

# Quality Assurance Challenges for Higher Education Private Providers, Post COVID-19 Pandemic: The development of a HYBRID Quality Assurance Model

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**ABSTRACT:** This research paper aims to analyse quality assurance practices of Higher Education private providers operating in Australia. The analysis would provide insights into how the quality assurance (Q.A.) culture supports HE Institutional performance post the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper will discuss various elements of quality assurance culture, models, performance, opportunities, and threats. The literature would also examine how the institutions mitigated the challenges during and post the covid pandemic. Further, this paper will attempt to identify the modifications to the elements in the Q.A. model for Higher Education private providers to support its performance following numerous challenges after the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the paper would also reflect on possible HE Models that would mitigate the challenges and reduce risks in the Future.

**Keywords** - Organisation Culture, Quality Assurance Culture, Higher Education, Higher Educational Model, Academic Performance

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The pre-pandemic period witnessed pressure on H.E.s and more for private providers H.E.s for quality education has increased tremendously. Significant to these developments are the increasing mobility of students globally, offshore delivery of programs and re-location of HE institutions (Austrade, 2020, ASQA, 2018). However, the challenge of delivering quality HE programs post-pandemic has increased stakeholders' expectations, specifically of students and accreditation authorities. Quality Assurance (Q.A.) has been the buzzword for HE institutions. The HE sector is faced with offering a Q.A. model providing consistent learning outcomes, content, assessment and pedagogy. This situation leads to a search for an appropriate Q.A. model to mitigate the challenges of the post-pandemic period faced by HE institutions. In particular, this paper intends to examine a proper Q.A. model for HE private provider institutions in Australia undergoing significant challenges after 2020.

Unlike HE institutions supported by the Commonwealth, private providers face more unknown external forces. This situation further exacerbates their critical survival in the competitive HE market. International students and Accreditation authorities are particularly concerned and closely look for evidence of quality delivery of programs and assurance for learning for students. Hence, the search for a Q.A. model that is consistent and acceptable to stakeholders.

In this research paper, several Q.A. models are examined. The literature review examines the research search work of Morgan, Kiechels, Clarke, Toma and Ramsden. Next, the practitioner experts' viewpoints of Ernst & Young, Deloitte and Mensah are reflected as they add value to Q.A. practices of HE institutions. The paper draws on Toma's eight elements and his strategic framework that provides a clear understanding of the impact on Q.A. practices of the organisation. Further, this paper also refers to McNay's four models that provided insight into H.E.s organisation management and how it impacted the culture. This paper will also study the opportunities missed and threats mitigated during this period of challenging times.

Finally, the paper attempts to design a contemporary Q.A. model-"The Hybrid QA model". This Hybrid Model would seek to offer quality assurances to stakeholders post-pandemic. A traumatic situation exists with rampant academic delivery issues following this challenging period for HE institutions. A new Hybrid Model could demonstrate what changes ought to be included in the Future during phases of incremental change.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ORGANISATION - AN OVERVIEW

Designing an acceptable Q.A. model has been a complex process, and there are often criticisms over time. Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić (former head of section for higher education at UNESCO), 2021, commented that a Q.A. model is seen 'as bureaucratic, heavy, expensive, and with uncertain benefits regarding quality improvement'. Even more were cynicism about the Q.A. models (Asif, Raouf, & Searcy, 2012). Wide variations of standards were observed in many countries. Stella and Woodhouse (2011) further argued higher education institutions in developing countries were at a disadvantage due to minimum resources and inability to compete in the global HE sector. Numerous element modifications to the Q.A. models and continuous efforts to develop an acceptable model.

HE institutions have been evolving since 2000 and attempting to 'strategise a Higher Education model under complicated contexts and environments '( Buckland, 2009). Buckland's research suggested that 'through the avenues of context, leadership and contingency' major problems encountered by higher education private providers in respect of Quality Assurance could be understood effectively. Considering complex macro-environment conditions that impact quality improvement. Many HE institutions miss the opportunity to develop critical strategic modelling. In the U.K., over the last three decades, universities have increasingly sought to connect with strategic modelling (Buckland, R. (2009). Morgan (2011) has also visualised this perspective in his metaphoric framework. He sought to identify an organisation's growth by applying metaphors to analyse the Life-Cycle Model of the organisation. This also refers to the Q.A. framework. Fundamentally, the Q.A. framework development and growth must be understood from both explicit and implicit perspectives. This framework, including assumptions and limitations of the Q.A. framework, should explain the organisation's changes. Morgan's usage of the simple metaphor "the organisation is a machine" suggests how the organisation's structure and machine-like characteristics operate. In his book 'Images of Organisations', Morgan demonstrates the use of eight generative metaphors' as organisations organisms; organisations as 'political systems' and 'brains'. This metaphoric framework is well developed in his writings, though it is criticised. Morgan even argues that the workplace is a 'psychic prison' – an argument supporting the role of stakeholders as critical. From the standpoint of employees, this may be true because machine-like organisation characteristics might maximise output without consideration of employee implicit elements. This approach impacts the Q.A. framework, suggesting that the Q.A. elements are not taken seriously. Bakan, 2004 supports this argument. Pursuing this argument, Morgan suggests that the metaphoric framework of institutions is likened to a 'fabric' that is interwoven with the Power of stakeholders to withhold and restructure the relationship 'between the organisation and relevant stakeholders (Morgan, 2011, p. 459-474). But the organisation must have a practical strategic framework to achieve its Q.A. goals. What then is an effective form of a strategic Q.A. framework?

The strategy framework, though, has undergone numerous evolutions but requires integration. Kiechel (2010), in his review of Chandler's Structure and Self-definition of strategy, suggests Chandler (1962) drew importance on the integration of goals, objectives and a course of action and the allocation of resources 'to carry out goals. The core of Chandler's theme was" structure follows strategy' concluding the importance of strategy to

achieve the effectiveness of an organisation's goal. Kiechal adds further that to measure the effectiveness of a goal, some criteria were required. To mitigate this issue, Andrews (1971) established five criteria to support Chandler's design of an organisation strategy. However, critics of Chandler raised the concern of competition that was not prominently deliberated. In Porter's (1980) approach to strategy, he introduced the Generic Competitive Strategies that essentially discussed three strategies: cost leadership, differentiation, and focus. Porter's theory of competitive advantage argument still holds significantly in organisation strategies in the 21st century. Finally, Mintzberg (1994) pointed out an 'evolving irrationalists' perspective in his publication. He propounded that an organisation's strategy must "be living, breathing, in the hearts-of-everybody and ever-ready to be modified". He argued that human talent's important role and networks are critical for achieving strategies. This perspective of Mintzberg is sound and a robust framework of strategy in the business world of uncertainty, particularly during the post-COVID-19 pandemic. Mintzberg's view is also relevant for the Q.A. framework in higher education - a significant business sector.

Considering the HE organisations during the COVID pandemic from 2020-2021, Mintzberg's framework is most relevant to the HE business survival. HE Tertiary organisations faced with the loss of student enrolments (both international and domestic) require to reframe their strategy to be agile and flexible. Instantly, faced with the challenges of the COVID 19 pandemic, Higher Education Institutions have changed their approach from 'face to face delivery, considerable classroom student interaction, assignment and examination assessment requirements to synchronous delivery, online technology-driven student academic interaction, and cumulative assignment regime. This reframing strategy added numerous challenges, as discovered by many HE institutions changing their mode of delivery during the COVID pandemic. The challenges would depend on the organisation's cultural preparedness to accept the change that depends on its organisational saga (Clark,1972). Clark (1972) purports that organisations have a 'saga' that binds their employees and management. This is quite true in smaller organisations, especially those institutions with a presence of low hierarchical levels. Clark's analysis of the three organisations in their initial stage of development reflects the building up of structure and staff with "no formal establishment" As the organisation developed, the changes encountered challenges and resistance, particularly from the team in the initial stage of development. Concepts such as benchmarking and Q.A. expectations- a critical expectation of stakeholders become a norm for measuring HE qualifications. Organisations' resistance to changes and indifference to standards arose (Laughton, 2003). The QA resistance was likened to 'colonising the lifeworld' of academics in a detrimental way where management and control processes drive out more authentic forms of change and development (Blackmore, 2009; Jackson & Bohrer, 2010; Lockett, 2007; Morley, 2003).

Clark's perspective of Q.A. challenges is demonstrated by using a "saga" that evokes a conditional subculture consisting of personnel, program, social base and student subculture. In smaller operations, this pattern of subculture is quite evident. H.E.s could easily focus on a 'student-centred' vision, and being a small organisation, it dealt with this vision effectively. Staff-student and management relations were bound closely respond to changes almost instantly. However, when the organisation becomes more extensive, the saga begins to show some reluctance and resistance to the new management style of operation and leadership. This situation was not unexpected in a "buy out' by a profit-oriented larger organisation.

Further, Graham's (2012) study on UTS professional staff relates to data on staff knowledge and attitudes associated with management expectations and changes. In the HE management's diverging environment, the professional staff's important role could restore the widening gap between management and student; hence, the organisation's culture could be built upon. It has also been argued that with policy changes after 2000, the quality of professional staff required to be upscaled to reduce this widening relationship between management staff and the diverse student population ( Goedegebuure and Schoen, 2014). Is the role of professional staff and relationship bonding of management-staff sufficient to germinate a positive organisation culture? Are there other critical elements to the success of the organisation's strategy, such as in HE's development? These questions raise whether the organisation can effectively establish a Q.A. framework that reduces academic resistance and meets the expectation of stakeholders.

In response to this depth of understanding of organisation strategy toward attaining the mission statement, we explore Toma's eight (8) elements for 'building organisational capacity (BOC) and examine whether they align with the H.E.s QA framework. Toma(2010) explained that HE functions are effective if the 'specific eight elements sync' with the Q.A. framework in the organisation. These elements are accepted as a best practice strategic management framework from the Q.A. viewpoint. The elements are considered relevant and beneficially, particularly when the HE management and Q.A. practitioners collaborate. Toma (p.3-7) further emphasised that BOC is the superstructure of an organisation towards achieving and 'sustaining initiatives of the organisation's mission and vision, particularly for Q.A. framework implementation and assessment. His strategic management framework lists eight elements: purpose, structure, governance, policies, processes, information, infrastructure, and culture. These eight elements are described as a "web of connections' critically synced for an HE organisation's Q.A. program to be effective. Toma further commented that all the elements need to be aligned with each other. If an element is lacking in equity, the Q.A. initiatives of the HE organisation will be ineffective. Toma's system thinking perspective is that if one element is incapacitated (lack of governance, unstructured organisation, or cultural values disrupted), the organisation's goals (system output) will be critically affected. In reflecting the Q.A. process, the framework will face ineffectiveness if the elements do not sync. Secondly, Toma's perspective of BOC and his strategic framework offers a checklist for HE institutions and their professional staff, an opportunity to mitigate the weakness in the system. Finally, when it operates 'in concert', Toma's strategic framework will ensure a higher success rate in achieving its objectives besides 'adding confidence' to the management, professional staff and support staff involved in the Q.A. processes. We can also critically question Toma's strategic framework and eight elements of BOC as to whether it will be sustainable in the evolving nature of HE in the present century, particularly in the disastrous COVID pandemic of 2020 and 2021. So much unwelcomed stress and numerous challenges had been placed upon management, professional staff, and its BOC (Toma,2012). Business models have been modified in the face of these challenging times with no ideal solutions. A change business model was welcomed with additional elements to survive in this tertiary sector by large and small organisations. Among these elements, leadership elements play the integration role.

Ramsden (1998) discusses leadership challenges in HE using four (4) University Models McNay, (1995). 4 University Models) for future HE organisations. First, Ramsden claims that 'implacable external forces' in the dynamic environment constantly 'exert pressure for change on the HE organisation, including eight elements discussed by Toma. Tertiary institutions faced with the external forces of the COVID pandemic and the survival syndrome in 2020 and 2021 were experimenting with unknown elements and outcomes impacting the leadership and management. The rage of this particular external force (pandemic) had caused wide disparities and disagreements between management, academics and professional staff. Ramsden classified these as '2 cultures' within one organisation (Ramsden,1998, Figure 2.1). The disintegration of organisation culture is reflected in McNay's Model-based upon' the degree of tightness and looseness' of policy and control (refer to McNay's 4 University Model. P. 31).

McNay,(1995), Four (4) University Models has four dimensions. They are Type A: Collegium; Type B: Bureaucracy; Type C: Corporation; and Type D: Enterprise. McNay's 4 Models with Toma's eight elements are presented in Table 2.1 below:

**Table 2.1 McNay's 4 Models with Toma's eight elements of BOC (Building Organisational Capacity)**

<b>Toma's Eight(8) Elements</b>	<b>McNay Type A Model: Collegium</b>	<b>McNay Type B Model: Bureaucracy</b>	<b>McNay Type C Model: Corporation</b>	<b>McNay Type D Model: Enterprise</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	<i>Academic</i>	<i>Managerialism</i>	<i>Profit based</i>	<i>Venture</i>
<b>Structure</b>	<i>Discipline-based;</i>	<i>Formal &amp; Power</i>	<i>Competitive based</i>	<i>Continuous change</i>

	<i>Informal</i>	<i>based</i>		
<b>Governance</b>	<i>Consensual</i>	<i>Rule &amp; authority based</i>	<i>Political &amp; tactical</i>	<i>Accountability</i>
<b>Policies</b>	<i>Peer review; Loose</i>	<i>Regulatory</i>	<i>Performance-based; Benchmarking</i>	<i>Achievement based</i>
<b>Processes</b>	<i>Freedom &amp; Flexible</i>	<i>Procedures and audit</i>	<i>Target driven</i>	<i>Flexible</i>
<b>Information</b>	<i>Loose</i>	<i>Consistent</i>	<i>Goals driven</i>	<i>Market-driven</i>
<b>Infrastructure</b>	<i>Loose arrangement; Simplistic</i>	<i>Bureaucratic</i>	<i>Resource</i>	<i>Partnership</i>
<b>Culture- HE &amp; Students</b>	<i>Apprentice Relationship</i>	<i>Statistics</i>	<i>Customers</i>	<i>Clients</i>

Although McNay's classification of Universities into four conceptual models is valid but may not be entirely relevant for challenges faced by HE at the present moment, such as the pandemic situation, challenges were met by the HE in almost all the countries- both developed and less developed. Keller(1983), for instance, was critical of the American HE strategies. He pointed out there were many limitations, and even his 'insights might only be valid in some circumstances' Another researcher, Justice Mensah,2020 ( Directorate of Academic Planning and Quality Assurance, University of Cape Coast, Ghana), retorted that strategic planning in H.E.s faced challenges that included resource constraints, a lack of experts, and resistance to change. Important to the success of the HE organisations is the change mechanism for continuous quality improvement. Continuous Quality Improvement in H.E.s would put the organisation in a competitive advantage position. To achieve this purpose-driven objective, H.E.s will need to re-orientate its focus on the change models to meet the quality assurance of education, an expectation of customers. Student demand for high-quality education seeking foreign education in USA, U.K. and Australia has been evident since 2000. An informed HE organisation would continuously scan the external environment and prepare for emerging or unanticipated market developments. Finally, Justice Mensah reiterates that the critical elements of continuous quality improvements (including Toma's eight elements for BOC) should be aligned with the mission and vision of the organisation. Any shortfall in the commitment or 'poorly implemented strategies would lead to a disadvantaged position in the competitive HE market. How do we measure the effectiveness of continuous quality in Higher Education Institutions? Do we then reflect on the compliance element in the Q.A. models? Both quality and compliance are the contemporary elements that were not examined in Toma's paper on BOC and strategic management framework.

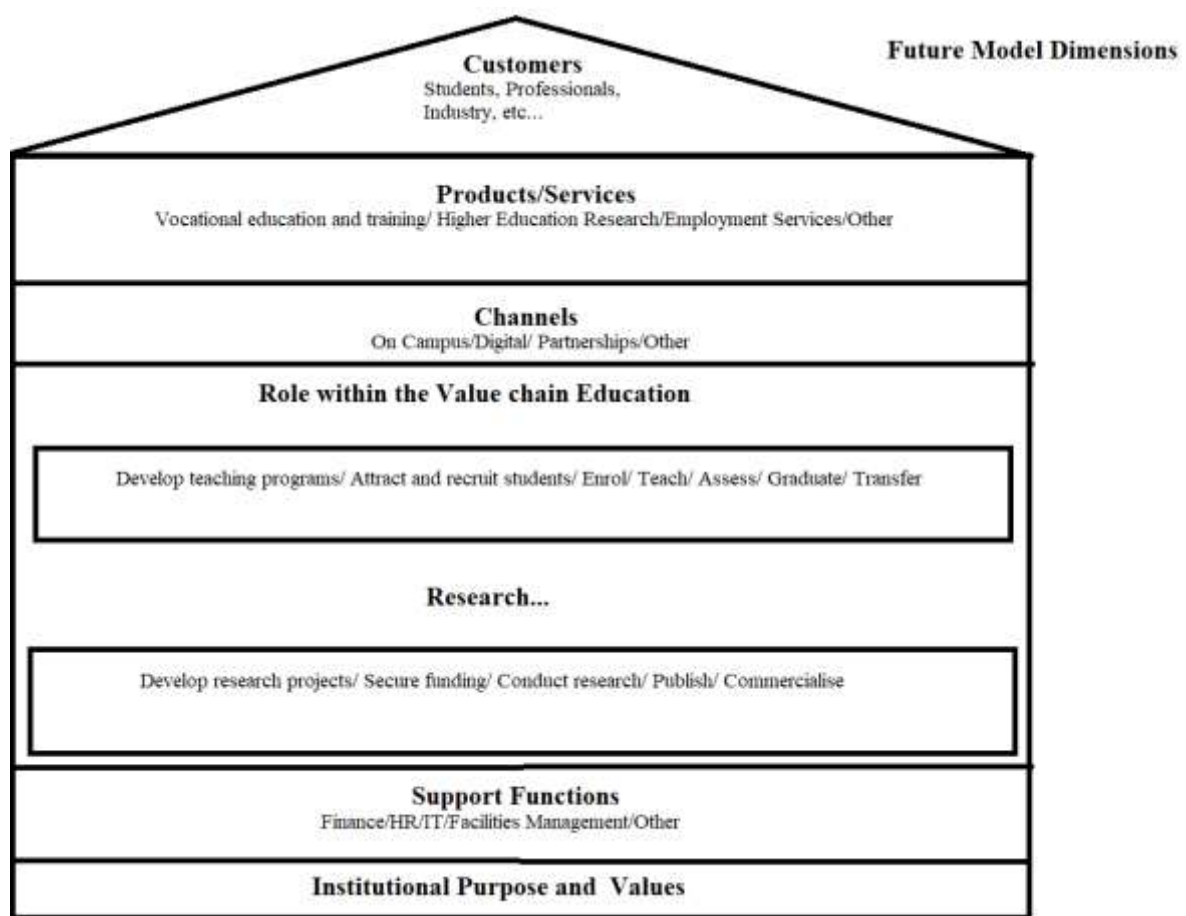
At a higher level, Deloitte Access Economics, in its review (2017), commented on the impact of Australia's TEQSA Act on the HE sector; it examined the effectiveness of the 'standard-based framework for quality assurance against the 'fitness-for-purpose' framework. The 'fitness-for-purpose' framework is useful for monitoring the processes and performance of Higher Education Institutions. This framework has been translated as a compliance mechanism by AUQA and the HE Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)2015 to assess the performance of a HE provider. Is the particular HE provider compliant with the TEQSA's Standards and quality of program delivery? What improvements are expected to comply with the Standards within a set period if not? TEQSA expects provider compliance and requirement to submit annual evidence such as 'monitoring, review and improvement of the program approved by TEQSA. The review suggests the importance of quality assurance and compliance in Higher Education Institution operations. Therefore, these elements would be essential to be included in Toma's strategic framework and his fundamental elements of 'building of organisational capacity (BOC) for HE to chart 'across trouble waters' that is being experienced right now.

The present and imminent danger to HE is the pandemic that has caused financial disarray due to a significant downturn in international student enrolment in Australia (Minister for Education, 2019). The education sector

(International education component) contributed A\$37.6 billion to the economy between 2018-2019 but the grim forecast modelled by Universities Australia indicates a loss of A\$16billion by 2023 (The Conversation, 2020). Is the tertiary sector ready with a business model to mitigate this present sectoral downturn? What strategic framework and elements are to be reviewed? Which capabilities do we add to the business model to sustain it? What will be our competitive advantage in the Future? There are more questions than answers.

According to Ernst and Young(E&Y), a new University model is a framework for the Future (2012). E&Y concluded that there were four prominent models: life-long learning, global alliance, multi-disciplinary, and hybrid. While researching and deliberating with sector leaders, E&Y found conflicting views; some Universities cited themselves as evolving into teaching and researching; others focused primarily on research and teaching niche areas of discipline, and smaller HE providers focussed on teaching and industry research partnership. Finally, taking all contributions and changes that the HE sector was encountering, a new University model was developed by E&Y. Refer to Figure 2.1: Ernst & Young's framework of a University Model for the Future.

**Figure 2.1: Ernst & Young's framework for assessing and designing a university model for the Future**



Adapted from Ernst & Young, 2012

This University Model (Ernst & Young,2012 ) demonstrates students' customers' importance. Unlike other models and frameworks, this University Model emphasises students as customers. Other components of this model comprises five essential institutional structure, each aligning and providing support to roles and responsibilities of the organisation: customers, products/services, channels, role within the value chain, support functions and institutional purpose and values. Firstly, the model's primary focus is students, professionals who intend to pursue careers, upskilling, and those intending to have a lifelong learning experience. The University Model's primary strategy is 'what the HE organisation is in business for'. Secondly, this model explicitly suggests that there must be a 'deep alliance' with the industry sector as partnership

benefits the HE and its students (for internship) and employability skills training. In this partnership, H.E.s could also engage in R & D arrangements with the industry and gain expertise from academic researchers. Thus innovation will be an essential outcome system in the model. Thirdly, the Model structure relates to products/services suggesting the H.D.s would offer an array of academic programs ranging from Vocational, Higher Education, and Research, as demanded by the market conditions. The business strategy is, therefore, to sustain its competitive advantage in the sector. Fourthly, as stated in the model, the channels deliver the programs effectively through various modes such as direct to students, asynchronous, synchronous, blended and practical experience through industry partnerships. Objectively, the learning outcomes must meet the stakeholders' expectations through whichever mode. Next, the structure relates to the 'value within the value chain'. This model component highlights the critical teaching and learning capacities: student enrolment, program development, teaching and learning activities, research, funding, publication and commercialisation. Finally, the model considers the substructure of support services: finance, human resources, marketing, student counselling, I.T. and facilities provision. Overarching all these levels of structure, the University Model developed by Ernst & Young believes that the organisation's purpose and values should govern the operation of an HE organisation. Is the University Model sufficient to mitigate the challenges faced now (with the pandemic) and in the Future?

From the standpoint of HE operations, this model would suffice to sustain. The model has not considered elements such as compliance and quality assurance in terms of external challenges. This role seems to have been left entirely to the professional staff, such as the Dean or his Associate Dean. E & Y reported that some providers prefer an inhibitor model because of unknown external factors influencing HE. Other providers remained sceptical of the market conditions and challenges in the sector. Does the model require a revisit in the context of external factors, quality assurances and compliance demanded by stakeholders such as TEQSA and AQUA?

Concerns about the Q.A. process reflect another challenge: creating a quality culture. All stakeholders within an institution need to share a vision of what quality is and choose a management model to improve the overall quality and maintain continuous improvement (Lomas, 2003). Indeed, another major challenge in quality assurance revolves around digital learning and technology integration. According to Stella and Gnanam (2004), with the increasing amount of digital educational offerings, consumers "expect the quality assurance agencies to provide more information about the quality of those educational services to make intelligent choices (p. 148). In turn, "this raises issues of quality assurance controls by the exporting and importing countries and whether quality assurance should discriminate between in-country providers and the transnational providers" (2004, p. 148).

A dynamic model could be considered with the issues raised above. A hybrid model comprising Toma's elements and McNay's 4 Models could address the criticisms raised. Firstly, this Hybrid Model must be added two features: quality assurance and compliance. This Hybrid Model is presented in the next section.

### 3. THE HYBRID MODEL

TABLE 2.2 THE Q.A. HYBRID MODEL- (TYPE E) AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO TOMA'S 8 ELEMENTS PLUS 2

**OVERARCHED INFLUENCES OF MACRO ENVIRONMENT FACTORS**

Toma's Eight(8) Elements	McNay Type A Model:	McNay Type B Model: Bureaucracy	McNay Type C Model: Corporation	McNay Type D Model: Enterprise	Type E: Hybrid Model
<b>Purpose</b>	<i>Academic</i>	<i>Managerialism</i>	<i>Profit based</i>	<i>Venture</i>	<i>Academic Innovation</i>
<b>Structure</b>	<i>Discipline-based; Informal</i>	<i>Formal &amp; Power based</i>	<i>Competitive based</i>	<i>Continuous change</i>	<i>Hybrid (Continuous Change)</i>
<b>Governance</b>	<i>Consensual</i>	<i>Rule &amp; authority based</i>	<i>Political &amp; tactical</i>	<i>Accountability</i>	<i>Responsibility Accountability</i>

<b>Policies</b>	<i>Peer review; Loose</i>	<i>Regulatory</i>	<i>Performance-based; Benchmarking</i>	<i>Achievement based</i>	<i>Regulatory</i>
<b>Processes</b>	<i>Freedom &amp; Flexible</i>	<i>Procedures and audit</i>	<i>Target driven</i>	<i>Flexible</i>	<i>Procedures</i>
<b>Information</b>	<i>Loose</i>	<i>Consistent</i>	<i>Goals driven</i>	<i>Market-driven</i>	<i>Multi-dimension/Evidence-Based</i>
<b>Infrastructure</b>	<i>Loose arrangement; Simplistic</i>	<i>Bureaucratic</i>	<i>Resource</i>	<i>Partnership</i>	<i>Joint Partner Relationship</i>
<b>Culture- HE &amp; Students</b>	<i>Apprentice Relationship</i>	<i>Statistics</i>	<i>Customers</i>	<i>Clients</i>	<i>Student Centred</i>
<b>Quality</b>	<i>N.A</i>	<i>N.A</i>	<i>N.A</i>	<i>N.A</i>	<i>Above Benchmark</i>
<b>Compliance</b>	<i>N.A</i>	<i>N.A</i>	<i>N.A</i>	<i>N.A</i>	<i>Regulatory</i>

### 3.1. A brief discussion of the Q.A. Hybrid Model

The Hybrid Model (Type E) has an overarching relationship between Toma's elements and the components. First, researchers often itemised the macro-environment (external forces) as political, economic, social, legal, technology, and environment. These forces are dynamic, reactive and disruptive to the normal state of affairs, be it business, academic or social life. For instance, a change in the political relationship (between China-Australia in the 2020s) had significant implications for Chinese students enrolling in Australian institutions. It disrupted economic sectors, including trade, tariffs, exports and imports. It also witnessed negative impacts on legislation and social relations. Thus, the political systems and legislations are going through significant changes in structure, policy, procedures, cultural ties and compliance arrangements.

Another instance is the COVID-19 pandemic (environment) that became global, restricting both domestic movement and international travel. In the Education sector, which contributes to the Australian economy, almost a third of the GDP(2019, A\$37.7 billion) was affected by dwindling enrolments as of 2020—continuing students (some overseas, were unable to return) to continue with their studies. However, the online teaching mode has been activated. The education sector has laid-off academics and support staff caused of the reduced student enrolment. On the social aspect, students and academics working from home under the lockdown environment were undergoing stress and psychological situation. There was also a loss of casual employment for students who depend on this source for financial stability. Overall, economic, social and environmental forces have affected the education sector. Changes have been instituted by the academic sector (online delivery, moratorium on fees, counselling support), the government (relaxation of work hours, offer of financial aid), and social groups ( provision of food and social support) to address the forces of the pandemic. The University model did not support the new challenges. A new institutional model is required to mitigate some of these new challenges.

### 1.2. Will a Hybrid Model on Q.A. meet the challenges of the Future Higher Education sector?

First, the proposed Q.A. Hybrid Model comprises Toma's eight elements (discussed earlier) and an additional two elements, quality and compliance, for this model to be comprehensive. We have extensively discussed the important role of quality assurance and compliance. Stakeholders expect both these elements to ensure graduates have the capacity, skills, knowledge and desired outcomes while meeting industry standards. Quality and compliance go together in whatever circumstances of the external forces.

Second, the Hybrid Model using the eight elements would suffice to mitigate the challenges of this century. The first element of the Hybrid Model is the 'purpose'. This element is associated with 'academic innovation' in



the Q.A. Hybrid Model. Under the conditions of macro-environment forces which occurred indiscriminately and were influenced by other elements, the purpose of the HE organisation would have to react and, at the same time, be proactive for any eventualities. Institutions were pressured to innovate instantly—for instance, the synchronous mode of delivery and work-based internships during the lockdown period of the pandemic. Next, the organisation's structure will evolve with the environment but under uncertain conditions and continuous change. Professionals, academic and support staff have been 'thinned' to reduce the bearing of financial downturn.

For instance, work from home during the lockdown was put in place, requiring teaching and learning, communication with students and peers synchronously, and use of technology commuted from 'lecture room to computer labs'. Thirdly, the governance structure became "responsible accountability". Evans (2008), in his book 'Winning with Accountability, defines accountability as 'clear commitments that in the eyes of others have been kept". Accountability in the organisation environment creates a culture and holds everyone accountable (Evans, 2008), while responsibility is a duty or obligation to complete a task satisfactorily. It also has a penalty if one fails. In short, the accountable staff (on the organisation structure) will be held responsible. A successful team must be accountable and liable, where both are explicitly connected. A high-performing team (understanding its responsibilities and accountability) often has close working relationships and job satisfaction and is prepared for change. Hence the governance will weed out any irresponsible acts because the staff are accountable.

Next, policies are regulatory in scope. Regulators and stakeholders expect the organisation to meet the standards established by the act or governance structure. Structured upon good governance and procedures, the organisation will not deviate from its mission statement. Policies would be made with environmental force evolution and its guidance not rigid. Along with the policy, the procedures and processes are developed to be implemented, monitored, and address any system deviations. Procedures and systems change as policies evolve. Therefore, it is structured upon internal and external forces and evidence-based. Fifthly, information must be consistent in the model, yet multi-dimension flows are based upon evidence. All information would enable every stakeholder, the knowledge, facts and data for deliberation and accurate decision making. Sixth, the infrastructure following the nature of hybrid could become a joint partner relationship of the elements. Whether the management, professional staff, academics, support staff or students, they will have appropriate ownership in the form of a partner relationship. Seventh, the culture of the Hybrid Model needs to be student-centred. The students are customers of the organisation. E & Y's University Model rightly placed 'students' first on the model. Without the core student relationship, the organisation would see its survival evaporating sooner than later. Unlike the Bureaucratic Model of McNay's that treats students as statistics, there is little possibility of student-centred focus in the core business of education. Every level of the Hybrid Model should and needs to be aligned and in sync with the students in its evolutionary process of change.

We deliberated on several theoretical frameworks of Higher Education institutions, considering perspectives from Morgan, Kiechels, Clarke, Toma and Ramsden's research work. This deliberation examined key industry practitioners' frameworks: Ernst & Young, Deloitte and Mensah. The theoretical framework of Toma's eight elements and his strategic model provided clarity to Higher Education institutions' fundamental elements that could also be used as a checklist to analyse the evolution of Higher Education institutions in the current challenging environment. McNay's 4 Models provided an insight into the variance of Higher Education institutions' structure, governance type, policy and policies, decision-making processes, the flow of information and most importantly, the organisation culture. E&Y offered a practitioner model- the University Model that considered present-day challenges facing the HE institutions. However, it has been found that the models did not explicitly discuss the three elements: external forces (macro-environment), quality assurance, and compliance. These three elements were examined as potential concerns and risks by stakeholders, namely TEQSA. A new framework discussed in this section as Q.A. Hybrid Model could resolve the present and new challenges. In the next area, we will analyse the Q.A. organisation culture of Higher Education institutions using the Hybrid Model and how Higher Education institutions address these challenges.

#### 4. CHALLENGES AND IMPACT ON THE ORGANISATION

The development of HE organisations post-COVID witnessed an evolution faced by almost all HE providers. There have been significant challenges and shifts in the academic sector after 2020. What modifications or changes to the Q.A. elements, BOC, and strategic management models (Toma, 2010; McNay's, 1995) are required to mitigate the challenges and risks effectively? What elements are positively constructed, what are negatives in the present framework?; what are the opportunities and threats? What changes are required to address H.E.s challenges for the Future?

##### 4.1 Opportunities missed and threats mitigated

There have been ad-hoc changes to mitigate the challenges in 2020 and 2021. Most of these mitigation actions were influenced by the public authorities and the regulators. With the COVID -19 pandemic announced by the Australian government in March 2020 and the ensuing strict lockdown, the elements (Toma's, 2010) were in disarray, chaotic and disorganised. The strategic management and objectives envisioned to be achieved in 2020 were withheld. Table 4.1 provides a brief overview of opportunities and threats to Toma's element and strategic management.

**Table 4.1: A brief overview of opportunities and threats in relation to Toma's element plus 2; and strategic management**

Toma's Eight(8) Elements Plus 2	McNay Type C Model: Corporation	Opportunities Missed	Threats Mitigated
Purpose	Profit based	Increase in profits	Program delivery synchronous
Structure	Competitive based	Competition for survival	Retained competitiveness
Governance	Political & tactical	Political & tactical	Government support- HE Relief Package
Policies	Performance-based; Benchmarking	Performance-based; Benchmarking(withheld)	Withheld performance based/benchmarking
Processes	Target driven	Reduced target	N.A.
Information	Goals driven	Reduced goals	N.A.
Infrastructure	Resource	Reduction of resources	HE Relief package
Culture- HE & students	Customers	Cultural shock	Student support
Quality	Early development	Minor Modification	Addressed
Compliance	Early development	Continued	Risk management

First, what were the opportunities that were missed? Every sector was significantly affected during the pandemic, particularly tourism and hospitality. Higher Education Institutions' core academic programs lost a significant number of new students and continuing student enrolments by 17% at the end of 2021 ( ICEF, 2022). Most second-year and final-year students in Australia and a small segment of onshore students enrolled in the first year continued to be enrolled. This was a significant loss of opportunity for growth and profit. However, the organisation's purpose did not change; instead began to design niche degrees such as Cybersecurity, digital marketing and high-value online degrees - a diversification strategy. At the same time, visas granted to international students increased by 34% for future enrolment. Higher Education institutions need to remain in competition for survival, with all their investment in academic resources and capacity. Many

Higher Education Institutions' restructured their operational structure to lean management and reduced educational activities. Accountability was centralised in the Corporate office. The corporate style remained tactical in all respects. Obviously, with the lean structure and new governance, leadership and management style changed to a simple reporting mechanism for Corporate Managers (with little or limited academic expertise). Therefore, many opportunities were swept away or ignored. The impact was on Q.A. processes which were left with limited attention.

Threats were mitigated for academic progression through synchronous delivery of lectures. Therefore, Higher Education Institutions' generally delivered the core academic programs though some international students suffered inconsistent academic progress largely due to attendance and delivery during the pandemic lockdown. Their conditions were addressed with remedial studies, additional academic support, and workshops to complete their studies within the specified period. In terms of growth of profits, new programs were developed to diversify and sustain the organisation's profit and growth. Higher Education institutions began to work on quality programs rather than numerous courses competing with the existing providers. There were no known limitations on Q.A. activities. Higher Education Institution's academic and quality assurance met objectives and met the rigorous compliance expected by the Regulator. With these changes to innovation and change, which necessitated the growing challenges, mitigation strategies addressed the ongoing threats to Higher Education Institutions. Q.A. systems and processes were left threatened by limited resources.

Policy and procedures likewise remained unchanged under the pandemic conditions. In the last two years, no policy or procedures changed to reflect the challenges faced. However, there were ad-hoc procedural changes primarily to ease the student concerns, such as easy fee payment, attendance, submission of assessments, students at risk and counselling. Due to uncertainty and an indefinite lockdown period, many academic quality activities were withheld, such as benchmarking activities. Both information and academic infrastructure elements missed many opportunities because of a lack of innovation and foresight. Organisation goals and infrastructure were reduced to the bare minimum (sort of breakeven standpoint). Higher Education Institutions could not visualise their mission except for a reduction of resources to survive. So many opportunities were overlooked for survival in the uncertain external environment.

The government's Higher Education Relief Packages also mitigated the threats to the organisation's financial, lean structure, processes, and governance. Corporate-wise, the management was not in a position to offer financial support except through the government's 'job keeper' program. However, the threats were mitigated with the lean structure, procedures, systems, and reduction of academic infrastructure. This included limited academic staff who worked from home, which to some extent reduced the operational costs. There were no other initiatives introduced by the corporate.

Organisation culture at most Higher Education Institutions underwent a culture shock with major changes largely due to the COVID pandemic and the political and economic conditions. This was undoubtedly a missed opportunity for the organisation's cultural value and norms to bind with the corporate leadership. It generally caused a severe concern that caused confusion, frustration, directionless, and stress in the institutions. Managers proceeded cautiously to the line of the corporate, again contrary to the ideals of organisation culture growth. This situation affected the students too. Decisions were not forthcoming, which added to the stress of the new synchronous delivery method. As the lectures were delivered, new technology was required to be learnt almost instantly by students and academics. The close rapport between students, academics, and administrative staff widens further, causing student discontentment. Culture shock grew to disorient the organisation's culture. Opportunities are missed altogether.

It is essential to highlight the student's support services that mitigated some elements of threats to the organisation's culture. Although the lean staffing limited support provided to students, this critical role was taken over by the Academic Team (AT). The AT communicated directly with students to address all their concerns, including student services matters, counselling and academic problems. Students regularly sought the support of AT, keeping the culture 'student-centred'. One outcome of this culture has reduced the threats to higher education institutions.

Quality Assurance and compliance activities continued with no changes, though Q.A. had minor modifications to suit the changes to support student academic progression. Students were stressed out facing unfamiliar

synchronous delivery methods and limited interaction with academics. It was a difficult time for many students to obtain direct academic assistance using online systems. Many Higher Education Institutions offer additional support sessions to support student learning without compromising the quality of teaching and learning. Workshops for quality assessment outcomes and exceeding quality standards were added to support academic performance. This activity met compliance assurance processes to meet the stakeholders' statutory requirements during this period.

Evaluating the opportunities missed and mitigated, we can conclude that many opportunities were not pursued, largely due to challenges with diverting a pandemic. Most if not all Higher Education Institutions' academic performance, including achieving their mission statement, profits generation, governance improvements, quality assurance and organisational culture, stagnated. The survival of the core business was paramount to the corporate board, and all other opportunities were deferred due to the uncertain climate. Actions against possible threats were mitigated, and sometimes ad-hoc steps to contain were taken to reduce the impact of any down-turn of academic activities while trying to sustain the core business.

The following section will discuss the changes to the Q.A. Model. Applying a Hybrid QA Model would be examined as an effective tool for HE institutions for their future survival in the competitive market.

#### 4.2 Changes for the Future

The challenges faced by all sectors in Australia and globally have been unfathomable since 2020. Despite government remedial actions in socio-economic sectors, micro and macro-environment components have been affected. Political and professional experts have been unable to provide any feasible solutions. Education and related services were among the major sectors that were affected. In the previous discussions, the elements of the HE organisation and its strategic framework to seek viable or feasible solutions for Q.A. processes have not been practical. Perhaps, one strategy will be to identify possible elements review that is flexible and innovative. Table 4.2 refers to the changes that could be considered for future Q.A. elements in Higher Education Institutions.

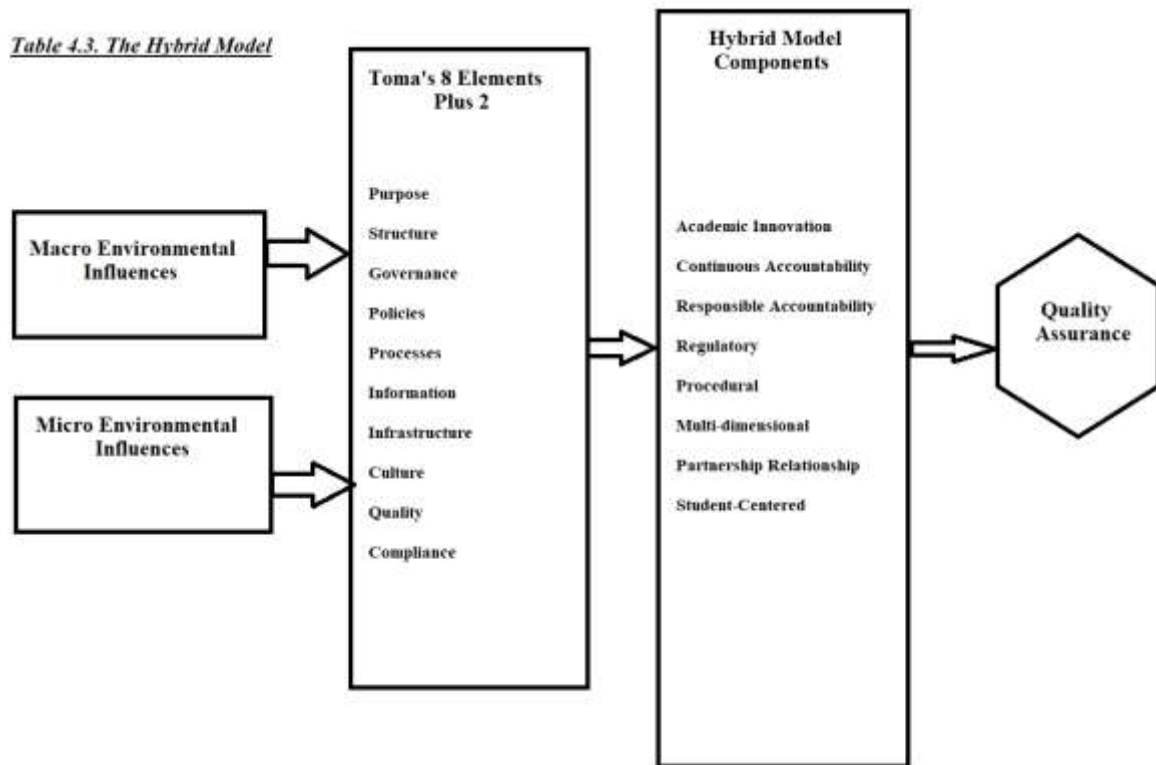
**Table 4.2: An overview of Elements modification required for the Q.A. Model in Higher Education**

<b>Toma's Eight(8) Elements Plus 2</b>	<b>McNay Type C Model: Corporation</b>	<b>Opportunities Missed</b>	<b>Threats Mitigated</b>	<b>Modifications of Elements Required for the Future</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	Profit based	Increase in profits	Program delivery synchronous	Academic Innovation
<b>Structure</b>	Competitive based	Competition for survival	Retained competitiveness	Hybrid (continuous change)
<b>Governance</b>	Political & tactical	Political & tactical	Government support- HE Relief Package	Responsible accountability
<b>Policies</b>	Performance-based; Benchmarking	Performance-based; Benchmarking(withheld)	Withheld performance based/benchmarking	Regulatory
<b>Processes</b>	Target driven	Reduced target	N.A.	Procedures
<b>Information</b>	Goals driven	Reduced goals	N.A.	Multi-dimension - evidence-based
<b>Infrastructure</b>	Resource	Reduction of resources	HE Relief package	Joint Relationship
<b>Culture- HE &amp; students</b>	Customers	Cultural shock	Student support	Student centred

<b>Quality</b>	Early development	Minor Modification	Addressed	Above benchmark
<b>Compliance</b>	Early development	Continued	Risk management	Regulatory

Firstly, Higher Education Institutions (H.E.s) need to change from a rigid structure to a flexible Hybrid type, keeping their purpose and objective in academia. With the environmental factors changing rapidly, a Q.A. model fundamentally requires to be proactive and innovative. They were challenged by survival in the competitive market; Higher Education Institutions must constantly analyse impeding factors and resolve them through innovative Q.A. practices. For instance, Academic Innovation -to offer future market needs such as a Cybersecurity course. This is a niche and future market. Consequently, the organisation structure needs to change into a Hybrid type with continuous change to address the external forces.

*Table 4.3. The Hybrid Model*



Next, flexibility should be the critical element in the framework of the Hybrid Model of the Future. This will help retain Higher Education Institutions' competitive strategy and develop rapid element modifications to the Q.A. model. The Hybrid Model's governance should be 'responsible accountability' instead of resorting to political manoeuvres. A responsible governance element in the HE operations will ensure accountability. Accountability of the governance is a pillar for an organisational culture that also meets both the regulatory and stakeholders' expectations.

Further, accountability and knowledge (information resources) will sustain Higher Education Institutions' strategic position in the market. Another crucial element is the leadership role and staff empowerment to implement initiatives under this Hybrid Model. Many innovative ideas and projects could naturally find growth under this model. However, the corporate should motivate such initiatives. This can be equated with transformative leadership and re-affirmation of student centre-ness.

Policies and procedures should be able to mitigate changes in the HE sector. The Future is unknown, but this openness, flexibility, and employee empowerment will cultivate innovation and creativity in the organisation. This perspective will support the purpose and mission of Higher Education Institutions. An important change for the Future is to move towards a multidimensional ( web-like information flow and infrastructure capacity) for the Future. Such a strategy in the organisation will advocate a strong organisation culture and demonstratable value to Higher Education Institutions' stakeholders.

Further, this collaboration between departments could enhance shared goals and common objectives. The organisation's success is assured by strong values, norms and beliefs bonding the elements in the organisation's culture. The new norms (after the COVID) could revolutionise Higher Education Institutions and enable 'agile' character. For instance, a hybrid delivery system that caters for students' needs (synchronous or asynchronous) will motivate students to remain in the system even under unforeseen eventualities. Finally, QA elements in Hybrid Model could achieve 'above benchmark' standards should these changes be instituted. The QA process (with innovation encouraged) would result in 'out of the box and proactive compliance. In other words, compliance modernisation- using Business Intelligence, Analytics, and digital transformation that aligns with business and stakeholders' expectations will reduce risk challenges. Next, such all-encompassing quality changes would enhance and synergise the strategic Hybrid model. Refer to Figure 4.4. The Quality Components support the Q.A. Hybrid model.

**Figure 4.4. The Quality Components supporting the Q.A. Hybrid Model**



Source: Image adapted from AUN-QA training course presentation (after Green 1994)

Having elaborated the best practices elements for the Hybrid Model, the timing is crucial and immediate for implementation. Incremental Changes (Janićijević, 2012) will allow sufficient time to make a strong and lasting impact on the organisation's culture, structure, governance and leadership style. Therefore, the Hybrid Model must be implemented beginning with organisational cultural components of belief, norms, and values that will remove obstacles to re-imagine the organisation. Next, the information and academic infrastructure establishment under the support services could ensure the continuous flow of transparent actions between departments and the management. Third, the final phase could include Q.A. and compliance to evaluate, report practices, and reduce risks. This reflection has limitations, and an empirical study needs to be conducted. The paper requires extensive research to complete the analysis and study of the organisation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented an overview and a brief literature review of the main aspects of higher education quality assurance. In reviewing the concept of quality assurance itself, it can be said there is a need for a common framework for a quality assurance model; however, there is no agreement as to a Q.A. definition or a Q.A. model. Furthermore, although the quality is the most significant concern for accrediting bodies, accreditation structures are decentralised and complex at both the regional and international levels. The difficulties and scepticism in choosing one Q.A. Model or another can be seen in the various types of services and the quality frameworks the agencies use, which vary from one Q.A. organisation to another, and from one jurisdiction to another. Another challenge revolves around the concerns of faculty members and other stakeholders, such as students, about the Q.A. process. Because students are at the centre of higher education and invest time and money in the system, involving them could improve Q.A. processes.

This research paper's purpose and intent were to examine an appropriate Q.A. model for HE institutions undergoing significant challenges, particularly since 2012. Several unknown external forces took the HE organisations into uncharted waters. This situation led Higher Education Institutions' to face critical survival in the competitive HE market. Stakeholders, particularly compliance authorities and customers, looked for evidence of quality education and recognition. Many QA models were examined in the literature. We used literature reviews to read Morgan, Kiechels, Clarke, Toma and Ramsden's research. We also believed that the practitioner experts' viewpoints of Ernst & Young, Deloitte and Mensah would add value to this organisational change reflection. We also noted in our reflection that Toma's eight elements and his strategic framework would provide a clear understanding of the changes in the organisation. To identify the organisation style, we used McNay's four models that provided insight into Higher Education Institutions' organisation management and how it impacted the culture. Ernst & Young offered a University Model for the later years of Higher Education Institutions' management style and culture. But this model did not elaborate on three elements: external forces, Q.A. and compliance. There were opportunities missed and threats mitigated during this period of challenging times, with the organisation's culture being impacted most. But one model that stands out is the Hybrid QA model, which appropriately provides additional elements such as quality and compliance for the stakeholders to access and choose. The Hybrid QA model demonstrates these elements discussed above. The Hybrid QA model is a clear and transparent Q.A. model, offering elements to measure the quality and standards of HE institutions. A new Hybrid Model demonstrated what changes should be included in the Future during phases of incremental change management planned and implemented.

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