

Guidelines of Good Practice

2016 revised version

1. The structure of the External Quality Assurance Agency (EQAA)

The EQAA is a recognized, credible organization, trusted by the higher education institutions and the public. It has adequate mechanisms to prevent conflicts of interest in the decisions it makes; its staff has the needed skills to carry out the functions associated to external QA. The EQAA has the needed resources to carry out their mission.

1.1 Legitimacy and recognition

- 1.1.1 The EQAA has an established legal basis and is recognized by a competent external body.
- 1.1.2 The EQAA takes into consideration relevant guidelines issued by international networks and other associations, in formulating its policies and practices.
- 1.1.3 The EQAA has a clear and published policy for the prevention of conflicts of interest that applies to its staff, its decision making body, and the external reviewers.

1.2 Mission and purposes

- 1.2.1 The EQAA has a written mission statement and a set of objectives that explicitly provide that external quality assurance of higher education is its major concern, describe the purpose and scope of its activities and can be translated into verifiable policies and measurable objectives.

1.3 Governance and organizational structure

- 1.3.1 The EQAA has a governance structure consistent with its mission and objectives and adequate mechanisms to involve relevant stakeholders in the definition of its standards and criteria.

- 1.3.2 The composition of the decision-making body and/or its regulatory framework ensure its independence and impartiality.
- 1.3.3 The EQAA's organizational structure makes it possible to carry out its external review processes effectively and efficiently
- 1.3.4 The EQAA has a strategic plan that helps it assess its progress and plan for future developments

1.4 Resources

- 1.4.1 The EQAA has a well-trained, qualified, staff able to conduct external evaluation effectively and efficiently in accordance with its mission statement and its methodological approach.
- 1.4.2 The EQAA has the physical and financial resources needed to fulfil its goals and carry out the activities that emerge from its mission statement and objectives.
- 1.4.3 The EQAA provides systematic opportunities for the professional development of its staff.

2. The EQAA's framework for the external review of quality in higher education institutions

The main concern of the EQAA is the promotion of quality education and student achievement. In doing this, it recognizes that quality is primarily the responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves, and supports this principle in its criteria and procedures. These promote internal quality assurance and provide higher education institutions with clear guidance on the requirements for self-assessment and external review.

2.1 The relationship between the EQAA and higher education institutions

2.1.1 The EQAA recognizes that institutional and programmatic quality and quality assurance are primarily the responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves, and respects the academic autonomy, identity and integrity of the institutions and programs.

2.1.2 The EQAA promotes the development and appropriate implementation of internal quality assurance processes in accordance with the understanding that the primary responsibility for assuring quality resides with the institutions and its programs.

2.1.3 The EQAA bears in mind the level of workload and cost that its procedures will place on institutions, and strives to make them as time and cost effective as possible.

2.2 The definition of criteria for external quality review

2.2.1 The EQAA recognizes and values institutional diversity, and translates this valuation into criteria and procedures that take into account the identity and goals of higher education institutions.

2.2.2 The standards or criteria developed by the EQAA have been subject to reasonable consultation with stakeholders and are revised at regular intervals to ensure relevance to the needs of the system.

2.2.3 Standards or criteria take into consideration the specific aspects related to different modes of provision, such as transnational education, distance or online programs or other non-traditional approaches to higher education as relevant to the context in which they operate.

2.2.4 Standards or criteria explicitly address the areas of institutional activity that fall within the EQAA's scope, (e.g. institutional governance and management, program design and approval, teaching and learning, student admission, progression and certification, research, community engagement) and on the availability of necessary resources, (e.g. finances, staff and learning resources).

2.2.5 Criteria or standards and procedures take into account internal follow up mechanisms, and provide for effective follow up of the outcomes of the external reviews.

2.2.6 The EQAA procedures specify the way in which criteria will be applied and the types of evidence needed to demonstrate that they are met.

2.3 The external review process

2.3.1 The EQAA carries out an external review process that is reliable and based on published criteria and procedures. It follows a self-assessment or equivalent, and includes an external review (normally including a site visit or visits), and a consistent follow up of the recommendations resulting from the external review.

2.3.2 The EQAA has published documents, which clearly state what it expects from higher education institutions, in the form of quality criteria or standards and procedures for self-assessment and external review.

2.3.3 The external review process is carried out by teams of experts consistent with the characteristics of the institution/program being reviewed. Experts can provide input from various perspectives, including those of institutions, academics, students, employers or professional practitioners.

2.3.4 The EQAA has clear specifications on the characteristics and selection of external reviewers, who must be supported by appropriate training and good supporting materials such as handbooks or manuals.

2.3.5 External review procedures include effective and comprehensive mechanisms for the prevention of conflicts of interest, and ensure that any judgments resulting from external reviews are based on explicit and published criteria.

2.3.6 The EQAA's system ensures that each institution or program will be evaluated in a consistent way, even if the external panels, teams, or committees are different.

2.3.7 The EQAA carries out the external review within a reasonable timeframe after the completion of a self-assessment report, to ensure that information is current and updated.

2.3.8 The EQAA provides the higher education institutions with an opportunity to correct any factual errors that may appear in the external review report

2.4 The requirements for self-evaluation

2.4.1 The EQAA provides clear guidance to the institution or program in the application of the procedures for self-evaluation, the solicitation of assessment/feedback from the public, students, and other constituents, or the preparation for external review as necessary and appropriate.

3. Decision making

The EQAA has policies and procedures in place that ensure a fair and independent decision-making process in the final review of the institution or the program. It provides effective procedures to deal with appeals and complaints.

3.1 The decision making process

3.1.1 The EQAA decisions take into consideration the outcomes of both the institution's self-assessment process and the external review; they may also consider any other relevant information, provided this has been communicated to higher education institutions.

3.1.2 The EQAA decisions are impartial, rigorous, and consistent even when they are based on the reports of other quality assurance bodies.

3.1.3. The EQAA decisions are based on published criteria and procedures, and can be justified only with reference to those criteria and procedures.

3.1.4. Consistency in decision-making includes consistency and transparency in processes and actions for imposing recommendations for follow-up action.

3.1.5. The EQAA's reported decisions are clear and precise.

3.2 The EQAA's process for appeals and complaints

3.2.1 The EQAA has procedures in place to deal in a consistent way with complaints about its procedures or operation.

3.2.2. The EQAA has clear, published procedures for handling appeals related to its external review and decision-making processes.

3.2.3 Appeals are conducted by a panel that was not responsible for the original decision and has no conflict of interest; appeals need not necessarily be conducted outside the EQAA.

4. The EQAA and its relationship to the public

The EQAA makes public its policies and decisions about institutions and programs, discloses the decisions about its own performance and disseminates reports on outcomes of QA processes.

4.1 Public reports on EQAA policies and decisions

4.1.1 The EQAA provides full and clear disclosure of its relevant documentation such as policies, procedures and criteria.

4.1.2 The EQAA reports its decisions about higher education institutions and programs. The content and extent of reporting may vary with cultural context and applicable legal and other requirements.

4.1.3 The EQAA has mechanisms to facilitate the public a fair understanding of the reasons supporting decisions taken.

4.2 Other public reports

4.2.1 The EQAA discloses to the public the decisions about the EQAA resulting from any external review of its own performance.

4.2.2 The EQAA prepares and disseminates periodically integrated reports on the overall outcomes of QA processes and of any other relevant activities.

5. Accountability of the EQAA

The EQAA has in place policies and mechanisms for its internal quality assurance, which demonstrate a continuing effort to improve the quality and integrity of its activities, its response to the changes to the context in which it operates and its links to the international community of QA.

5.1 Quality assurance of the EQAA

5.1.1 The EQAA operates with transparency, integrity and professionalism and adheres to ethical and professional standards.

5.1.2 The EQAA has in place mechanisms that enable it to review its own activities in order to respond to the changing nature of higher education, the effectiveness of its operations, and its contribution towards the achievement of its objectives.

5.1.3 The EQAA periodically conducts a self-review of its own activities, including consideration of its own effects and value. The review includes data collection and analysis, to inform decision-making and trigger improvements.

5.1.4 The EQAA is subject to external reviews at regular intervals, ideally not exceeding five years. There is evidence that any required actions are implemented and disclosed.

5.2 Links to the QA community

5.2.1 The EQAA is open to international developments in quality assurance and has mechanisms that enable it to learn about and analyse the main trends in the field.

5.2.2 The EQAA collaborates with other QA agencies where possible, in areas such as exchange of good practices, capacity building, and review of decisions, joint projects, or staff exchanges.

6. The QA of cross border higher education

The EQAA has policies relating to both imported and exported higher education. These policies take into account the characteristics of the providers and the receivers and refer to all types of transnational higher education.

6.1 Criteria for cross border higher education

6.1.1 The EQAA in a sending country makes clear that the awarding institution is responsible for ensuring the equivalent quality of the education offered, that the institution understands the regulatory frameworks of the receiving countries, and that the institution provides clear information on the programs offered and their characteristics.

6.1.2 Students and other stakeholders receive clear and complete information about the awards delivered.

6.1.3 The rights and obligations of the parties involved in transnational education are clearly established and well known by the parties.

6.2 Collaboration between agencies

6.2.1 The EQAA cooperates with appropriate local agencies in the exporting and importing countries and with international networks. This cooperation is oriented to improve mutual understanding, to have a clear and comprehensive account of the regulatory framework and to share good practices.

6.2.2 The EQAA seeks ways to cooperate in the external quality assurance in transnational education provision, for example through mutual recognition.