

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance (EQA) – Roles And Responsibilities
Topic	2.2 Frameworks for National Approaches to QA

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1. Introduction



This topic examines the reasons for inconsistent usage of external quality assurance (EQA) terms and for variations in the approach to quality assurance. The topic moves then to a generic definition of EQA and three basic EQA approaches: audit, assessment and accreditation. The topic closes with examples of EQA approaches from Indonesia, the UK and India.

Objectives: Frameworks for National Approaches to QA

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to

- identify reasons for varying QA approaches and EQA terminology
- define EQA from a generic perspective
- define the three basic approaches to EQA: audit, assessment and accreditation
- identify relevant examples of national EQA approaches

2. Inconsistent Usage of EQA Terms

As you weighed the definitions of quality and the various approaches to QA, you no doubt noticed that the definitions are not very acute. Indeed, confusion results from the interchangeable use of certain EQA terms. This is due, at least in part, to the way in which many QA agencies combine several approaches to QA under whatever label they wish to propagate. The potential for confusion only grows as the QA story is told by a succession of learned people.

Variations in QA approaches and terminology arise from the national contexts in which QA systems operate. In some cases, EQA is equated with ministerial recognition of institutions within the national system; this is viewed as a regulatory approach. In other situations, QA is a process over and above the regulatory mechanisms. Further variation occurs when the outcome of EQA bears consequences for the funding and survival of the institutions or programs (which is by no means universal). A further variation is that whatever is monitored through internal QA and that which is steered by EQA differs among countries. In brief, to serve the different purposes of QA, different countries take different approaches to EQA. What is understood as the scope and methodology of EQA in one country may be very

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different from what the terminology signifies in another country. To facilitate our discussion we need a generic operational definition that recognises variation and can accommodate different approaches.

The term “accreditation” offers an example of creative use and interpretation. Suppose that some people want to distinguish quality audit and peer review from other QA modalities. Baggage is added and the discussion proceeds. Suddenly, audit is equated with higher standards, quality improvement, and autonomy, while accreditation is equated with minimum standards, prescriptive criteria, and mindless quality control. Next, the conflated term is used to make an argument for audit and autonomy. Put all this into a different national context and stir vigorously.

The U.S. government refers to all EQA as “accreditation,” a process of external review and certification based upon published standards and criteria with an emphasis on outcomes. Both institutional and program-level agencies act as accreditors. What is overlooked is difficulty and behavioral effect. The U.S. accreditation criteria don’t work like quality control standards – in general they require more effort -- outcomes assessment and improvement are in the Federal “meta-framework” for EQA agencies.

The U.K. comes to the debate from a different direction. The QAA/UK states that it does not accredit; rather, it places more emphasis on self-assessment and peer review. It has benchmarks (guidelines) and statements of good practice, rather than criteria. Institutions are, however, told that it might be a good idea to have an effective top-down IQA system. The guidelines are quite detailed, and can only be ignored at great peril. After all, the QAA works in conjunction with HEFCE, the national funding agency. The point: what is not called accreditation may indeed have that effect.

3. A Generic Definition of EQA

A useful generic and operational definition for EQA has been developed by the International Network of QA Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE):

“...QA may relate to a program, an institution or a whole higher education system. In each case, QA is all of those attitudes, objects, actions, and procedures, which through their existence and use, and together with the quality control activities, ensure that appropriate academic standards are being maintained and enhanced in and by each program. QA extends to making the process and standards known to the educational community and the public at large.” (www.inqaahe.org)

Within this definition, agencies may follow a combination of three basic approaches:

- Academic audit
- Accreditation
- Assessment

The features of these approaches are explained below:



[Three Basic Approaches](#)

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Concepts and Terminology: Defining the 'A' Words

Audit

Audit is a check on an organisation's explicit or implicit claims about itself. When an institution states objectives, it implicitly claims that this is what it will do; a quality audit checks the extent to which the institution is achieving its own objectives. When an organisation publishes financial reports, it is making explicit claims about itself; a financial audit determines the credibility of these reports. When the claims are explicit (as in financial reporting or when the institution has done its own quality-audit), audit may validate or disprove those claims.

Audit asks "are your processes effective?" (in achieving your objectives). An audit describes the extent to which the claims are correct.

Assessment

Assessments contribute to an overall evaluation. They usually focus on a specific objective, function, or issue. For example, a specific assessment of student progress, graduation rates, and employer satisfaction. To facilitate corrective action, they often lead to a grade or rating which may be alpha-numeric (1,2,3... or a,b,c...) or descriptive (excellent, good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory). There may or may not be a pass/fail point within the rating scheme.

Assessment asks "how 'good' are the outputs?" There are many definitions of "what is good," so we might ask "who has the responsibility and authority for defining 'good', and what factors affect their thinking?" An assessment is sometimes called an evaluation, although 'evaluation' is the more inclusive term.

Accreditation

Accreditation is an evaluation of whether an institution qualifies for a certain status. The status may have implications for the institution itself (e.g., permission to operate) and its students (e.g., eligibility for grants) or graduates (e.g., qualified for employment).

Accreditation asks "are you 'good' enough (fit) to be 'approved'?" 'Approved' implies admission to some category (e.g., qualified to receive government funds, your graduates accepted as qualified engineers, etc.)

In some countries institutional 'accreditation' has an element of audit; for example, when the large U.S. regional accreditors demand information on the performance of internal QA systems. Many of their standards refer to meeting standards set or adopted by the institution, rather than a quantitative goal.

Depending on how the criteria are written, accreditation can provide needed coercion for quality assurance. ABET, an accreditor for engineering programs, requires evidence of a working quality management system, with provisions for outcomes assessment and improvement. This approach tends to change the behaviors of academic managers.

It is very important for students to critically analyse the actual demands made by a set of accreditation criteria. Accreditation often requires far more than reaching a fixed numerical target. (Adapted from Woodhouse 2009 and Phillips 2010)

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4. EQA Frameworks in Different Countries

With these definitions in the background, here are some examples of EQA approaches from Indonesia, UK and India.

Examples of EQA Approaches from Indonesia, UK and India

In each of these settings, a grading scale is used to express or back up the QA outcome. This has certain benefits. The clients in some systems are concerned about politically-motivated actions. Grades or ratings may force the evaluators to justify their methodology and findings in detail, perhaps adding a touch of objectivity. The sum of ratings can still support a yes or no decision, or permit averaging. Ratings can also be used for differential funding, or as a way to target areas for improvement. They may also provide evaluators with a bit of “wobble room” in rendering a final verdict. Click the tabs below to look at the examples of EQA approaches from these countries.

Indonesia

The outcome of QA by the National Accreditation Board for Higher Education in Indonesia (Badan Akreditasi Nasional - Perguruan Tinggi - BAN-PT) is a formal accreditation decision with a grade on a four-point scale – grade A to grade D - where grade A indicates that the study program conforms to international standards, grade B indicates a course of good quality, grade C indicates a course that fulfils minimal requirements and grade D means that it is not accredited. Various assessments contribute to an overall evaluation for the purpose of accreditation.

Scotland

The Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) in Scotland results in a main and summary report on ELIR outcomes for individual institutions. Both reports are published on the QA Agency (QAA) website. The report also leads to a single overarching judgment expressed in the form of a 'confidence' statement in one of three forms: confidence, limited confidence, or no confidence. This example combines elements of audit and assessment, although a “no confidence” finding seems to imply consequences similar those associated with a denial of accreditation. One of the prime stakeholders is the national HE funding body. The QAA uses the generic term 'review'.

India

In India, the National Assessment & Accreditation Council (NAAC) incorporates elements of all three QA approaches in its model. NAAC declares whether an institution is accredited or not. It introduces an element of assessment and rates the quality of an institution on a nine-point scale. The methodology has an element of audit; a small team of external peers is sent to the institution as generalists who produce a team report for public consumption. This combination of approach is deemed necessary given the size of the Indian higher education system and its QA objectives. With 17000 higher education institutions (HEIs) in the sector, NAAC uses a grading scale to show the variation in levels of quality. Further, in a still growing HE sector, multi-level grading motivates institutions to work toward a higher grade and thereby serves an improvement purpose. In India, this methodology is labeled 'assessment and accreditation'. The term “audit” is omitted, possibly because the peer review leads to consequential ratings.

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To add complexity, within the same country there are variations in the EQA outcome. For example, the Accreditation Board (AB) of the Indian Council of Agriculture Research expresses the accreditation outcome on a three-point scale: accreditation, provisional accreditation, no accreditation. The National Board of Accreditation of India oversees standards in technical education and accredits programs on a two point scale – accredited/not-accredited – but the length of accreditation status is variable. Thus, an institution or program with a limited term is faced with preparations for the next review.

Reading: Three Levels of Confidence

See the [Handbook for enhancement-led institutional review Scotland](#) for details of the three levels of confidence recommended by QAA in Scotland. Accessed on 28 June 2009

While it is possible to define EQA in generic terms, experience shows that different countries develop their own definitions and combine these to suit local circumstances. It is essential therefore to look beyond terminology to understand what is happening (and WHY) within a national EQA framework.

5. Discussion

Discussion: National Approaches for QA

Choose three countries, not all from the same region, which have some form of EQA for higher education.

1. List the major QA players in those countries.
2. Identify the EQA approaches they follow.
3. Of these, identify the agencies that have EQA functions going beyond governmental regulation and justify your observations.

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6. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- Different countries take different national approaches to EQA to address the various purposes of QA. The understanding of the scope and methodology of EQA may vary across countries.
- The causes for these variations include situations where:
 - EQA is the equivalent of ministerial recognition of institutions belonging to the national system and which therefore is a regulatory approach.
 - QA is a process over and above the regulatory mechanisms.
 - The outcome of EQA has serious implications for the funding and survival of the institutions and programs although this is by no means universal.
 - What is monitored through internal institutional QA and what is steered by EQA differs among countries.
- The International Network of QA Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) has developed an operational definition, which is a useful generic approach to describing EQA use.
- QA agencies follow a combination of three basic approaches but may name them differently:
 - Academic audit
 - Accreditation
 - Assessment
- Although it is possible to define EQA in a generic way, the reality is that different countries develop their own particular definitions of terms and combine these for the local circumstances.