Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	Standards Applied By External Quality Assurance (EQA) Agencies
Topic	4.3 Quality Assurance at Institutional Level

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1. Introduction

This topic discusses the issues related to the functioning of higher education institutions (HEIs) that EQA agencies must consider when developing standards for review. You will also learn about the two broad philosophical approaches to QA adopted by standards-setting organisations for HEIs. The topic concludes with a discussion on the important role of stakeholders in developing these standards.

Objectives: Quality Assurance at Institutional Level

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to
- explain the focus areas that EQA agencies must consider before developing standards
- describe the two approaches to setting standards that EQA agencies use
- identify the stakeholders in the standards-setting process for institutions

2. Standards for Institutional QA

Institutional QA in higher education deals with the entire institution as a single operating unit. The institution may be called a college, a university or a single purpose institute, but as an institution of higher education, it ultimately awards at the lowest level an associate's, baccalaureate, or bachelor's degree. In some systems or institutions, a master's degree is the first award.

Because EQA institutional reviews must examine how the unit operates as a whole, they generally cannot focus on minute details of each study program. Therefore, external reviews of institutions must focus on overarching issues surrounding the functions of the unit. Such areas of analysis may include the following:

Click the tabs to view the details.

Areas of Analysis for Developing Standards

The defined mission of the institution

An institution's mission statement should define its purpose within the context of higher education, the nation and region, the population(s) being served and what it plans to accomplish.

Institutional governance and administrative structure

Governance and administrative structures must be designed to allow for appropriate information gathering and decision-making processes for policy development, in keeping with the goals, type, and size of the institution. There must be clear lines of authority, as well as shared ownership in establishing services and maintaining qualified faculty to promote learning, research and scholarship.

Basic curricular requirements for qualifications (e.g., associate or bachelor's degree)

Institutions require all students complete a set of curricular requirements that represent the institution's definition of the minimum college-level knowledge and skills required for a degree. Such general education requirements often include curricular requirements related to oral and written communication skills, quantitative reasoning, basic scientific principles, critical thinking, technological competence, and an understanding of citizenship and ethical behaviour.

The number and array of academic programs or fields of study

Institutions use their mission statement to define the types of educational programs to be offered, whether limited to undergraduate education or including graduate degree and advanced certificate programs. The institution should have the expectation that all programs will have clearly defined objectives for the required curriculum and student learning goals that are consistent with the mission of the institution.

Financial resources and issues of institutional stability

Institutional stability requires sound financial planning that is consistent with the mission and goals of the institution. Institutions must demonstrate that they continuously analyse their financial portfolios and update their financial plan to insure sufficient funding to carry out their mission and support the programs offered to students.

Physical facilities that may be required

Institutions, whether they offer traditional classroom-based education or an online learning experience, should be able to document that their physical plant or facilities are maintained to safely and adequately provide access to learning resources, instructional equipment, library facilities, and to serve as a base for key personnel.

Student support services

Institutions provide student support services that foster each student's ability to achieve their goals and those of the institution. Examples of such services are student advisement or counselling, grievance and complaint procedures, secure maintenance of student records (with appropriate policies for the release of such information), and technological learning support systems.

Teaching and learning resources

Because teaching and learning are central to the mission of any institution, attention is given to the quality and qualifications of the professionals who teach across the educational offering and the support provided for student learning. Institutions are expected to document sufficient numbers of qualified faculty/academics to assure the coherence and continuity of programs. Faculty and staff development provisions may also be examined by EQA agencies to insure that adequate measures are taken to develop teaching skills, conduct research, or serve as mentors to new faculty and students. In addition, institutions are expected to document access to learning resources, such as the information resources or laboratory facilities that support student acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Internal QA and accountability systems

Assessment and evaluation occurs at multiple levels of institutional operations through the development of a process that examines the institution's overall effectiveness in achieving its goals. The results of assessment and self-evaluation are used by the institution to determine if it is indeed meeting its goals and to make changes when necessary to improve its operations and further advance student achievement and learning.

A decision on how best to develop standards for each of these areas of analysis often depends upon the type of organisation responsible for the QA review system.

3. Standards-Setting Organisations

Standards-setting organisations for HEIs can be described within two broad philosophical approaches to QA. One approach is self-regulation; the other is governmental or quasi-governmental regulation or regulation from outside the academy.

Click the tabs to view the details.

Self-Regulation vs. Governmental or Quasi-governmental Regulation

Self-regulation

When a standards-setting body operates from a philosophy of self-regulation, the HEIs are the primary drivers of the process. Representatives from HEIs hold positions on the QA review boards, participate in teams and are primarily responsible for directing the procedures and application of standards within the review process. This is the approach in the United States, where institutions are reviewed and accredited by private non-governmental organisations that depend on volunteers from their member institutions. The autonomous aspect of non-governmental self-regulation is said to reflect more emphasis on quality improvement than on Quality control standards.

Self-regulation is fine when all is well -- but it offers no immunity from adverse public opinion and politics. It must be proven effective from time to time. As the nineties began in the U.S., the large institutional accreditors (private NGO's) were harshly criticised for failing to weed out bad institutions, to improve higher education

in general, and more specifically, the capabilities of graduates relative to their international peers.

One result was virtually a command from the U.S. Secretary of Education for the adoption of outcomes assessment and improvement procedures. Agencies that neglected this too long would not be recertified. At that point, most U.S. accreditors began a substantive overhaul of their standards and procedures, starting with an effort to define "outcomes."

Governmental or quasi-governmental regulation

When governmental or quasi-governmental (i.e., independent public agencies funded by government) organisations are responsible for the EQA process, the initiative to develop and apply standards is in the hands of government. The decision-making bodies may include government appointed representatives or heads of state. The decision to have representation from institutions is dependent upon the structure set up by the government. Although governmental involvement in the standards-setting process is often associated more with control factors than self-regulation, there are many such systems that choose to focus on quality improvement issues.

Regardless of the philosophical approach taken, self-regulation or Governmental/ quasi-governmental regulation, the initial development of the standards to be used should include representation from a broad constituency of stakeholders who will be affected by application of the standards. Categories of stakeholders may include
- the HEIs (higher education administrators or trustees);
- science and academia (QA researchers, faculty);
- consumers (students, parents);
- government and/or other regulators (national or regional level representatives); and
- industry (employers of graduates).

The views of all stakeholders should be taken into account and the process for developing and finalising the standards should include public dissemination of drafts with open and transparent processes for providing comments for consideration.

4. Discussion

Discussion: Institutional-level Quality Assurance

Choose an EQA agency that has written standards where the unit of analysis is an institution. Using the EQA agency's standards, evaluate as best you can, two institutions' mission statements, their strategic educational objectives, and broad degree requirements, based on information offered on each institution's website.
1. What issues problems did you encounter in finding this information? Did the institutions present these things with sufficient emphasis and clarity?
2. Imagine that you are on an expert team that will be going to one of these institutions. Your task will be to judge the credibility of the institutional mission, the related strategic objectives, and provision of material and human resources to realize those strategies. What kinds of information would you regard as necessary for the review?

5. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- External reviews of institutions focus on the following issues surrounding the adequate functioning of the unit:
    - The defined mission of the institution
    - Governance and the administrative structure of the institution
    - Basic curricular requirements for the qualification
    - The number and array of academic programs offered
    - Financial resources and issues of institutional stability
    - Physical facilities that may be required
    - Student support services
    - Teaching and learning resources
    - Internal QA and accountability systems
- Standards-setting organisations for HEIs tend to fall within two broad philosophical approaches to QA:
    - **Self-regulation**: In this case, HEIs are the primary drivers of the process.
    - **Governmental or quasi-governmental regulation**: In this case, the government takes the initiative to develop and apply standards.
- The initial development of standards should take into account the views of a broad community of stakeholders.