

Different approaches to EQA: Institutional vs Programmatic Approaches

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Abstract

Most higher education systems have both institutional and programmatic approaches to monitor quality. Institutional approach to external quality assurance (EQA) is predominant in developing, emerging economies with big and still expanding higher education sector, often linked to public funding and higher education reforms. These are also the countries where due to variability in academic governance within institutions, some amount of external monitoring of program quality is required and there is a tension between what is ideal and what is feasible.

Sustainability of the EQA approach, feasibility in relation to the size and number of the entities to be covered, resources available for EQA, capacity of internal quality assurance of the institutions to ensure program quality, variability within the country in institutional capacity for good academic governance, capacity of the higher education institutions to absorb more assessment, and returns on the EQA efforts are a few factors that affect this scenario. These and the related factors are discussed in this paper. It also discusses the way these approaches might evolve as the higher education institutions become more mature and become able to assert their role as true custodians of quality.

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An analysis of the current practices of the external quality assurance (EQA) agencies of different countries reveals a great deal of diversity in various aspects of quality assurance (QA). The reasons for this variation are many and depend to a large extent on the national contexts in which EQA has to operate. Consequently, each country has developed its own QA model differently and one cannot say which one is the best. However, for a given frame of reference, one can attempt to identify the model that is most suitable for the national context. One major aspect that needs careful attention, before a desirable model is evolved, is the choice of the 'Unit of QA'. For the purposes of this paper two extremes have been selected – institution vs program as the unit of QA. To emphasise the influence of the contextual factors on the suitability of a particular EQA approach, this paper uses the EQA experiences of two countries – India and Australia, and generalizations are drawn from those comparisons.

Most higher education systems have both institutional and programmatic approaches to monitor quality. The difference lies in 'who' is the custodian of 'which' approach and 'what' the balance between the two is. Institutional approach is predominant in developing, emerging economies with big and still expanding higher education sector, often linked to public funding and higher education reforms. These are also the countries where due to variability in institutional capacity for rigorous academic governance, some amount of external attention to program quality is required and there is a tension between what is ideal and what is feasible due to limited resources available for EQA.

The surveys done in the Asia Pacific region (the region with many developing countries) indicate three trends some of which are valid for other regions as well:

1. Programmatic approach is prevalent in professional areas of studies (most countries and most regions)
2. Both institutional and programmatic approaches exist for non-professional areas of studies as well. (most countries and most regions)
3. There is a move towards institutional approaches in EQA (Eg. Malaysia and Indonesia)

What works well in a country depends on the sustainability of the QA approach, feasibility in relation to the number and size of the entities to be covered, resources available for EQA, capacity of institutional QA to ensure program quality, variability within the country in institutional capacity for good academic governance, and capacity of the higher education institutions to absorb more EQA. To present the influence of these factors, this paper deliberately takes the stand in support of institutional approach and challenges the comments that support programmatic approach over the institutional approach. This paper also explains how institutional approach can in fact include programmatic approach as well. The arguments are presented around factors.

1. Size of the higher education system

The overall size of the higher education system varies with the countries. The total number of students enrolled, and number of institutions - universities and colleges -

involved are some of the factors that determine the size of the system. It ranges from a single University that caters to a group of countries (The University of South Pacific that has its main campus in Fiji caters to twelve Pacific island States) to hundreds of them as in USA, China and India. India has more than 300 universities and about 17000 colleges with more than 10 million students enrolled. Obviously, for the size of the Indian system of higher education, choosing any unit smaller than the *institution*, will have many practical difficulties. If one chooses the *program* as unit, the number of units to be assessed will run to many thousands, a stupendous and practically impossible to be done within the normal QA cycle of 5 to 7 years.

One might think that in a country with a relatively smaller number of large institutions, program as the unit of QA may be relevant. However, due to other considerations that we will explore in the following pages, even small systems go for institutional approaches. Australia with its 39 universities has the institutional approach to EQA and so is Fiji with only two universities. Bahrain is another example of a country with a small number of higher education institutions that has the institutional EQA approach.

In a way, the question of size and practicality applies to Australia as well. If a typical Australian university offers 200 programs, it is not feasible to audit each one of those programs. It would be sensible to have an institutional approach that checks whether the internal QA processes of the institution are well in place to monitor program level quality.

2. Centralised facilities and Institution wide arrangements

In many developing countries like India, due to limited resources most of the facilities that are essential for quality education such as library and computer laboratory are centralized facilities. Even in developed countries, there may be additional support structures at the department level but major facilities are centralized. Other facilities such as residential halls, facilities for sports and games, support for cultural activities and seminars etc also depend on the institutional arrangements. These significantly contribute to the academic as well as corporate life of the campus and they have a significant place in developing the desirable attributes and competencies among students. Consequently, only when the institution is assessed for its mission, objectives, policies, and principles, one can get an insight into the quality of education offered.

There are also areas where institution-wide structures and accountabilities are in place and they are covered well by institutional approach to QA. For example, in Australia, institution wide arrangements are common in international activities of the universities. Usually a senior executive such as the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International) would have the responsibility for all international activities of the institution and s/he may be supported by an institution-wide structure. In Cycle 1 audits, AUQA's institutional audit considered the international activities through its 'whole of institution' approach. In Cycle 2, the focus is on two themes and 'internationalization' is one of the themes (pre-selected). Institutions do comment that this theme gives a 'whole of institution' approach to the Cycle 2 audits as well.

3. Shared understanding and Consistent implementation

At the strategy and policy level, two important QA questions are:

- ‘Is there a shared understanding of the institutional goals and objectives and the corresponding strategies and policies across the institution?’
- ‘Are the policies implemented consistently across the institution?’

It is the institutional QA approach that will be able to address these questions.

Even from the point of view of ‘shared understanding’ and ‘consistent implementation’ it might be argued that the academic work goes on at program level, so that’s the level at which it must be good. A counter argument then is that, in practice, academic work goes on at the level of individual academic staff, so that’s the level at which we should assess. Just like an institution might have good programs and poor programs, staff who teach within a program might also vary greatly in their competence. We expect the institutions to put in place appropriate mechanisms to ensure that the right kind of people are involved in the academic work. The same explanation can be extended in support of ‘institutions monitoring the programs and EQA monitoring those institutional arrangements’.

This is the approach of AUQA in Australia. A similar approach is followed by NAAC in India when it assesses universities that provide academic governance to hundreds of colleges affiliated to them. NAAC checks how well the universities discharge their affiliating functions.

4. Critical size and return of investment

In countries where undergraduate education is separated from universities and offered in affiliated colleges, the size of the individual unit is generally small. Many state universities in India have a large number of small colleges affiliated to them which take care of the undergraduate education, while most universities provide only post graduate and research programs. The result of this bifurcation is that neither the colleges nor the affiliating universities normally have more than 1000 to 1500 students. The few unitary universities may be exceptions. In such cases, for the extent of efforts and the time involved in EQA, the outcome may not commensurate with the efforts and it is a futile task to take up a unit other than the institution as a whole.

5. Changing nature of programs

Most programs at any given institution may not involve more than a few faculty. Compared to the institution as whole, the composition and character of the group offering a program gets affected quickly and significantly with just a few changes. In India, it is common to find university departments offering two programs with not more than five faculty members. If one of the members of the faculty leaves the institution and another one goes on sabbatical leave, it will lead to major reallocation of faculty responsibilities. Consequently, it will affect the quality of the program and the outcomes of any EQA prior to that change may not be tenable for any extended time. Institutions also face such changes but institutional arrangements have more stability than the departmental structures and processes.

6. Relevance to major stakeholders

Another advantage of using the institution as a unit of QA is its direct usefulness and relevance to the major stakeholders, such as the government that provides public

funding. The institution is the unit of funding by the government or the private groups all over the world. Although certain specific programs of studies and many research projects may be routed to a faculty or a department of studies, the substantial funding - maintenance or block grants - comes only to the institution. Even the agencies that provide support to individuals insist on institutional commitment for accountability and in many cases the institution is the proper channel through which the transaction takes place.

7. Understanding academic quality

The academic quality is defined as, not the quality of individual teachers but the collective impact of a range of issues related to providing the desired knowledge, skills and competencies to students. If that is true, then the QA strategy should focus on this *collective impact*. In that sense, institution is the obvious choice of unit of QA because the responsibility to design, deliver and review programs lies with the institution. Individuals and department groups do contribute but they cannot do so without the academic soundness and processes of the institution. It is the responsibility of the institutions to provide the academic environment that helps in developing the skills that are beyond subject specialization and class room teaching. Likewise, only the institution can facilitate the multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary programs through co-ordination among the various constituent departments of studies.

The public understanding of academic quality is built around the institution. The fact that institutional reputation can have significant influence, positively or otherwise, on public perception is well known through the debate on rankings. Simon Marginson, an Australian higher education policy analyst stated in one of his newspaper articles that the Law School of a famous university was rated as the top law school in that country while the fact is that that university didn't have a law school at all. What had remained in the minds of the survey respondents was the reputation of the institution and they attributed it to the entity that was being surveyed – law school in this instance.

There is ample evidence that students and parents choose an institution for study mainly based on their perception about institutional quality and not based on the quality of program(s). The surveys conducted in India indicate that this is case. However, looking at it positively, one should acknowledge that faculty and quality programs do contribute significantly to the perception on institutional quality. After all, it is the programs that form the backdrop for the institutional QA and without them the institutional approach to EQA is meaningless.

8. Prioritisation and resource implication

Program accreditation works well for professional areas of studies that have an impact on public welfare and safety (engineering and technology gets included here from the public safety perspective). In India, around 85% of student enrolment is in general higher education. The major professional courses absorb 15% of the student enrolment. In the order of enrolment, these are law, engineering, medicine, agriculture, and veterinary science, followed by other minor ones. Most of the professional institutions that were established before the 1980s get public funding. There has been a criticism in the higher education system that a few hundred

professional institutions established to cater to a few thousand students get more funding than the general education institutions that cater to a few million students. Per student public spending in professional areas of studies is many times higher than that for general education. However, investment in engineering and technology education was considered as a national priority and the government invested in technical education according to that priority. It is reasonable that such programs that are of national priority and get a lot of public subsidy need to be assessed more rigorously at the program level. But even in those cases, it should be understood that an institution is greater than the sum of the programs it offers.

A good QA system needs assurance at both levels. But the questions are around 'how much' of 'what' should be external and what the priorities are. If we need external QA at program level, issues of practicality warrant that selectivity and prioritization are required and it is based on those considerations that external QA mechanisms already exist for professional areas of studies.

9. Institutional capacity for internal QA

In both developed and developing countries, professional areas of studies are regulated and guarded mostly at the program level. In the non-professional areas of studies, what is left to internal institutional QA mechanisms and what is monitored externally depends on the maturity of the higher education institutions to manage their academic governance well. This often is a picture favourable to the higher education institutions in developed countries and the purpose of programmatic EQA in such situations is triggered by a set of different expectations such as national reviews in an area of study, and mutual recognition ambitions.

We often talk about autonomy of institutions and how quality is the responsibility of HEIs themselves. If that is so, EQA should assess how well institutions exercise that responsibility consistently across all programs. In fact, in the institutional EQA approach, institutional processes become the starting points and through sampling we investigate the consistency of the processes across the institution. In the programmatic approach the starting point is what happens at the program level and then the investigation considers what institutional arrangements are in place to support the program.

If the institution has good internal QA systems, it is reasonable to expect that it will ensure that the programs are all 'good'. If there is great variation (of an inappropriate character) between programs, this might mean that the institution does not have a comprehensive QA system and hence would be spotted by the institutional EQA. The EQA operating at institution level need not look at every program but an appropriate sampling that balances spread and depth will be able to spot if there are problems. This is the approach followed by AUQA.

The other approach is to maintain programmatic EQA for institutions that need more guidance but move to institutional EQA for institutions that can demonstrate the soundness of their internal QA. This is the proposed approach of the Malaysian Qualifications Authority. The Minister of Education, Malaysia has invited selected HEIs of the country, including the foreign university campuses, to apply for 'self accrediting' status that will enable them to offer their programs without the need for

external accreditation at the program level. Institutions that have a successful institutional audit will be given that status. The purpose of institutional audit here is to ensure that the HEIs have the capacity to take the responsibility to ensure program quality. To maintain that self accrediting status, institutions will have to undergo periodic institutional audits.

In other words, the unit of QA depends on institutional capacity to manage its affairs well. The ideal situation would be that the institution checks that the faculties carry out the devolved work effectively and offer quality programs, and the EQA checks that the institution carries out the program level QA work effectively. In reality, if the institution fails to demonstrate its capacity to monitor program quality, that QA responsibility should also be shouldered by EQA.

10. Two at the price of one

It is possible to integrate programmatic approach within the institutional approach. For example, in the institutional audits of AUQA, as a part of looking for evidence the audit panels investigate the processes and outcomes in sample programs. For the programs selected for the sample, which would normally have a good spread of levels (undergraduation, postgraduation, professional area of study, interdisciplinary program), faculties (one from science, one from arts and one from management etc) and history (one new, one well established etc), the panel reviews the document trails.

In India, due to manageable number of departments within a typical higher education institution, the panel tries to visit all the departments and investigate the programs as a part of that. The panel might split into sub groups if there are many departments.

If sampling is done appropriately balancing the spread and depth, the institutional EQA will be able to achieve the major benefits of programmatic EQA. It may not be able to assess the program quality per se but would be able to provide assurance whether the program quality in general is taken care of. If problem areas are identified at this level, then the institution should be alerted to attend to those areas and a programmatic approach for the identified (risk-based approach?) programs may be necessary.

How will these approaches develop in future?

1. Alternate between the two approaches and build elements of the alternate approach into the subsequent cycles. Eg A cycle of focused QA following a whole of institution approach and vice-versa. (NZUAAU did 'whole of institution' audits in Cycle 1, followed by focused audits. In Cycle 4, NZUAAU has come back to the 'whole of institution' audits. AUQA had 'whole of institution' audits in Cycle 1 and in the second cycle the focus of the audit is two themes.)
2. Combination of the two: Institutional approach combined with national reviews of selected programs. Eg. HEQC's review of MBAs in South Africa alongside institutional reviews, Program assessment in areas of national priority as separate initiatives in Australia alongside institutional EQA.
3. More clarity on internal QA and external QA will evolve. As HEIs become more mature they will take more responsibility to demonstrate that they are capable of monitoring program quality and EQA may be at the institution level. Programmatic approaches will continue to develop but for reasons such as mutual

4. As institutional capacity develops to assure program quality, the purpose of programmatic approaches to EQA will move towards more macro level approaches such as national reviews about national standards in select areas of studies. As program quality is assured well by internal QA, weaning away from the reliance on programmatic approach in EQA itself might be seen as evidence of good national standards.

The two country experiences discussed here – India and Australia – indicate that they both have institutional as well as program level QA arrangements. In India ‘feasibility’ considerations do not favour a program level EQA. Monitoring program quality is the responsibility of the universities and there is a strong reason for supporting institutional EQA. In Australia, although programmatic approach is feasible, maturity of the HEIs and their capacity to monitor program quality themselves enables the EQA agency to follow the institutional approach; EQA agency checks how well the internal QA mechanisms of the institution ensure program quality. Other developments in the sector such as a well developed qualifications framework and well established government regulations for allowing institutions to offer higher education programs also favour an institutional approach to EQA.

In summary, this paper argues that suitability of a particular EQA approach depends on a number of contextual factors. Emerging QA systems that are looking at the lessons of experience of other QA systems should reflect on these factors before adapting a particular approach.