help them track the right root cause for further improvements or changes from each of the processes to the end results.
- **'ENGAGE students'!**-- Remember that after all, the quality of Thai students and graduates are the most important! Whenever we talk about IQA and EQA, it seems to be more of the top down approach like very capable and kind parents who think they know and will do what is best for their kids! Students are growing up in their own environments and with different lives from ours to lead! Our overall accomplishments are to see them fully function with

readiness to handle their new challenges successfully while staying quite happily and meaningfully.

Quality assurance is a journey that is never-ending as we strive to do only the better. Indicators are the results of our understanding of our own contexts and our designed strategic directions. Only then will we be able to determine appropriate indicators to measure desirable outcomes and impacts. Each and every step has to be systematic with inclusion of key stakeholders at both macro and micro levels. This is to ensure that integrated efforts would be fruitful to reach the institutions' vision.

In our ever-increasingly complicated world, we cannot afford to go along by any instructions and indicators without much thinking!

In our ever-increasingly complicated world, empty quality needs to be totally eradicated!

*"Mam, could I check your handbag please?" A guard was asking me to open my handbag as he was using his flashlight to quickly screen through what was inside.*

*"What exactly are you looking for?" It was my turn to ask.*

*"Weapons, Mam. Sorry it will take a bit of your time. We need to make sure everyone will be safe! Enjoy your visit!"*

It will then be true to what Aristotle put it, **"Quality is not an act, it is a habit."** **Let's nurture the quality habit in everyone and everywhere!**