

18.6 Within laboratory studies (internal quality control, IQC)

Internal quality control is one of a number of concerted measures that analytical chemists can take to ensure that the data produced in the laboratory are fit for their intended purpose. In practice, fitness for purpose is determined by a comparison of the accuracy achieved in a laboratory at a given time with a required level of accuracy. Internal quality control therefore comprises the routine practical procedures that enable the analytical chemist to accept a result or group of results as fit for purpose, or reject the results and repeat the analysis. As such, IQC is an important determinant of the quality of analytical data, and is recognised as such by accrediting agencies.

Internal quality control is undertaken by the inclusion of particular materials, here called "control materials", into the analytical sequence and by duplicate analysis. The control materials should, wherever possible, be representative of the test materials under consideration in respect of matrix composition, the state of physical preparation and the concentration range of the analyte. As the control materials are treated in exactly the same way as the test materials, they are regarded as surrogates that can be used to characterise the performance of the analytical system, both at a specific time and over longer intervals. Analytical results should have an associated uncertainty if any definite meaning is to be attached to them or an informed interpretation made. If this requirement cannot be fulfilled, the use to which the data can be put is limited. Moreover, the achievement of the required measurement uncertainty must be tested as a routine procedure, because the quality of data can vary, both in time within a single laboratory and between different laboratories. IQC comprises the process of checking that the required uncertainty is achieved in a run.