Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	Standards Applied By External Quality Assurance (EQA) Agencies
Topic	4.4 Quality Assurance at Program Level

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1. Introduction

This topic considers the areas that overlap between institutional- and program-level QA reviews. You will learn about areas that must be considered when developing standards for program review. The topic concludes with a discussion of the key role of stakeholders in developing standards at this level.

Objectives: Quality Assurance at Program Level

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to
- explain the differences in focus between institutional and program reviews
- describe the functioning of standards-setting organisations that review professional training programs
- identify the stakeholders involved in the standards development process for programs

2. Program-level QA Reviews

QA reviews for specific academic and professional degree programs may include some of the areas of review found in standards developed for institutional review. Obviously they may differ in level and focus. For example, a specialised accreditor may have standards for financial resources and institutional stability.

Both institutional and program review have a similar concern: whether the competence of the organisation and financial condition indicate stability for at least the period of recognition. And specifically, whether the institution or faculties can provide adequate resources and inputs (of all types) for the programs under review. Very simply, a program accreditor may be more concerned about sustainability.

A second overlap between institutional and program reviews is the consideration of mission statements. When an EQA agency reviews mission statements and goals at an institutional level, they expect a clear definition of the overall purpose and clientele of the institution in the context of higher education, the nation and region. The mission statement sets broad parameters for types of education that will be offered.

In a program-level review the emphasis on mission may not be as pronounced. The agency still wants see any mission statement for a program, in order to judge its congruence with institutional purposes. Among those purposes is a definition of who will be served as clients or stakeholders. Apart from mission, EQA agencies should look at strategies in order to actual intents, objectives, and the outcomes that must be delivered.

Specialised and professional-level accreditors will set standards in the following areas:

Click the tabs to view the details.

Setting Program Standards

Administrative leadership structure

The organisational structure of the program, faculty, or department must provide effective leadership for the development of program curricula, with an eye toward consistency with the goals of the institution, the discipline, and related professions. "Effective leadership" can be judged in terms of policy management, i.e., policy formulation and planning, deployment, oversight, and evaluation.

Curricular requirements for the specific program of study

Specialised programs have core requirements, ideas about the total study hours to be completed, practical and project work, and internship options. The question is then "what must the students actually do and how difficult is it?" A reviewer should look for well-conceived course descriptions; i.e., allocation of time to specific topics, exams, graded exercises, projects, assessments, etc.

The relationship of the primary study program with other areas of study

When students must complete courses in more than one academic field as part of their chosen program, the program that is primarily responsible for the student must document the academic components and the relationships between different departments or faculties.

Facility requirements specific to the training needs of the program

Depending on the profession or field of study, EQA reviewers may find programs that require specific facilities and equipment to fulfill learning objectives. For example, programs that train psychologists or counsellors may need to have rooms suitable for individual therapy sessions. These rooms may need provisions for observation and communication between instructors and students. Computer workrooms may be outfitted for general use, but made adaptable for students in diffferent fields of study. The self-assessment may ask the faculty to link specific learning objectives and outcomes to the use of specific facilities. This brings in an unpleasant issue, funds for the maintenance and updating of facillities and equipment.

Student support services in relation to program or student needs

In addition to the support services provided at institutional level, a program-level review may consider student services directly related to student progress and success in a given field of study. The review might look into admission standards, remedial or corrective study, activities intended to build professionalism, access to program and career advisors, assistance in the preparation of portfolios, and support for job searches.

In an ideal world these provisions would be the norm, rather than the exception. Even in some of the more developed HE systems, funding for such services is scarce at best. Faculty contracts might not pay for time spent on student advising or even quality assurance activities. İn some institutions the student government has taken on advising functions. All the while, reports of budget cuts continue to flow in. The reviewer must be aware of systemic and structural conditions that often limit student support services.

Student and faculty access to learning resources

Programs must document access to library resources, such as journals, books, research and learning resource centres that are appropriate to and support the mission and goals of the specific professional program or academic field being reviewed.

Faculty staff resources and qualifications

Programs are expected to identify the principal and supporting faculty members who are responsible for, and presumably qualified to teach specific subjects. Faculty educational requirements may be specified, along with any required certification or licence. Programs may also be required to assign a minimum number of academics to teaching roles, in order to insure that students are exposed the variety of topics and methodologies that characterize a particular field of study.

Higher education, especially in some developed countries, must contend with changes in the composition of faculties, hiring practices, and the academic career path. İn some systems, adjuncts, contractors, and part-time instructors account for an increasing proportion of the teaching faculty. The percentage of faculty in tenure-track positions has declined, just as we see more faculty being hired only to teach or to do mostly applied research. All this complicates the work of the reviewer, who wishes to know who teaches what, whether they are qualified, whether they are current in their field, and where some of the traditional functions of full-time faculty have gone.

Program and student evaluation processes

Program academic staff engage in continuous and systematic evaluation indicating how the program's mission, objectives and goals are measured and how the assessment information is used to further improve the program. In addition, the program documents how it assesses student learning, both didactic and practical, and its treatment of professional identity development.

Do you believe that this scenario exists in most institutions? What about the institutions in your own country? Do they have the resources and time to do these things? As for QA, let us assume that someone is doing something somewhere. Quality assurance is best done though teamwork, but in reality, we may find one or two people in a program faculty who deal with QA, the assessment scheme, and perhaps improvement. İf and when they 'underachieve' it is no small wonder.

3. Standards-Setting Organisations for Programmatic Quality Assurance

Standards-setting organisations that review professional or specialized programs may operate as either governmental or non-governmental decision-making bodies. However, in the case of the professional programs, the primary stakeholders are not the HEIs, but rather the professions themselves. Here it is important to note that any given profession has multiple stakeholders ranging from individual practitioners and educators to broader groups such as professional membership associations, statutory or regulatory bodies responsible for licensing or certification of individuals, and employers of graduates seeking employment in the field. These groups may work collegially during the standards-setting process, but they may represent competing interests. In situations where the EQA process is closely linked to regulation of the profession (i.e. when a candidate for professional licensing must have a degree from an 'accredited' or 'approved' program), the EQA agency's standards will be greatly influenced by governmental or regulatory systems and vice versa.

Professions such as medicine and health sciences, engineering, law, psychology and architecture have a shared practical concern for educational standards, notably the ability of their graduates to perform as entry-level professionals. Hence, the emergence of non-governmental organisations and professional accreditors which develop and apply standards that reflect the education and attitudes that are deemed essential for professional entry.

Most professional accreditors have a link to a professional membership society, but are separately incorporated in order to isolate the 'parent' organisation from legal liability for the accreditor's actions. This means that a parent organisation may provide a financial subsidy without acquiring ownership, even partial. That separation may be reinforced by limiting the Board seats held by delegates from the parent organisation. In some cases, government rules for agency approval go in two directions at once; the government likes to see stable financial support for an agency, alongside a full measure of independence.

When professional or specialized accreditors develop standards and criteria, they solicit input from educators and practitioners; specifically, the knowledge, practical skills, and professional attitudes that students must acquire. A number of these organisations cooperate with with professional licensing or registration boards in the development of standards.

Standards are often developed with input, at some stage, from students, HE administrators, related professional organisations, researchers, and consumers. In a number of countries, accreditors are required to publicise proposed changes in standards and criteria from six months to a year before formal adoption. A good example can be found in the constitution and by-laws of ABET, the U.S. agency for engineering accreditation. In short, stakeholder involvement is a must.

The following 'charge' or requirement from the Board of Directors of the Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) is an illustration of how a programmatic accrediting organisation for the counselling profession in the United States defined its key stakeholders during its recent standards review process:

[Defining Key Stakeholders](#)

Defining Key Stakeholders

Charge #3

Feedback is sought on drafts from a broadly defined constituency that includes programs, faculty, students, practitioners, counselling consumers, and higher education administrators

To ensure that this charge was followed, the CACREP Standards Revision Committee posted three public drafts of its revised standards on the internet over a three and a half year period asking for feedback from all constituents. In addition, members of the Committee presented the various drafts in open sessions across the country at conferences of relevant educators, practitioners, state licensing boards (government regulators), and other organisations involved in higher education or the counselling profession.

The following is an interesting case study in the development of standards for professional programs from Chile.

[Development of Standards with Participation of Stakeholders: An Example from Chile](#)

Development of Standards with Participation of Stakeholders: An Example from Chile

Development of Standards with Participation of Stakeholders: An Example from Chile

Chile has developed standards for several professional programs (such as Medicine, Engineering, Architecture, Psychology, Nursing, Law, Teacher Training and others). In order to do that, it invited representatives from academic programs in public and private universities, from professional associations and from employers or other destinations of graduates (such as graduate programs). These 'Technical Committees' worked on their expectations for graduates in each program.

It became evident that all groups tended to look at the same issues, and therefore the agency developed a set of basic standards in eight areas:
1. Goals and objectives;
2. Management and administration;
3. Curriculum;
4. Staffing;
5. Teaching and learning;
6. Effectiveness and efficiency;
7. Teaching and learning resources;
8. Links with the external environment (including the disciplines, the profession, the labour market and the community)

The role of the Committees was re-defined. They had to look at the proposed standards, and make any adjustments they saw necessary for the program they were working on. They had to identify the main competencies that each and every graduate of the program had to acquire in the teaching and learning process, and on that basis, develop a set of Expected Learning Outcomes (ELOs, or Graduate Profile),

which would then become a 'hard core' of requirements for curriculum development.

The ELOs and standards for each program were sent to every program in the country, with a deadline for comments. The comments were fed back to the committee, which decided on their inclusion.

Each institution was expected to complement the established 'hard core' with other learning outcomes that the institution wanted to achieve, based on its own mission or principles; the result of this combination was the framework against which the standards were applied in each assessment exercise.

Reading: Development of Standards for Professional Programs in Chile

To view ELOs and standards for programs (in Spanish), visit the following website:

[Comisión Nacional de Acreditación](#)

4. Discussion

Discussion: Program-level Quality Assurance

Choose an EQA agency that has written standards for a specific professional program of study (e.g., business & management, engineering, nursing). Using the EQA agency's standards, evaluate two study programs according to the published curriculum, statements of learning objectives & intended outcomes, the approach to student evaluation (completion of required program, exams, assessment of competencies), and faculty qualifications, based on the information provided on the institution's website or in an official bulletin. (some institutions place a PDF file of their official bulletin on the web).

One object of this exercise is to see to what extent, if any, EQA agency standards are reflected in, or correspond with, information published by institutions or program faculties.
   1. Was the accrediting agency mentioned in the published materials?
   2. Accreditation standards should imply the type of information or evidence that will demonstrate their fulfillment. Did these agency standards do that?
   3. Did you find the EQA standards clear and straightforward, especially when you tried to apply them?
   4. This is an unfair exercise: it is likely that you will run into things that you don't know much about just yet. No problem, but what didn't you know?

5. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:
   * Institutional and program-level reviews may overlap, e.g.,
      o **Financial resources & institutional stability**: In program reviews, the issue is whether and how reliably the institution provides funding to ensure the continuity of programs.
      o **Mission statements**: In program reviews, the issue is whether the the mission of a specific program is consistent with the mission and goals of the entire institution.
      o **Strategic objectives**: At institutional and program level, a mission statement is only as good as the strategic objectives and plans that proceed from it.

- In addition to the issues of financial support and mission, EQA agencies in specialised and professional fields of study, may also set standards in these areas:
  - Administrative leadership structure [note: perhaps more important is 'policy leadership'
  - Curricular requirements for specific study programs
  - Support or complementary courses taught outside the primary program
  - Facility requirements specific to learning objectives of the program
  - Student support services in terms of program or student needs
  - Student and faculty access to teaching/learning resources
  - Faculty and staff resources and qualifications, in relation to learning objectives and intended outcomes
  - The program and student evaluation process
- Standards-setting organisations that review professional or specialised programs may operate as either governmental or non-governmental decision-making bodies.
- In case of professional programs, the primary stakeholders in the work of non-governmental agencies are not so much the institutions, but the professions themselves.
- Professional accreditors generally recognise the following stakeholders:
  - Professional members, including educators, working professionals, and the relevant licensing or registration boards
  - Students
  - Higher education administrators
  - Related professional organisations
  - Researchers in the field
  - Consumers of professional services

6. Reading references

Reading: References: Program-Level QA

On Web sites:

QAA/UK: Engineering Subject Benchmarks (U.K.). Also see references to subject benchmarks in other disciplines. The benchmarks are said to reflect something other than accreditation, insofar as they are guidelines.

Requirements for engineering education are, however, imposed by the "Chartered Institutions" (organisations) that represent the specific engineering fields and professions of the U.K. It is interesting to consider how the benchmarks could be re-worded for other disciplines.

The ABET engineering criteria offer a significant example of competency-based standards and criteria, as well as a demanding quality improvement approach. In effect, engineering schools and programs must have processes for quality assessment and ongoing improvement in place in order to be accredited. Both program-level outcomes and student learning objectives and outcomes are examined. Here also, it is interesting to experiment with the competency objectives, to see how they could be written for other fields of study.
- ABET Policy & Procedure Manual
- ABET Criteria for Engineering Accreditation (U.S.)

EQUIS: an accreditation program for business and management schools, based in Brussels, under the auspices of the EFMD- European Foundation for Management

Development. The EQUIS evaluation works at the "school" or institutional level, with an emphasis on the formulation and realisation of strategies. In a sense, the "school" and program are one and the same.