Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	Standards Applied By External Quality Assurance (EQA) Agencies
Topic	4.2 Standards: Basic Concepts and Benefits

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1. Introduction

This topic discusses the benefits of EQA standards-setting activities for the general public, students, institutions and their programs. The topic explores a range of terms that EQA agencies use to define standards. You will also learn how the purpose and unit of analysis influence the development of standards.

Objectives: Standards: Basic Concepts and Benefits

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to
- identify the value of defining standards to measure quality of programs and institutions
- identify the various definitions of standards used by EQA agencies
- explain how the purpose for which standards are developed influences their approach and content
- describe how the unit of analysis impacts the development and use application of standards

2. An Introduction to Standards and Their Advantages

According to Webster's online dictionary:

"A standard is a basis for comparison or a reference point against which other things can be evaluated"

Source: http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/ST/STANDARD.html

Thus, when EQA agencies adopt standards, they are setting up the framework within which they will measure quality.

EQA agencies set evaluation standards to judge the quality of key functions, such as curriculum, teaching and learning, and institutional management. Preferably, this is a

cooperative effort of the EQA, institutional personnel, and in some HE systems, government emissaries.

Standards-setting activities by EQA agencies may be viewed as a public service, which provides a framework for judgments on quality, expected or achieved, and parameters for improvement. Let's take a look at the benefits of standards in detail.

Click the tabs to view the three assignments in detail.

Benefits of Standards

General public

When EQA agencies review HEIs and their programs against a set of published standards, the general public is provided with assurance that:
- the institution and its programs have set learning objectives that are clearly defined and appropriate;
- the institution and its programs have the resources needed to attain the objectives;
- the institution and its programs are making an ongoing effort to evaluate their progress toward meeting stated objectives; and that
- the institution and its programs are willing to undergo external review to determine how well they are meeting their stated objectives.

Students

The benefit for students enrolled in programs and institutions that have met EQA standards is the knowledge that their investment in higher education and the degrees that they receive are more likely to be recognised by
1. other institutions, should they wish to pursue further (advanced) education,
2. regulatory or credentialing bodies that license practitioners in specific professions, and
3. employers seeking qualified candidates for job openings.

Higher education institutions (HEIs)

The use of standards stimulates self-evaluation and self-directed improvement. When institutions and programs make open and honest assessments of their offerings and operations against a set of external criteria, they enable themselves to reflect upon and assess their strengths and limitations relative to external expectations. This "reality check" or self-assessment is an essential first step in any EQA review process.

When institutions and programs use EQA agency standards, they can benefit from a cost-effective system of accountability, one that provides expert review, ongoing consultation, peer and public recognition. In addition, in some countries, a review against EQA agency standards may be linked to public funding of the institutions and/or its enrolled students.

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3. Discussion

Discussion: Benefits of EQA Standards

Consider the benefits of attending an institution and program that has been reviewed by an EQA agency. Indicate several ways in which these benefits might be validated through research. Now consider the benefits from an institutional perspective and indicate how to verify those benefits. Discuss the reasons why verification of perceived benefits is crucial to the EQA process.

4. An Overview of Types of Standards and Their Differential Uses

Standards may be defined and applied in many ways. In fact, EQA agencies in higher education often use a variety of terms when referring to their "standards," thus making it important to examine the terminology in common use.

In addition, the purposes for which standards have been developed shape both their content, role, and perceived impact in the QA review process. Starting from an assessment against standards, the purposes can range from quality control, to accountability, or improvement. In each case, the standards may be formulated, phrased, and used in a different way.

The intended level of analysis also plays a key role in how standards are developed and used in the review process. In higher education, the unit of analysis might be an entire institution (e.g., university, college); a specialised program area or academic discipline (e.g., engineering, nursing, teacher education); or individuals (e.g., students, faculty or staff members). For this discussion we will set aside the individual as a unit of analysis.

5. Defining the Criteria: Basic Terminology

Because QA agencies use varying terminology to define measures of quality, it is important to be familiar with the range of terms in use. Below you will find some of the most common terms used by EQA agencies.

Click the tabs to view the three assignments in detail.

Varying Terminology in Use

Criteria

The Analytic Quality Glossary prepared by Professor Lee Harvey defines criteria as the *specification of elements against which a judgment is made.*

Source: http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/#c

Standards

Taken as a noun, "Standards" can be the reference against which other items may be evaluated or a reference point for comparison. Standards can also take on meaning with regard to representing the ideal against which judgments can be made. When used as an adjective, the term "Standard" can be describe something *widely recognised as a model of authority or excellence; "a standard reference work."*

Source: www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/ST/STANDARD.html

Even at this point, a clarification is in order. The term "standards" is more inclusive than "criteria." A standard may express a broader principle, e.g., "the institution must provide effective advisory support for students" or, "engineering students must receive an adequate exposure to sustainability." These statements put forth a principle, but offer not clue about what is meant by effective, adequate, advisory, or sustainable. This is where Criteria are needed, the specific elements that must be present to validate a principle. Confusion creeps in when you have a standard that says "each student must have exactly five textbooks." In effect, the standard and a lone criterion become one and the same. Nothing was said about which books go to form the precious five.

Performance Indicators – PI's

This term is a bit more specific than the "criteria" for quality evaluation. PI's tend to focus on the measurement of individual, group, or organisational performance relative to an identified set of skills or body of knowledge. Thus, the performance indicators may be the set of data against which changes in performance can be documented and compared. The definition from the Analytic Quality Glossary indicates that the data is usually quantitative data.

Source: http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/#p

In the midst of such specificity, this term can also have different meanings. For example, in a QA system based on quality control, much is made of input, process, and output data. The data might pertain to material resouces, student admission, annual attrition, numbers of graduates, time needed to complete a degree, pass rates on specific exams, gender/age/ethnicity – and other things that can be reduced to numbers. A report then goes to a government office where a bell rings if and when the data deviates from a norm. The data elements are considered to be PI's.

The idea of "competencies" is an important development in higher education and QA. Basically, we begin with a "standard", such as "each graduate will possess and demonstrate competency in the use of computers." Even if a standard expresses a competency objective, as above, that is not the actual competency. Now we need criteria, perhaps even some PI's. Let's assume that the criteria include a working knowledge of the major software applications for certain types of systems. Finally we bring in the **PI's**, which in this example are the **specific tasks** that the students must master, some related to software, some to hardware. Thus, a P.I. does not have to be a numerical value. İn case you didn't notice, the reviewer's job just became more complicated, but the end result should be a more acute performance assessment.

Benchmarks

Webster's online dictionary defines a benchmark as *a standard by which something can be measured or judged; "his painting sets the benchmark of quality."* This dictionary goes on to provide a specialty definition when used in the Information domain. This definition defines benchmark as follows: *In the quality improvement lexicon, a benchmark is a best in class achievement. This achievement then becomes the reference point or recognised standard of excellence against which similar processes are measured.*

Source: http://websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/benchmark

Now let us go from this fine definition of "benchmark" into the realm of institutions struggling to improve quality. Perhaps for most, benchmarking is an organized effort

to identify problems, to find other institutions or faculties that somehow found a **better** way to do something, and to adapt that innovation to one's own circumstances. "Better" does not necessarily mean "best in class", for many institutions could do better, but lack the resources or will to be the best. The key idea is an external search for a feasible solution to a well-defined problem. In HE, some of the best benchmarking comes through interaction with external peers.

These definitions have similarities, with the level of specificity being the major difference. You can well imagine how agencies may use some or all of the terms interchangeably. However, be aware of differences in the meaning of terms depending upon the agencies' approach to and definition of quality. The chosen terminology may also depend upon whether the institution or study program is the unit of analysis. Performance indicators, for example, are often used by agencies that focus on professional programs. As illustrated above, one reason for this is that the competencies (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) required for entry into practice in specific professions have been identified, clearly articulated, and accepted by those active in the field.

Performance indicators are more difficult to develop and agree upon when the focus is on an entire institution. At that level, the PI's are more likely to be quantitative. As such, they may make a contribution to an overall assessment, perhaps as a diagnostic tool.

6. Discussion

Discussion: Basic Terminology

Which term(s), if any, may cause an EQA agency to limit or restrict the types of information that it considers appropriate documentation for the QA review process?

Note: One way to approach this is by examining the questions and data requirements - actual or implied - found in the Self-Assessment guidelines of EQA agencies. Often this is more revealing than the standards and criteria.

7. The Purposes for Which Standards Are Developed

The purposes for which standards are developed shape content and approach. Some agencies develop standards for purposes of compliance or quality control. As previously noted, quality control standards originated in industry. For example, the toy industry must comply with safety specifications set forth by various governments and private entities. The primary purpose of these standards is to protect the health and safety of consumers and users from various hazards, so they are defined for compliance and quality control purposes. When quality control standards for HEIs are set by EQA agencies they are often written as 'must' statements. For example, the EQA agency may write standards requiring the institution or program to document specific content to meet curricular requirements, or faculty qualifications for teaching specific subjects. In such cases, the standards are either 'met' or 'not met' during the review process and the program is then accountable for maintaining compliance with them.

Sometimes standards are developed for a 'fitness for purpose' approach to QA. In this case, standards may be written to provide flexibility in how an institution or program proves that its offerings and faculty qualifications are relevant to meeting its mission and goals, in keeping with external Standards. One example of this is

seen in the standards developed and applied by the (US) Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). MSCHE's very first standard demonstrates how standards might be written with a fitness for purpose approach to institutional QA, as detailed in the information below:

MSCHE's Standard 1: Mission and Goals

MSCHE's Standard 1: Mission and Goals

The institution's mission clearly defines its purpose within the context of higher education and indicates whom the institution serves and what it intends to accomplish. The stated goals of the institution, consistent with the aspirations and expectations of higher education, clearly specify how the institution will fulfil its mission. The mission and goals are developed and recognised by the institution with the participation of its members and its governing body and are used to develop and shape its programs and practices and to evaluate its effectiveness.

Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education,2006

http://www.msche.org/publications/CHX06060320124919.pdf

In the 2006 edition of MSCHE's publication Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education, we find this instruction: "each standard should be interpreted and applied in the context of the institution's mission and situation" and that "not all parts of every statement in the Context sections will apply to every institution" (p.9). The MSCHE team evaluators are cautioned to use "common sense" and to insure that their reports reflect an understanding of the particular institution under review and the goals the institution set for itself (p.9).

As noted previously, the types of standards that should be applied often depends upon the purposes for which the standards will be used and the unit of analysis. Therefore, when developing standards, EQA agencies should ask reflect on why they are being developed and for whom. Some of the possible questions include:

- Will our agency primarily focus on minimum quality control issues? This is probably defined in documents submitted for government authorisation of the agency, if not in its founding documents.
- Will our evaluations be used for government funding purposes? A related question is whether the review findings have a direct linear effect on external funding or internal allocation of resources.
- If this organisation is to be responsible for review of a specific professional program, should we focus on student competencies and learning outcomes? The answer depends in part of whether this will be instrumental for the professional licensing or recognition of graduates.
- Should performance indicators be included in our standards? If so, what are they and are they generally agreed upon as acceptable? Without PI's it is more difficult to judge whether, when, and to what extent a standard has been achieved. PI's help evaluators to make more reliable judgments.
- Will the organisation work strictly at the institutional level from a quality improvement perspective? If so, what are the best ways to assess quality improvement in this environment? One way is to focus on strategies for

quallity and improvement; i.e., do they exist, are they credible; have they been implemented; what are the intended results; and how will we know when a strategy has been fulfilled?

- Does the organisation's mission permit reviews to include two or more philosophical perspectives? For example, can the organisation set minimum threshold standards for compliance review purposes and set standards that focus on institutional or programmatic quality improvement issues? Perhaps, but you should supply the details.

8. Discussion

Discussion: Developing Standards for EQA Agencies

Using the questions above, work with two other class members to develop a fictional EQA agency with a specific mission and purpose. What other questions came up as you attempted to lay the foundation for a new agency?

9. The Unit of Analysis

To understand the purposes and types of standards or criteria applied by EQA agencies in higher education, it helps to understand the context of the unit of analysis, which can be an institution or a program.

Click the tabs to view the three assignments in detail.

Institutional Standards and/or Programmatic Standards

Institutional standards

If the unit of analysis is an institution (e.g., college or university), then criteria must be developed to evaluate the overall institution as a single operating unit, despite the fact that it offers many degrees and many different programs.

Programmatic standards

When the unit of analysis is at the programmatic level, criteria may be developed to apply to a specific academic field (e.g., political science, mathematics) or to a program that prepares students for entry into a specialised professions (e.g., accounting, architecture, engineering).

Mixed modes?

Very few EQA agencies can afford to train and maintain separate cadres of experts for institutional and program review. Theoretically a large agency might have separate commissions for different purposesm but this is unlikely. In the U.S., for example, agencies seeking Federal authorisation must specifically identify themselves as an institutional or program-level agency and offer proof of the need for one more agency.

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10. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- Standards set by EQA agencies in higher education serve to define expectations and set values for the performance and quality of a product, process, or service. In addition to benefiting the public and enrolled students, standards provide benefits to the institutions and programs that use them.
- QA agencies use varying terminology to define how quality is measured, depending upon the EQA agencies' approach to and definition of quality.
- The purposes for which standards are developed shape both their content and the role that they play in a QA review. Some agencies develop standards for purposes of compliance or quality control, and others develop them with more consideration of objectives and outcomes.
- The level of analysis for which standards are intended also plays a key role in how they are developed and then used in a review process.

References
Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2006). Characteristics of excellence in higher education. Philadelphia, PA: Author.