Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	Standards Applied By External Quality Assurance (EQA) Agencies
Topic	4.5 Pitfalls in Standards Development

Please note that this is a text-only version. All links and animations are not activated in this version. It is recommended that you view the topic online for an interactive learning experience.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the potential pitfalls in standards development, along with good practices to follow in order to avoid such problems.

Objectives: Pitfalls in Standards Development

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to
- describe the potential pitfalls in standards development
- identify the good practices in standards development

2. Pitfalls in Standards Development

The process of developing standards has its pitfalls, including unrealistic timelines, narrow focus, poor understanding of context and consequences, the balance between specificity and flexibility, to name but a few.

Click the tabs to view the details.

Pitfalls in Standards Development

Insular Processes

One does not develop standards 'alone on a desert island' and expect them to work brilliantly once back in civilisation. It is important to include key stakeholders in the developmental process. Very simply, if key stakeholders and end users have not been consulted about what constitutes appropriate standards, they may neither recognise nor willingly use them. Furthermore, standards development requires organised and conscientious research into the subject areas or domains that will be subject to review.

Unrealistic Timelines

Standards setting cannot be achieved in a day, week, or even a month. At the outset, it takes time to analyse the intent and consequences of existing standards. Based on an understanding of the past, what must change and to what extent? Next comes the political environment and its potential for conflict. Time will be needed to

involve key stakeholders with care and discretion, followed by a tour of relevant research, efforts to indoctrinate the community, the preparation, approval and distribution of annotated drafts, and then comes a feedback cycle. Alas, there is no mention of interaction with government regulators.

Too Little Understanding of Context and Consequences

A standard-setter must understand the institutional work environment where some unsuspecting person will be "volunteered" to implement the new set of criteria. What will this require in terms of top-down support and bottom-up acceptance? How many people should be involved, and at what levels? What does the institutional and departmental work process really look like? What about data requirements and clerical support? So, what could happen when the new protocol lands on an institution?

Perfectionism

An attempt to develop a perfect set of standards, whether it is for one's own behaviour or for use by institutions and programs, is to invite failure. Perfectionism often leads to rigidity and defensiveness. Standards-setting organisations should strive to develop standards that are adaptable and scalable in a quickly changing higher education environment. Overly prescriptive standards will soon be outdated.

Perfectionism may take the form of unrealistic demands for the technical merit, quantity, and availability of information. The standard-setter must have a realistic sense of "what happens" when certain demands hit an institution. It is very easy to make demands that simply exceed the capacities of institutional QA systems. A maxim that applies both to institutions and accreditors is that "each objective, old or new, will require at least one assessment to have any meaning."

Oversimplification

Just as overly prescriptive standards are to be avoided, standards written too broadly or with little precision may lead to multiple or wrong interpretations, or make it easier to "game the system." The appropriate balance between specificity and flexibility is elusive, so it may well be necessary to provide guidance to the programs, institutions, and public.

In the late eighties' a major program accreditor used numerical "guidelines" for the number of credit hours that students needed to complete in different subjects; e.g., math & science, computing, technical analysis and design project work, and non-technical subjects. The self-assessments revealed meticulous efforts by faculties to document exact compliance with the credit guidelines, i.e., not a point more or less. Human nature is such that the reduction of a standard to a number leads to near-mindless observance.

The Gotcha Syndrome

Standards must be written clearly for ease of implementation and interpretation' -- they are not meant to trap or punish the unwary candidate. Their purpose is to supply a useful measure of QA and hopefully to mark the start line for quality improvement.

Here again, technical perfectionism can be a liabililty. It is not terribly difficult to design an evaluation that most institutions and faculties will fail. That is just as much a problem for QA agencies as the other extreme, where candidates known for their deficiencies still meet the criteria.

Limiting Access

Setting standards that raise the bar so high that only a few elite institutions or programs can meet them will ultimately have little effect on quality in higher education. Standards can have the effect of raising graduation requirements, and with them, the total cost of the degree. Add to that the effect of any number of institutions that lose their eligibility for funding.

Believing there is a Single End Product

Just as there is no perfect set of standards, there is no set of standards that are good into perpetuity. Even at the point when new standards have been developed and adopted for use, the standards-setting organisation or EQA agency should have a timeline for the revision of standards. Standards revision is necessary to incorporate changes and new developments in i) the structure of higher education; ii) research in professional programs and academic disciplines; iii) societal needs; iv) faculty hiring, promotion, and tenure policies. Revision schedules should also take into account the time needed for new standards to work their way through the educational system, while not being so frequent as to be overwhelming.

The information below details a sample standards revision policy.

A Sample Standards Revision Policy

A Sample Standards Revision Policy

Standards Revision

The Board will conduct a systematic, comprehensive review of its Standards every seven years. This involves consultation with all Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) constituents. It requires lead-time so that affected programs can comply with proposed changes. It is during this review time that Eligibility Requirements can be modified or added.

In the interim, the Board will only consider recommendations that clarify existing Standards or, that, by delaying implementation, will negatively affect the preparation of counsellors and higher education student affairs practitioners.

Philosophically, the Board is committed to measures of outcomes and both qualitative and quantitative indices of success in teaching the skills and encouraging the attitudes needed for effective counselling work. Therefore, individuals making standards proposals must be sensitive to the needs that program staff will have in attempting to meet any requirements.

The following are necessary conditions for presenting new or revised statements to the CACREP Standards. Such statements will be received only from sustaining or constituent members of CACREP.
1. the proposal shall include a statement of rationale and apparent need for the changes;
2. the proposal shall include a review of the process followed in its development, including, for example, input from consumer groups, programs affected, and related specialty groups, as well as endorsement by the governing bodies of the professional association(s); and
3. the proposal shall illustrate how the new statements will be applied in

practice, including the implications for cost to CACREP and/or institutions in the application of these statements as standards to be met for accreditation.

The Board will conduct a review of all such proposals. In every case, new statements or criteria for accreditation will be implemented only after thorough study and in an orderly, deliberate manner (i.e., time for affected programs to respond and/or make program changes will be provided). The Board encourages requests for consultation or information prior to and during any standards revisions or new standards development. Such consultation will preclude delays, duplication or errors in processing.

References
Source: Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs. (2009, January). *Policy Document.*

3. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:
1. The table below summarises the pitfalls of standards development and the corresponding good practices that can help avoid these pitfalls:

Pitfalls	Good practices
Insular Processes	Include key stakeholders in the standards development process.
Setting Unreasonable Timelines	Build adequate time into the process.
Perfectionism	Develop standards that are flexible and can adapt in an evolving higher education environment.
Poor understanding of context and consequences	Work closely with pilot institutions to assess the feasibility of the proposed QA scheme, especially its data and personnel requirements
Oversimplification	Develop standards with appropriate level of precision and specificity.
The Gotcha Syndrome	Develop standards that can be easily interpreted and implemented.
Limiting Access	Set standards that take into account all types of institutions.

Believing there is a Single End Product	Consider revision of standards a part of standards development.

2. In chapter 4.4, Program-Level QA, you will find references to standards written for engineering and business/management programs. Standards for institutional review and accreditation may be found on the web sites of the major U.S. institutional (regional) accreditors, such as the New England Association (NEA) and the North Central Association. To see a 'strategic' approach to QA and evaluation, we recommend a look at the EQUIS program (under the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD).

Your mentor will help you to find these and other useful reference materials.

References
Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs. (2009, January). *Policy Document*.