

Subject	Operating an External Quality Agency
Segment	Structures and Management
Topic	1.4 Quality Assurance Frameworks

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1. Introduction



You will know from your prior studies and experience that there are many ways to define quality. This topic explores how agencies differ in the way in which they define quality and the frameworks and methodologies they put in place to assess it. You will learn how some agencies follow the 'fitness-for-purpose' definition of quality and look into the ways in which higher education institutions (HEIs) or programs fulfil the objectives they aim to achieve. The topic also discusses QA agencies that emphasise pre-determined sets of standards for the HEIs or the programs they quality assure. In addition, the topic explores the areas of focus in quality assurance activities and highlights how these focus areas of assessment overlap and vary between institutional and program accreditation exercises.

Objectives: Quality Assurance Frameworks

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to

- describe the various ways of defining quality in higher education differentiating between the 'standards-based' and 'fitness-for-purpose' approach to quality
- compare the contexts in which the minimum requirements and high standards models of quality assurance are applied
- identify the focus areas of assessment for institutional and programme review and accreditation processes

2. Defining Quality

Although the concept of quality in higher education is widely discussed by its stakeholders they would probably, if pressed, find it difficult to define quality precisely. In practice, it is a relative concept that means different things to different people. For instance, while discussing the quality of a HEI, different stakeholder groups may have different aspects in mind:

- Students may focus on the facilities provided and the perceived usefulness of their education for future employment;

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- Teachers, on the other hand, may pay attention to the teaching-learning process;
- Management may give importance to the institution's achievements;
- Parents may consider the achievements of their children; and finally
- Employers may consider the competence of the institution's graduates.

Given that each stakeholder has a different approach to defining quality, it is not possible, therefore, to talk about quality as a single clear-cut concept. Any definition of quality must be understood in terms of the context in which it is used. In the case of HEIs, one should bear in mind that an institution may be of high quality in relation to one factor or from the perspective of a category of stakeholders, but may seem as being of low quality in relation to another. Considering these factors, Harvey and Green (1993) and Green (1994) have identified a number of approaches to conceiving quality. Green (1994) lists five different approaches to quality in the field of higher education and says it can be viewed:

- In terms of the exceptional (highest standards);
- In terms of conformity to standards;
- As fitness for purpose;
- As effectiveness in achieving institutional goals; and
- As meeting customers' stated or implied needs.

Based on various understandings of quality and the context, QA agencies adopt a particular definition of quality to develop their procedures. In summary, some QA agencies build their understanding of quality, taking the 'self-defined' goals and objectives of the institution or program as the starting point. Other agencies determine quality with reference to a set of standards, specifications or expectations set externally. The agencies of the latter group define quality relative to an external requirement. They may not care what an institution itself means or wants to do. Rather, the agency demands that at the very least it does A, B or C, which are set as external requirements. There are also differences in the levels set by the agencies to demonstrate quality – whether these are minimum requirements or high standards.

In the following section, we will discuss the understandings of quality that are commonly adopted by QA agencies.

Standards-based understanding of quality

In the 'standards-based' understanding of quality, institutions must demonstrate their quality against a set of pre-determined standards. Adherence to standards developed externally by a reference group is seen as a threshold level of quality. Compliance to norms, accountability, adherence to rules and regulations and adopting codes of practice are predominant here. This is also the practice where the outcomes and competencies acquired are important, as in the case of licensing for professional practice.

It may be noted that standards are not necessarily quantitative. To judge whether standards are met, some level must be agreed on or set. This level may be quantitative (e.g. student-teacher ratio) or qualitative (adequate, competent and qualified faculty). From the examples given within brackets, it is clear that issues perceived to be quantitative can also have a qualitative basis. In addition, it is clear that most qualitative aspects can be given a quantitative expression. For example, we can talk about the student-teacher ratio in terms of numeric data based on the assumption that a particular staff:student ratio is necessary for good teaching and learning. On the other hand, the description of competent and qualified faculty can be expressed in terms of academic qualification, years of experience, publications record, student evaluation of faculty, and so on which also gives a measure of quality in relation to teaching staff.

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In QA activities in the past, quantitative criteria were considered adequate in demonstrating that a standard had been met, but now it is more usual to find qualitative criteria. For institutions this can assist in individuality of purpose and operation. In keeping with this trend to take externally set standards may also be expressed in qualitative statements, such as occurs in regional accreditation agencies of the USA. Some agencies develop standards based on good practices required in quality institutions or programs. There are also agencies that spell out detailed specifications to be fulfilled relying more on quantitative specifications. There are, thus, widely different approaches or models that quite large numbers of agencies have adopted.

The set of standards developed by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges, USA is an example of a qualitative approach while the standards developed by the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) is an example of the latter. AICTE has a set of standards that must be fulfilled for the establishment of new institutions wishing to offer undergraduate degrees in engineering and related areas. The standards set by AICTE are meant to check whether institutions have the potential and adequate facilities to offer quality programs. For certain aspects, AICTE has outlined quantitative standards. These include, for example, student intake, land area, carpet area, funds, faculty size and the library requirement. Details for one item – Central Library – are given in the information box below. On the other hand the US example shows that the standards are broadly expressed and that it is up to the institution to meet the standard in a way appropriate to their mode of operation, student body and so on. The institutions in this latter case needs to be able however, to demonstrate that they have reached the broadly phrased standards using whatever kind of data will support their case – including quantitative data as necessary.

Click the following link to view the quantitative standards for the establishment of an institution to offer new degree programs in engineering and technology as well as the qualitative approach to standards.



[Quantitative and Qualitative Standards \(India, USA\)](#)

Quantitative and Qualitative Standards (India, USA)

Quantitative and Qualitative Standards

Quantitative standards for the establishment of an institution to offer new degree programs in engineering and technology (India)

Central Library

The central library for an admission of 240 students per year will have a carpet area of 400 Sqm.

At the time of establishing a technical institution with three branches, there should be a minimum of 4000 volumes in the Library distributed as below:

- Each branch will have 250 titles with four multiple copies.
- In subjects like Mathematics, Humanities, Physics, Chemistry, etc. there should be total of 1000 volumes.

There should be a minimum of 12 technical journals - 6 Indian and 6 International for each

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branch of engineering. While this is essential for institutions offering P.G. program, the number of International Journals may be relaxed, though preferred for those offering only U.G. Programs.

Accordingly, the norms for the initial stock of books, yearly addition of books and the number of journals to be subscribed are as given below:

SI. No.	Item	Minimum
1.	Initial Stock of Books for three branches in Institution	4000
2.	a. Each Branch of Engg. (A) b. Mathematics, Applied Physics Applied Chemistry, Humanities, Social Science and Management Science (B)	1000 (in each branch)
3.	Yearly addition of Books (Average) a. For (A) 1 title per student admitted to the branch b. For (B) 0.2 title per student admitted per year	
4.	Number of Tech. Journals a. For (A) 12 (6 National + 6 International) b. For (B) 12 (6 National + 6 International)	

Source: AICTE website

Qualitative Approach to Standards

Standards for Accreditation; Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges

Standard one: Mission and Purposes: The institution's mission and purposes are appropriate to higher education, consistent with its charter or other operating authority, and implemented in a manner that complies with the Standards of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education. The institution's mission gives direction to its activities and provides a basis for the assessment and enhancement of the institution's effectiveness.

Standard two: Planning and Evaluation: The institution undertakes planning and evaluation appropriate to its needs to accomplish and improve the achievement of its mission and purposes. It identifies its planning and evaluation priorities and pursues them effectively.

Standard three: Organisation and Governance: The institution has a system of governance that facilitates the accomplishment of its mission and purposes and supports institutional effectiveness and integrity. Through its organisational design and governance structure, the institution creates and sustains an environment that encourages teaching, learning, service, scholarship, and where appropriate research and creative activity. It assures provision of support adequate for the appropriate functioning of each organisational component.

Standard four: The Academic Program: The institution's academic programs are consistent with and serve to fulfill its mission and purposes. The institution works

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systematically and effectively to plan, provide, oversee, evaluate, improve, and assure the academic quality and integrity of its academic programs and the credits and degrees awarded. The institution sets a standard of student achievement appropriate to the degree awarded and develops the systematic means to understand how and what students are learning and to use the evidence obtained to improve the academic program.

Standard Five: Faculty: The institution develops a faculty that is suited to the fulfillment of the institution's mission. Faculty qualifications, numbers, and performance are sufficient to accomplish the institution's mission and purposes. Faculty competently offer the institution's academic programs and fulfill those tasks appropriately assigned them.

Standard Six: Students: Consistent with its mission, the institution defines the characteristics of the students it seeks to serve and provides an environment that fosters the intellectual and personal development of its students. It recruits, admits, enrolls, and endeavors to ensure the success of its students, offering the resources and services that provide them the opportunity to achieve the goals of their program as specified in institutional publications. The institution's interactions with students and prospective students are characterized by integrity.

Standard Seven: Library and other information resource: The institution provides sufficient and appropriate library and information resources. The institution provides adequate access to these resources and demonstrates their effectiveness in fulfilling its mission. The institution provides instructional and information technology sufficient to support its teaching and learning environment.

Standard Eight: Physical and Technological Resources: The institution has sufficient and appropriate physical and technological resources necessary for the achievement of its purposes. It manages and maintains these resources in a manner to sustain and enhance the realization of institutional purposes.

Standard Nine: Financial Resources: The institution's financial resources are sufficient to sustain the quality of its educational program and to support institutional improvement now and in the foreseeable future. The institution demonstrates, through verifiable internal and external evidence, its financial capacity to graduate its entering class. The institution administers its financial resources with integrity.

Standard Ten: Public Disclosure: In presenting itself to students, prospective students, and other members of the interested public, the institution provides information that is complete, accurate, timely, accessible, clear and sufficient for intended audiences to make informed decisions about the institution.

Standard Eleven: Integrity: The institution subscribes to and advocates high ethical standards in the management of its affairs and in all of its dealings with students, prospective students, faculty, staff, its governing board, external agencies and organizations, and the general public. Through its policies and practices, the institution endeavors to exemplify the values it articulates in its mission and related statements.

Source:

http://cihe.neasc.org/standards_policies/standards/standards_html_version#standard_one

The examples above showed you that deciding whether something is of quality depends on whether or not it conforms to externally-derived standards. Contrary to

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this perspective, the 'fitness-for-purpose' understanding of quality begins not with external standards but with the institution's purposes.

Fitness-for-purpose (FFP) understanding of quality

In the 'fitness-for-purpose' approach to quality, an organisation or object is 'fit for purpose' if:

- There are procedures in place that are appropriate for the specified purposes(s); and
- There is evidence that these procedures are, in fact, achieving the specified purpose(s).

In this sense, an institution that achieves the goals and objectives it has set for itself is considered a quality institution. The goals and objectives of the institution or program become the lens through which the QA agency analyses the quality of the institution or program.

The 'fitness-of-purpose' approach assumes that the institution has determined which purposes or mission it will pursue although this is usually ratified by both internal and external stakeholders – funding authorities, governments and so on. The institution is then measured against those purposes. Hence the 'fitness-for-purpose' approach implies that we are talking about the mission set out by the institution for itself and the extent to which it can demonstrate it is fulfilling the mission.

This approach to quality is suitable in systems where other mechanisms ensure that pre-determined or threshold-level standards are met by the institutions or programs. It is also effective in systems with good self-regulation mechanisms, where institutional diversity is promoted (as against conformity to standards) and where institutions of higher education are granted a high level of autonomy.

Within the same country, different QA agencies might have a different understanding of quality depending on their mandate so there is unlikely to be one approach operating. For example, professional bodies that look into the quality of professional areas of studies build their understanding of quality around the competence of the graduates to practice the profession. In the same country, the agency responsible for monitoring the establishment of new institutions would have different expectations and philosophy of QA. Very often, agencies use a combination of different understandings of quality as required by the context in which they have to operate. They then develop their quality assurance practices around this. The stand of the Higher Education Quality Commission (HEQC) of South Africa is an example of this, as illustrated in the information below:



[Balancing the Different Emphases of Quality: the Higher Education Quality Committee of South Africa](#)

Balancing the Different Emphases of Quality: the Higher Education Quality Committee of South Africa

In view of the prevailing higher education policy and educational context, the HEQC's understanding of quality encompasses fitness for purpose, value for money, and individual and social transformation, within an overarching fitness of purpose framework. (...)

- Fitness for purpose is examined in the light of the institution's mission and

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- goals and definition of its identity.
- Fitness of purpose is examined with regard to the manner and extent to which an institution's mission and academic activities are responsive to national priorities and needs.
 - Value for money is assessed by considering the extent to which efficiency, effectiveness and economies of scale are embedded in the quality management of the core functions of the institution.
 - Transformation is assessed with regard to the development of individual students as well as the country's requirements for social and economic development.

Source: HEQC Institutional Audits Manual 2007

As might be expected the choice of approach - 'fitness-for-purpose' or 'standards-based' - influences the methodologies followed by the QA agency. For example, the idea of audit is more open to the use of the 'fitness-for-purpose' approach as it looks at QA mechanisms in an institution while accreditation is more commonly 'standards-based'. The fitness-for-purpose approach has been criticised because it is said that it undermines the 'fitness of purpose', that is the appropriateness of mission or purpose of an institution. For instance, when evaluating performance against aims and objectives defined by the institution itself, the review team may find that the self-defined aims and objectives have been fully met. But this tells us nothing, however, about the academic worth of these aims and objectives. Indeed, the mission may have been pitched, deliberately, at a modest level although there is no substantial evidence this is the case since governments and regulatory authorities have a role in oversight of higher education in a country and are a safeguard against such practices. Nonetheless the potential of abuse has led to criticisms of the approach based on fitness for purpose.

While the different approaches to defining quality in HE are often seen as opposing it is also difficult to separate the two definitions as on a practical level it is not possible to have an absolute 'fitness-for-purpose' understanding of quality. Some amount of what is 'acceptable and appropriate' to be considered as quality can be found in all definitions of quality and there are certain non-negotiable national development requirements within which HEIs must determine their mission. This takes care of the appropriateness of purposes, ('fitness of purpose') even if the QA agency chooses 'fitness-for-purpose' as its focus.

Woodhouse (2006) argues this case and says that 'fitness for purpose' inevitably includes 'fitness of purpose'. He points out that we have a historic meaning of quality as exceptional, and there has been a gradual shift in usage to refer, sometimes but not always, to serviceability. In the context of this variability of meaning, pressures on organisations (educational or otherwise) to display quality have led to the growth of many definitions of the term. In elaborating definitions, he explains how some people have explored and distinguished every possible nuance (eg Harvey & Green, 1993), and some people evince a Humpty Dumpty approach to words: "When I use a word it means exactly what I want it to mean". The information below explains how quality can be viewed as 'fitness for purpose'.



[Quality = Fitness for Purpose \(FFP\): Definition for all Seasons](#)

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Quality = Fitness for Purpose (FFP): Definition for all Seasons

Q=FFP might sound too precise a definition for HE, and some people have rejected it on those grounds. However, it is not too precise a description if one immediately asks 'whose purpose?' and acknowledges that there will be a multiplicity of answers. In Q=FFP, the stakeholders indicate the purpose and the educators provide the fitness. Thus, for example, worthwhile educational goals are specified, and students are enabled to achieve them. In determining what is worthwhile, academic standards, employer demands, student aspirations, societal expectations and Government exactions need to be taken into account in varying degrees, so there are many valid interpretations of 'worthwhile'.

FFP embraces the different types of institution, with their different goals: the special-purpose university, the general university, the vocational college, the institute of technology. All can define their purpose(s) and achieve quality on the same definition but in their own terms. Within one institution, the multiplicity of purposes can be acknowledged, as the institution provides a context in which different people can move differently and achieve different personal goals.

Some people feel they have a smart and telling rejoinder to the adoption of FFP as the definition of quality, by saying 'Ah, but the important thing is fitness of purpose!' This is not wrong, of course, but simply a prior issue. It is at the stage of setting objectives that fitness of purposes is (or should be) carefully considered. Working out how to be fit to achieve those purposes comes later.

At this point, Q=FFP comes full circle. If you set out to do something exceptional, then Q=FFP aligns quality with being exceptional; set out to transform students and Q=FFP becomes quality as transformation; set out to add value, and Q=FFP becomes quality as value-added. Clearly quality by fact or perception are just Q=FFP, with the purpose being set via specifications or customer satisfaction respectively. Another gloss on the expression of quality that is sometimes used is 'doing the right things well', and this clearly also collapses into Q=FFP.

One can say therefore that Q=FFP embraces all the other definitions.

Source: Woodhouse, D. (2006). Quality = Fitness for Purpose, Presentation at APQN Conference, Shanghai, 2 March 2006.

The Chilean QA agency (the Comisión Nacional de Acreditación) has used a definition of quality that combines both approaches to defining and measuring quality and highlights the need for HEIs to take responsibility for their quality. The information below explains the Chilean case.



[The Chilean QA Agency's Approach](#)

The Chilean QA Agency's Approach

The Chilean QA Agency's Approach In the Chilean case, quality is defined as the combination of two main elements:

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- External consistency, which means the way in which a program or an institution adjusts its operation to the requirements set by its academic, disciplinary or professional reference group (the university community defines what is expected of a university, the architectural community defines what is expected of a program of architecture). It is important that these requirements are kept to the essential core of competencies or functions that must be fulfilled.
- Internal consistency, which means the way in which the institution or the program adjusts to the priorities and guidelines stated in the mission statement and its definition of purpose. Thus, while all architects will have the same basic competencies, the architects of university A will be quite different from the architects of University B, because they will adhere to a different set of priorities.

In the case of programs, this is translated into a graduating profile, which clearly states the expected learning outcomes of students, and the commitments the institution makes when enrolling them.

Source: CNAP, Handbook for Self-Assessment, 2006 (Translated from Spanish)

Minimum Requirements vs. Standards of High Quality (or Good Practice)

While virtually every QA agency would claim that they are aiming at the improvement of quality, some quality assurance models ensure only that the minimum requirements are fulfilled for a particular status. Such models are generally meant for compliance purposes and the outcome has implications for approvals and sanctions. Within the context of diversification and privatisation, many developing countries are confronted with some low level providers and have no system in place for dealing with them. Thus, minimum standards are now frequently a priority in those cases. The case of Chile in the 1990s, described in the information below, is an example of a regulatory approach to ensuring quality. Click the link below to learn more about the licensing of new private institutions in Chile.



[Licensing of New Private Institutions in Chile](#)

Licensing of New Private Institutions in Chile

The purpose: To make sure that all new institutional proposals comply with basic quality requirements, that they have the necessary resources to operate, and that during their initial years, there is a consistent advance towards the implementation of the initial proposal. At the end of the process, institutions are either certified as autonomous, or lose the public recognition that entitles them to grant valid degrees and must close down.

The agency: The Consejo Superior de Educacion (CSE), created by a constitutional law in 1990, has nine members from higher education institutions and other social organisations. It is chaired by the Minister of Education, and has joint funding: part of it comes from the national budget, and part from fees paid by the institutions that apply for licensing. It has technical staff, and operates mainly through the work of consultants and evaluators hired for specific purposes.

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The procedure: The CSE reviews all proposals for new, private institutions. It evaluates each proposal and either approves it or points out the reservations it may have. In the latter case, the proposal goes back to the institution, which has two months to modify its proposal and re-submit it. The CSE takes a final decision on approval or rejection. If it rejects the proposal, the institution cannot be opened. If it is accepted, then it is legally recognised and may start operating under CSE supervision.

During the first six years of operation of an institution, it must submit a set of institutional data every year (including academic and financial information). Students may be tested by external examiners sent by the CSE, and at least twice, the institution is visited by a team of external assessors who analyse the development of the project and the degree to which it is fulfilling its goals. During this time, new programs and degrees must also have the approval of the CSE. Every year, the CSE sends the institution an action letter pointing out the perceived strengths and weaknesses, and the actions the institution must take. At the end of the sixth year, assessment is global, and if the institution is considered to have developed adequately, the CSE certifies its autonomy. If not, supervision may be extended for a period up to five years, after which the institution is either certified as autonomous or closed down.

The CSE may also, during the period of supervision, close down an institution if it considers that the institution is not acting on its recommendations.

Source: Lemaître, 2005.

Source: Lemaître, 2005

Complementing the above approach, within the same country other initiatives emphasising the improvement of institutions can exist side by side with the regulatory approach. Sometimes, the same agency may have two different approaches. One ensures minimum requirements, while the other pays attention to high standards. The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) for example has developed a two stage process for institutional accreditation comprising a quality audit followed by an assessment against national standards.

Depending on the stage of development of the higher education system, QA agencies may set standards of high quality. Moreover, the frame of reference for assessment may be 'high quality' and not just fulfilment of minimum requirements. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) in the US calls its standards for accreditation 'characteristics of excellence of higher education'.

This discussion may appear to present contradictory approaches to quality assurance. But it should be remembered that quality assurance deals with institutions and programs of varying levels of quality so there is huge variety in the contexts. Moreover, the quality concerns of countries vary greatly. Within the same country, many mechanisms may co-exist to address different quality concerns. There should be co-ordination between these various quality assurance efforts. In general, those QA agencies that look into minimum standards and those that go beyond the minimum requirements in the same system complement each other. Mechanisms are required to ensure a threshold level of quality as well as to enhance quality among institutions having crossed the threshold level.

3. Focus Areas in QA Activities

Areas or aspects considered by QA agencies have a lot in common. Indeed, while they may have different names, or follow different organisational structures, most quality assurance agencies look at the same things even though they may have different emphases. For example, four QA agencies in the Philippines accredit programs. The information below highlights how similar they are in their scope of quality assurance. The areas considered by QA agencies that accredit institutions cover similar ground.



[Standards for Quality Assurance – Program Accreditation by the Four Accrediting Associations of the Philippines](#)

Standards for Quality Assurance – Program Accreditation by the Four Accrediting Associations of the Philippines

The (accreditation or quality assurance) agencies engage qualified faculty members and professionals to develop detailed criteria specific to each program or course of study. The criteria may differ from one agency to another, as might their application, but the scope of the review based on the areas covered by the standards of each agency is almost identical.

S. No.	ACSC-AA	PAASCU	PACU-COA	AACCUP
1.	Purposes and Objectives	Purposes and Objectives	Purposes and Objectives	Mission, goals and objectives
2.	Faculty	Faculty	Faculty	Faculty
3.	Instruction	Instruction	Instruction	Curriculum and program studies
4.	Library	Library	Library	Library
5.	Laboratories	Laboratories	Laboratories	Physical facilities and laboratories
6.	Physical plant and facilities	Physical plant and facilities	Physical plant and facilities	
7.	Student personnel services	Student services	Student personnel services	Student
8.	Social orientation and community involvement	Social orientation and community involvement	Social orientation and community involvement	Extension and community
9.	Organisation and research	Administration	Organisation	Administration

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	administration		and administration	
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Source: Phelps, 2001 In Pursuit of Continuing Quality in Higher Education through Accreditation: The Philippine Experience, IIEP case study, 2003

Certain areas are key to assessing quality. This is true in all agencies, regardless of differences in the country context in which they operate and the unit of quality assurance.

In August 2002, the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau of Education, Bangkok sponsored an experts meeting on 'Indicators of Quality & Facilitating Academic Mobility through Quality Assurance Agencies' for the Asia-Pacific region. The following information highlights the areas of assessment for institutional quality that were agreed upon in this meeting.



[Areas of Assessment for Institutional Quality](#)

Areas of Assessment for Institutional Quality

The meeting was well attended by quality assurance and higher education experts from eight countries. Participants at the meeting agreed that the following areas are key to quality:

- Integrity and mission;
- Governance and management;
- Human resources;
- Learning resources and infrastructure;
- Financial management;
- Student profile and support services;
- Curricular aspects;
- Teaching-learning and evaluation;
- Research, consultancy and extension; and
- Quality assurance.

The following are the areas to be considered under the key areas that the participants identified:

Key Focus Areas for Quality Assurance

Integrity and mission

- Honesty and transparency in policies and procedures
- Interaction with the community and stakeholders
- A clearly formulated realistic mission
- Aims and objectives known to all constituents of the institution
- Equity and reservation for disadvantaged groups

Governance and management

- Autonomy of governance
- Organisational structure

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- Delegation of powers
- Institutional effectiveness
- Strategic plan
- Documentation
- Modernisation of administration

Human resources

- Recruitment procedures
- Adequacy, qualification and competence of staff
- Awards, honours, membership, prizes, medals of learned societies of staff
- Retention
- Staff development
- Recognition and reward
- Staff workloads
- Welfare schemes
- Grievance procedures

Learning resources and infrastructure

- Land and buildings
- Ownership
- Labs and lecture halls
- Library and information technology facilities
- Library spending per student
- Spending on computing facilities per student
- Health services, sports and physical education and halls of residence
- Campus maintenance
- Optimal usage
- Community use of institutional facilities
- Commercial use of institutional facilities

Financial management

- Funding sources
- Ownership of resources
- Sustainability of funding
- Resource mobilization
- Resource allocation
- Accountability
- Liquidity
- Budget for academic and developmental plans
- Unit cost of education
- Strategic asset management
- Matching of receipts and expenditure

Student profile and support services

- Admission procedures
- Student profile – gender, age, social strata, geographical distribution, foreign students, enrolment by levels of study, age ratio, staff/student ratio, out-of-state enrolment, distribution of entry grade
- Drop out and success rate
- Progression to employment and further studies
- Student achievement
- Student satisfaction
- Personal and academic counselling
- Participation of staff in advising students
- Merit-based scholarships

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- Other scholarships and fellowships
- Informal and formal mechanisms for student feedback
- Student representation
- Student complaints and academic appeals
- Student mobility
- Recreational activities for students
- Placement rate of graduates
- Employer satisfaction with graduates
- Graduate earning by field of study
- Alumni association and alumni profile

Curricular aspects

- Conformity to goals and objectives
- Relevance to social needs
- Integration of local context
- Initiation, review and redesign of programs
- Program options
- Feedback mechanism on program quality
- Interaction with employers and academic peers
- Demand for various course combinations

Teaching-learning and evaluation

- Teaching innovations
- Use of new media and methods
- Co-curricular activities
- Skill and competence development
- Projects and other avenues of learning
- Linkage with institutions, industries and commerce for teaching
- Linkage for field training
- Monitoring student progress
- Continuous internal assessment
- Use of external examiners
- Examination schedule, holding of examinations, evaluation, declaration of results
- Remedial and enrichment programs

Research, consultancy and extension

- Institutional support for research
- Staff active in research
- Research students by field of study
- Number of PhDs awarded per academic staff
- Number of research projects per academic staff
- Research projects sponsored by industry
- Public sector research funding
- Ratios of research expenditure and income
- Research assistantships and fellowships
- Staff supported by external research grants
- Existing research equipment
- Usefulness of research results for education
- Social merits of research
- Interdisciplinary research
- Student involvement in faculty research
- Research quality - citation of publications, impact factors, patents and licenses
- Benefits of consultancy to industry and the public

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- Community-oriented activities

Quality assurance

- Internal quality assurance
- Institutional research on quality management
- Co-ordination between the academic and administrative functions
- Outcomes of external quality assessments
- Academic ambience
- Educational reforms

These areas indicate how a group of QA agencies have identified key areas with a bearing on the quality of institutions. You will notice that some of them could be linked to quantitative expressions while some are qualitative.

While the above example highlights the areas of assessment for institutional quality, the case of the Philippines presented highlights the point of view of program quality. The two examples indicate that the areas of assessment overlap for institutional and program accreditation. However, there are differences in terms of focus and scope. While the curricular aspects under institutional accreditation may be more concerned with the overall policies and practices of the institution, program accreditation would look more closely into the quality of the curriculum of the program under review. Institutional accreditation might also look at the quality of one or more programs to seek evidence for the evaluations. However, the purpose in this case is not to pass judgment about the quality of the curriculum of that program. Rather, it aims to make inferences about the overall curricular aspects of the institution.

There are also agencies that focus on assessment of broad functions of an institution for example the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) in Hong Kong focuses on teaching and learning as a whole in a university while another agency examines the quality of research programs. In the case of QAC, the agency samples programs for examination to gain a sense of QA policies in QA and the extent to which they are these policies are manifested in practice. There is no attempt to comment on specific disciplinary aspects of programs but to use the programs as a source of evidence of QA in the institution. The areas examined by the panels examining the teaching and learning function are provided below:



[Quality Assurance Council \(Hong Kong\)– Focus Areas in the External Assurance of Teaching and Learning Quality](#)

Quality Assurance Council (Hong Kong)– Focus Areas in the External Assurance of Teaching and Learning Quality

1. Articulation of Appropriate Objectives
2. Management, Planning and Accountability
3. Programme Development and Approval Processes
4. Programme Monitoring and Review
5. Curriculum Design
6. Programme Delivery including resources, teaching mode and the student learning environment
7. Experiential and other 'Out of Classroom' Learning
8. Assessment
9. Teaching Quality and Staff Development
10. Student Participation

Subject	Operating an External Quality Agency
Segment	Structures and Management
Topic	1.4 Quality Assurance Frameworks

11. Activities Specific to Research Degrees

Source: QAC Audit Manual p14

In summary, there is a great deal of overlap in the areas that are examined in the various QA processes. The way that different areas are examined does however differ with the intention of the examination of the areas be that for accreditation, review or audit.

4. Discussion

Discussion: Quality Assurance Frameworks

1. Reflect on the standards versus fitness for purpose debate from your country and/or institutional perspective, taking into account the key elements discussed in the course notes.
2. For the context of your country, which focus would be of immediate priority - 'minimum standards' or 'standards of high quality'? What would be useful in the long term?
3. If your country needs a QA agency to look into 'minimum standards' what would be the priority areas to be addressed?
4. If a QA agency is established in your country with 'high standards' as its focus what type of institutions or programs of your country will benefit from that?
5. What are the three key areas for quality assessment in your system from an external QA perspective and why?

5. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- Quality is a relative concept that means different things to different people.
- In the 'standards-based' understanding of quality, adherence to standards developed externally is seen as a threshold level of quality. Standards may be of two types:
 - Quantitative
 - Qualitative
- In the 'fitness-for-purpose' approach to quality, the goals and objectives of the institution or program become the lens through which the QA agency analyses the quality of the institution or program.
- In practice, QA agencies apply both the 'standards-based' and 'fitness-for-purpose' approach for different purposes.
- There are two broad models of quality assurance:
 - Minimum requirements model, which ensures only that the minimum requirements are fulfilled for a particular status. Such models are generally meant for compliance purposes.
 - Standards of high quality model, which focuses on improving institutions. In this case, the frame of reference for assessment may be 'high quality' and not just fulfilment of minimum requirements.
- Quality assessment may take place either at the program level, the institutional level or at the level of institutional function such as teaching and learning.
- While the areas of assessment overlap for institutional, functional and program accreditation, there are differences in terms of how the areas are approached in QA exercises.