Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	Standards Applied By External Quality Assurance (EQA) Agencies
Topic	4.6 Current Trends in Standards Development

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1. Introduction

CURRENT TRENDS IN STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT

This topic discusses the changing structure and delivery of higher education (HE) due to technological advances and the impact on the development of standards. You will learn about current trends in this area and the changing role of EQA agencies.

Objectives: Current Trends in Standards Development

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to
- discuss the impact of changes in structure and delivery of higher education (HE) on standards development
- describe the current trends in standards development
- explain the role of EQA agencies in monitoring these changes

2. New Trends and their Impact on Standards Development

If there is anything constant in higher education it is a constant state of change in institutions and programs. Change has come to be expected, even desired, for it brings improvement in the articulation of mission and goals, operating structures, curricular offerings, student services, and evaluation procedures.

The structure and delivery of higher education has been evolving to keep pace with technological advances. Online learning platforms have forever altered the student-teacher relationship. Not so long ago the educational experience was centered around the classroom, while today it is distributed to learners via computer technologies, such as video streaming and secure learning chat rooms. Institutions have thus expanded their capacity to serve learners in traditional and non-traditional settings, previously beyond their reach.

The standards of many EQA agencies were conceived for use in a conventional campus setting of classrooms and libraries, with professors lecturing to students in usually uncomfortable seats. Distance learning enables education to overcome the boundaries of place, space, and time. In an "asynchronous" mode, the student may determine when and where to connect to providers. EQA agencies have had to reconsider how they measure quality. This reflection has prompted a number of EQA

agencies to consider expansion of their scope from a national to an international perspective.

Listed below are trends in standards development that may be traced to the impact of technology on higher education.

Click on tabs to view the details.

Trends in Standards Development

Greater focus on student learning outcomes and evidence-based standards

EQA agencies have moved from input-based standards to a focus on student learning outcomes as standards, and/or evidence-based standards. EQA agencies are less inclined to fixate on the existence of a library building with an "appropriate" collection of books and journals, adequate seating, and regular operating hours (preferably 24/7). Instead, institutions are asked to show that students have access to current scholarly and technical information that is suited to the curriculum. Of course, much of this can be obtained online, if only there are enough terminals. This is one example of the decline of "bean-counting" approaches to evaluation.

Once upon a time the question was "how many oranges do you have and what color are they?" Today the question goes this way: "you say that you have oranges, but can you make orange juice?" For that matter, we could add criteria for taste, nutritive value, and consistency.

EQA agencies now focus on standards that refer to evidence of clear objectives for the knowledge and hands-on skills that students must acquire in each course, and for a degree. It is no longer sufficient to design courses around a conventional syllabus, for the game now involves specific learning objectives and outcomes – including the students' ability to "actually do something" that involves a synthesis of theory and practice.

Accountability has taken on additional meaning, beyond reaching a predefined level of achievement. That level is now defined in terms of learning outcomes that are more complex than a "72 or a "high passing" grade. The performance indicators may now include ratings of performance in six specified tasks that combine in a competency. This signals a change in the way that we formulate learning objectives, and in our methods for evaluation and grading. Further, there is a difference in what we measure. Grading was once fixated on correct answers and, granted, correctness still matters in some subjects. That said, there is a greater emphasis on problem solving (almost as an art form) and the thought processes that lead to a conclusion.

Minimum performance standards already exist in some form in the protocols for professional and specialised accreditation. The shift toward performance–based standards has prompted a number of EQA's to adopt practice requirements, sometimes disguised as competency objectives. Practice-based standards range from learning activities in the general curriculum to specific practicum and internship requirements. With some variation in terminology, it is fairly common to find references to "integration of theory and practice," and "practical synthesis."

One last point before moving on, something called "modularisation." This refers to planning and delivering courses in modules; discrete, somewhat compact, and largely self-contained course units. The term is often used to describe the elements of online courses. More pertinent, however, is the conversion to modular courses prompted by the Bologna Declaration of 1999. One goal of "Bologna" was to make course learning objectives, content, and intended outcomes "readable" and easily

transposed from one HE system to another, or easily interpreted for transfer students. In effect, this set the European continent to work writing what amount to competencies (which created a need for new assessment methods).

Greater focus on diversity standards

Technology and the rise of the global marketplace have placed a new focus on diversity issues in higher education. **Peter Ewell (2008)** indicates in his book ***U.S. Accreditation and the Future of Quality Assurance*** that "greater attention to diversity on the part of all of higher education is required in the light of the substantial demographic shifts in enrolment that the coming decade will bring" (p. 136). As the bachelor degree...replaces the high school exit qualification as the minimum educational requirement for entry into the technological and service-based job markets of developed nations, the students entering institutions will increasingly come from diverse and underserved populations and will require increasingly diverse faculty to meet their needs."

In the scenario described by Ewell, is faculty diversity the paramount issue, or one of many? Standards are the topic, so let us approach them from that standpoint. Ewell predicts a demographic shift (already happening), combined with upward movement of the minimum education standard for job entry. In the U.S. there is already a debate over how much the threshold standard for college & university admission has effectively declined – not increased. The data show a marked increase in the percentage of entering students who need remedial or developmental work in core academic subjects. Some observers see a "mission creep" as colleges & universities take on this task as a concomitant of expanding access. Money also enters the debate; i.e, who will bear the cost (and political heat) of either improving secondary school preparation, the cost of longer enrollments, or the budgetary impact of student attrition? Ewell makes a fair point in this short tract, but as with so many things, it should be viewed in a broader context. It is, after all, a multi-dimensional problem with no facile solutions.

Greater need to examine quality indicators related to delivery of education

Electronic delivery of education has affected the standards and processes traditionally used by EQA agencies. Technological advances in the delivery of education over the past ten years have popularised terms such as synchronous and asynchronous learning. However, electronic delivery is not the only change that has occurred in the structure of higher education communities. Institutions and programs have developed new models such as cohort groupings of students, revised academic calendars, service learning opportunities and course modules. There has been no time for adequate research into which models work best for which groups of students or even if there are comparable results across learning platforms.

A movement toward developing global standards

The recognition of higher education as a service that crosses borders has changed the structure of higher education while forcing some EQA agencies to expand their services from a national to an international perspective.

- At institutional level, EQA agencies have had to determine whether to include international branches of established national institutions in the review process. Simultaneously, foreign institutions now request QA reviews from EQA agencies based in other nations, because such recognition may represent a higher level of quality in the eyes of the public.
- In the case of professional programs, EQA agencies have started to work across borders, because their graduates have been doing so for years. This is

especially true for professions such as accounting, computing, engineering, and certain health professions. In other cases, EQA agencies working at program level have received requests from countries seeking QA review services, partly because of their quality standard, and partly as a less costly way to mount a new EQA program. Some professions have even entered into mutual recognition agreements across national borders based upon the idea of substantial equivalencies of their preparation standards (e.g., architecture; interestingly, architecture accreditation in some systems includes a 'portfolio' procedure).

In some cases, "equivalency" is based upon a comparison of national EQA standards and procedures. Comparisons based only upon procedures are not always dependable; after all, "standards drive processes." Some professions have brought representatives from different countries together to develop global or regional standards (e.g., technologies, health sciences)

3. Changing Role of QA Agencies

Just as these trends have been propelled by changes in higher education attributed to improved technologies, QA agencies need to consider the impact of these changes on the QA review process. In particular, is there a need to develop new standards or refine existing standards to maintain quality in educational offerings? These trends also highlight the need for standards-setting EQA agencies to:
1. Have transparent and open processes and procedures for standards revision on a regular and systematic basis;
2. Clearly identify the purposes and unit of analysis for which standards are being developed or revised; and
3. Understand the underlying philosophical approach fpr a definition of quality. Without a clear sense of purpose and consequences, it is too easy for the concern of the day to dictate a one–size fits all approach to quality assessment or for new standards to be continually added on, leading to assessment for its own sake, rather than assessment for the sake of quality.

4. Discussion

Discussion: Future Trends and the Role of EQA Agencies

Consider the future. How do you see societal needs and changes affecting the delivery of higher education? How will EQA agencies need to modify their approach to assessment and to their supporting role in HE management?

5. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- Institutions and programs are constantly evolving to keep pace with the changes in the structure and delivery of higher education that are attributed to technological advances.
- The advent of new HE structures and delivery methods has propelled EQA agencies to re-examine how they measure quality, leading to new trends in standards development, such as:
    - An increased focus on student learning outcomes, notably competency outcomes, and evidence-based standards
    - An increased focus on the need for diversity standards
    - A need better adapt quality indicators to the delivery of new forms of education
    - A movement toward developing global standards
- QA agencies need to monitor these trends and develop new standards or refine existing standards to maintain quality in educational offerings.