

Subject	Operating an External Quality Agency
Segment	Methods of Review and Accreditation
Topic	2.2 Implementing an EQA Process

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1. Introduction



This topic deals with the implementation of a QA process for institutions or programs. You will learn about the factors that determine the scope of operations of an agency and whether or not, for example, it will include private as well as public higher education institutions (HEIs) in its range. The topic also discusses the various influences on the way agencies discharge their roles and responsibilities

Regardless of the conceptual approach of an agency and the QA frameworks adopted, flexibility is essential as each situation has particular circumstances to be taken into account. You will learn how agencies introduce flexibility in quality assessment to take account of institutional diversity and the maturity of the quality assurance process itself.

This topic also explores the different approaches related to the setting and measuring of standards and the types of evidence needed for review teams relative to the frameworks against which they determine the outcomes of a QA review.

Objectives: Implementing an EQA Process

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to:

- outline the factors that need to be considered in decisions about the scope of an agency's operations
- discuss emerging trends in higher education that are providing challenges to QA agencies in terms of how they might adapt QA frameworks and methods to accommodate these new trends (such as off-shore provision, distance and on-line learning)
- describe the ways in which agencies respond to institutional and contextual factors through taking flexible approaches to self-assessment and other QA activities without compromise to the integrity of the processes
- describe the importance of a framework in QA decision making and the different approaches adopted by QA agencies to developing and using standards
- discuss the situations in which QA agencies use quantitative evidence and the benefits and disadvantages of the approach

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- discuss the situations in which QA agencies use qualitative evidence and professional judgment and the benefits and disadvantages of using the approach

2. Scope of Operations

A key consideration in the establishment of QA agencies and design of QA frameworks is the scope of institutions and programs to be dealt with for example:

- If there is a need for separate EQA mechanisms or agencies to deal with public and private institutions?
- How will for-profit higher education operations be assessed?
- What should be the focus of QA reviews – institution or program?
- If there is a need for different EQA approaches to distance and online education?
- How will higher education providers from outside the jurisdiction be treated?
- Will the international activities of local providers be within scope?

Should both Private and Public Institutions be Included?

In some countries, only private institutions are subject to external quality checks while public institutions are exempt (this was the case until recently in Chile and Malaysia). In some countries, such as Australia, the principle is that only institutions benefiting from Federal government funding must go through the national audit process. In some countries, there are two separate bodies to monitor the quality of public and private institutions. This was the case until recently in Singapore, where the establishment and operation of private HEIs came under business control mechanisms while the public institutions were monitored by the ministry responsible for educational funding. In Malaysia, with the creation of the Malaysian Qualifications Authority (MQA) in 2007, there is now a unified national QA body for both private and public institutions. A similar arrangement is emerging in Singapore.

Even with differences in the way that private institutions are established and monitored in some countries, it is increasingly the case that the same standards are applied both to public and private institutions be they for profit or not for profit. Good practice indicates that both public and private institutions should be treated equally in terms of the threshold level of quality they must demonstrate. In some systems this equality of treatment has also been extended to foreign providers.

What should be the Scope of EQA activities?

The scope of EQA depends on the mandate or objective of the particular agency as it has been established. The Higher Education Funding Council of England carries out a Research Assessment Exercise while Institutional Reviews are carried out by QAA of England and investigate very different aspects of research performance. In Hong Kong the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) focuses only on the teaching and learning functions of universities while a separate agency examines university research performance.

In some cases, the scope depends on negotiation or consultation within broad parameters between the QA body and the institution. For example, in the second round of audits of Australian universities, The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) determined two themes for emphasis in each individual audit. For all the universities audited from 2008, 'Internationalisation' was a pre-selected theme. The other theme was selected with input from the institution and informed by a structured view of areas of academic risk. Auditees selected a wide range of themes

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such as student experience, academic governance, nursing, community engagement and so on.

Should non-traditional delivery situations be examined separately?

The development of new technologies for the delivery of academic programs poses difficult questions for QA assurance systems. Agencies and their governing authorities need to decide if they will include 'institutions' that are virtual rather than physically based on a traditional campus. There are several examples of large HEIs of this kind including the Open University (UK); Phoenix University (US) and the Arab Open University which mostly serves students in the Middle East. Solutions to this QA challenge vary with some countries establishing special arrangements for QA of on-line and distance education providers (as with the Distance Education and Training Council – DEST- in the US) while others, such as Bahrain, Germany, and Australia apply the same framework to both traditional and non-traditional delivery methods.

An argument in favour of treating on-line providers in the same way as traditional providers is that there is a strong trend internationally, even among very traditional campus-based institutions, to provide elements of on-line learning opportunities for their on-campus students. This style of delivery of learning experiences is sometimes referred to as 'FDL' (flexible, distant learning) or 'blended learning'. In these modes, students who are nominally on-campus students engage in a variety of activities in a variety of locations including on-campus, their homes and workplaces. Consequently, the once clear distinction between on-campus and distance or on-line learning is now very blurred. However, for a QA agency, there are questions of scale in terms of the numbers of on-line HEI providers to be reviewed and the specialist skills of reviewers needed for the task. Where there are large numbers of institutions involved it may be more effective to have a specialist QA system for on-line providers. Regardless, however, of the agency arrangements for conduct of EQA processes of blended learning, there are typically guidelines, criteria or policies that provide a framework to take account of the special characteristics of FDL. Some examples of these approaches are the Council for Higher Education (CHEA) standards for distance education and on-line courses and the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) guidelines for distance education programs. In addition, the accrediting authorities in the US have adopted a common statement of good practice for programs delivered on-line to complement the various general frameworks used by these agencies.

Another emerging challenge for QA agencies is the rapid development of transnational education. The past decade has seen enormous growth in the number of institutions establishing off-shore operations for example, many Australian, UK and US institutions have campus arrangements in other countries and compete in a global education market. It is usual for the host country to have QA processes controlling who may operate in their jurisdiction. In addition, the provider's home-country QA arrangements are likely to monitor what the institution provides off-shore.

A further consideration is the method that will be used by a country or region to review the quality of the off-shore provisions of an institution when it is subject to an institution or program level review. An important rationale for attention off-shore operations is the risk to the reputation of an institution. This aspect needs to be included in QA processes to be applied by an agency and may require visits to off-shore sites or teleconferences to interview students, staff and other stakeholders.

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On what Level Should the EQA Focus?

Most QA systems in higher education incorporate both institutional and programmatic approaches for EQA. Differences on the ground emerge according to who is the custodian of the programmatic approach and who is responsible for the institutional level. The balance of power between the two is a key factor in how QA is played out in the system and where the emphases lie.

The argument in support of an institutional approach over the programmatic approach is that if the institution has good QA systems, it is reasonable to expect it will ensure the programs are all 'good'. Conversely if there is great variation between programs, this might mean that the institution does not have an effective and comprehensive EQA system to cover program matters. This should become evident in an externally driven QA exercise. For this reason, EQA teams working at institution level usually sample some programs to investigate the processes in place to ensure program quality. An appropriate program sampling that balances spread and depth in its investigations will be able to spot if there are problems at the program level.

The argument in support of a programmatic approach is about ensuring the direct relevance of programs to students and employers. This is a well-accepted rationale for programs in professional areas of studies. In any event, the programs form the backdrop for the institutional quality review and without them institutional review could be considerably weakened.

These debates may lead to interesting developments in EQA in the future. Systems may decide to alternate between the two approaches and build elements of each approach into the subsequent cycles of EQA. An example would be a cycle of focused QA following a whole of institution approach or vice-versa. AUQA's focus on two themes following a cycle of whole-of-institution audits is similar to this approach. Another option is a combination of the two, such as an institutional approach that is combined with national reviews of selected programs. The Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) review of MBAs in South Africa alongside institutional approaches is an example of this.

History suggests that as institutions become more mature they take responsibility to demonstrate that they are capable of monitoring their own program quality. Consequently external QA is carried out more often at the institution level. Programmatic approaches will remain but for reasons associated with mutual recognition. This will most likely be driven by participating HEIs rather than QA agencies. It is anticipated also that as institutional capacity to assure program quality develops, the purpose of programmatic approaches to QA might move towards more macro level approaches. This could involve national reviews based on select areas of studies, perhaps against national standards of some kind.

What criteria may be used to determine eligibility?

It is common for QA agencies to establish eligibility criteria for institutions seeking to enter into an EQA process. In most systems, these criteria do not amount to a rigorous screening mechanism, but instead establish a threshold for eligibility. For example, a program accreditor might require evidence that at least one full cohort of students have passed through the program. Eligibility criteria may help to prioritise the work of the agency. The National Assessment & Accreditation Council (NAAC), India, undertakes assessment and accreditation of higher education institutions which have operated for at least five years as HEIs as recognised by the state governments or the University Grants Commission. This stipulation helps to ensure that there is adequate data for assessment and it helps NAAC to target its efforts in a huge higher education sector. As an organisation funded by public monies, NAAC

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gives priority to the institutions that are eligible for government subsidy. Click the link below to view the general eligibility criteria for institutions to seek NAAC assessment and accreditation.



[General Eligibility Criteria for Institutions to Seek NAAC Assessment and Accreditation](#)

General Eligibility Criteria for Institutions to Seek NAAC Assessment and Accreditation

While there are diverse types of HEIs in the country, some coming under the provisions of alternate Regulatory bodies, with their own QA Agencies, NAAC Assessment and Accreditation shall cover the following Institutions, as per the eligibility criteria mentioned therein:

1. Universities recognised under Section 2(f) and 12(B), of the University Grants Commission (UGC) Act, 1956 or established under Section 3, which have completed 5 years since establishment or with a record of at least 2 batches of students having completed their degree programs, whichever is earlier (hereinafter referred to as "Recognised Universities"). For purposes of Assessment and Accreditation of Universities, their Schools, Departments, Centres and Units shall be taken as the components.
2. All Universities recognised under Section 3 of the UGC Act are eligible regardless of the number of year of establishment
3. Colleges / Institutions / Autonomous Colleges, affiliated to a 'Recognised University', and Constituent Colleges coming under the jurisdiction of 'Recognised Universities' (as defined in '1' above) and which have completed 5 years since their establishment or with a record of at least 2 batches of students having completed their degree programs, whichever is earlier (referred to as 'Recognised Colleges', 'Recognised Autonomous Colleges' and 'Recognised Constituent Colleges' respectively);
4. Institutions coming under the jurisdiction of Professional Regulatory Councils are eligible if they are duly recognised by the Concerned Councils
5. Any other Institutions / Units (Including cross-border and trans-national Indian/ Foreign Institutions) may also be taken up for Assessment and Accreditation by NAAC, if directed by the UGC and / or the Ministry of Human Resources Development, Government of India.

Source: <http://www.naacindia.org/viewevents.asp?eventid=243>

In other systems, where institutions have a choice as to whether or when they will enter an EQA process, the eligibility criteria help to ensure that only those institutions or programs with a fair chance of meeting requirements volunteer for review. This saves institutions and programs the frustration and expense of going through a process that is too demanding.

In the US, where the institutions own the large regional accreditation agencies, the eligibility requirements represent an additional set of standards that all member institutions have agreed to meet. The eligibility criteria vary between the numbers of years of operation to evidence of fulfilling a set of standards. The Northwest Commission on Colleges & Universities of the USA, for instance, accredits institutions based on nine standards and related policies. It also has 20 Eligibility Requirements that must be met by applicants. These are quite different from the standards for

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accreditation, although each Eligibility Requirement presents an expected level of performance or pre-condition related to one of the standards.

Some U.S. accreditors have introduced initial or candidacy status as the first step toward full accreditation. In Oman, the process of accreditation is based on two stages with completion of a quality audit being the first stage.

3. Overview of Elements Influencing Scope

Many of the similarities and diversities of approach discussed above in this topic can be summarised under nine determinants that shape an EQA approach as highlighted by Woodhouse (2001). Click the link to view the determinants of the EQA approach.



[Determinants of the EQA Approach](#)

Determinants of the EQA Approach

1. What is being evaluated
 - institution, faculty, department, program
 - services, divisions
 - research, teaching, other activities
 - quality, standards
 - how does evaluation of the different levels/areas interact, conflict, duplicate?
2. Why is it being evaluated
 - improvement, accountability, professional certification, funding
 - who is setting the agenda?
 - what are the terms of reference?
3. How is it being evaluated
 - audit, assessment, accreditation
 - seeing behind the facade
4. By whom is it being evaluated
 - level 1: what is the agency or authority: government, institutions, professions, institution
 - level 2: who actually does the evaluation: academics, non-academics, discipline specialists those from other disciplines, foreigners
 - who initiates the evaluation?
 - who owns the evaluation? - issues of trust
 - who owns the conclusions? who is the client?
5. Data required
 - internal PIs
 - existing data v. specially generated or collected
 - samples/examples of processes, activities, results
 - witness of staff, students, employers, alumni
6. Evaluation process
 - data collection & interpretation
 - triangulation
 - forming judgments/making decisions
 - who decides
7. Reporting
 - public or private
 - different forms for different stakeholders
8. Sanctions

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- withholding/withdrawal of approval
 - funding - nature, target
 - 'naming & shaming'
 - meta-evaluation
 - external validation (or otherwise) of internal review
9. Follow-up
- responsibility
 - methods
 - timelines
 - external approval & monitoring of action plan

Source: Woodhouse, D. (2001). Fundamentals of QA, Pre-conference workshop, INQAAHE conference 2001, Bangalore.

4. Flexibility in QA Approaches

As you will have seen from your studies so far, the context of QA varies greatly. Consequently, even when a QA agency has established its framework and scope the agency needs to exercise a degree of flexibility when establishing expectation of both the institutional self-assessment or review and the way the QA framework will be applied. It should be noted that flexibility is common in regard to the data to be provided by an institution for EQA. While there may be some mandated data required by an agency it is also a matter of institutional choice as to what other evidence it will submit for the EQA process. A brief overview of some other strategies for ensuring flexibility follows.

Flexible Approaches to Self-Assessment

The QA agency may initially develop a general framework for self-assessment of the institutions or programs. As the methodology develops, however, it must consider fine-tuning its approaches. One of the issues it might consider is awareness of 'institutional diversity' to ensure that the requirements of self-assessment or self-study are relevant and useful to institutions. Institutions will vary in terms of their broad character: they may be research-intensive; teaching-oriented; young; old; specialized; and/or multi-faculty. Whether the exact same set of guidelines, criteria and expectations for self-assessment are adequate is an issue in these systems.

The issue of flexibility is also raised in complaints from institutions about the burden of repeated accreditation visits so some regional accrediting agencies in the USA offer different options for conducting a self-study. For example, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) has four major models for self-study:

- the comprehensive model;
- the comprehensive model with special focus;
- the selected topics model; and
- the alternate self-study model.

Some regional accrediting agencies have introduced projects that are expected to lead to accreditation being continued without burdensome self-study requirements. These may be seen as variations of flexibility in the approach to self-assessment.

Flexibility in Applying the QA Framework

The fitness-for-purpose approach is one way of introducing flexibility as it takes account of specific missions relating to local circumstances. More generally, the

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agency must consider if and how it can use the same set of standards and criteria for different types of institutions and different types of programs.

When institutions of different types fall under the purview of an agency, the quality debate often raises this question: 'How can the same set of standards apply to all institutions or programs?' Some agencies rely on peer assessment to take note of institutional diversity while others have successfully addressed this issue by developing differential frameworks. The information below provides an example of National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India, which has developed criteria for assessment having different weights depending on the type of institution.



[Flexibility to Suit the Institutional Context: NAAC](#)

Flexibility to Suit the Institutional Context: NAAC

India has a diverse and complex system of higher education where institutions differ in their governance, funding pattern, freedom to innovate in curriculum, locality, and target group they serve, mission and vision. While it is not possible to evolve a different framework for each type of institution, the major differences have been taken care of by considering three major classifications – University and university-level institutions, Autonomous colleges and Affiliated/Constituent colleges. The NAAC's methodology takes care of the differences among these categories at two levels – differential frame of reference, and differential criterion weightage. The differential framework is explained in the manual. For each category of institutions, the NAAC has developed a separate manual with guidelines.

Taking cognizance of the difference in the goal and functioning of the institutions, different criteria have been allotted differential weightages as shown below:

Criterion		University	Autonomous college	Affiliated / Constituent college
I	Curricular Aspects	150(15)	100 (10)	50 (5)
II	Teaching-learning and Evaluation	250 (25)	350 (35)	450 (45)
III	Research, Consultancy and Extension	200 (20)	150 (15)	100 (10)
IV	Infrastructure and Learning Resources	100 (10)	100 (10)	100 (10)
V	Student Support and Progression	100 (10)	100 (10)	100 (10)
VI	Governance and	150 (15)	150 (15)	150 (15)

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VII	Innovative Practices	50 (5)	50 (5)	50 (5)
	TOTAL SCORE	1000	1000	1000

As can be seen, the weightage differs among the different types of institutions for the first three criteria. In view of the limited freedom an affiliated college has in curriculum design, the weightage is only 50 whereas for teaching-learning which is fully under the control of institution, it is 450. Similarly, since many affiliated colleges are undergraduate colleges without a strong research component, as a means to initiate the research efforts, weightage 100 has been allotted for the Research, Consultancy and Extension dimension of affiliated colleges. However, for autonomous colleges, in view of the research orientation they are expected to promote under the autonomous status, the weightage for the same criterion has been raised to 150.

While the example cited above gives different weightages depending on the type of institution, the case of the MSCHE is an example of differential weightages to suit the type of program irrespective of the type of institution. To cite another example, the NCA of Colombia uses weightages to take into account whether an institution is research intensive or not.

Source: Stella, 2002 and NAAC Manual for Assessment and Accreditation for Universities, 2007

Flexibility Introduced by Reviewers

Each HE entity has a unique characteristic and no agency could cater to all the differences by developing differential frameworks. But the matter of context of operation is an important issue and this is generally handled by the reviewers who are sensitized or oriented to individual HE situations. Training programs for reviewers and briefings usually discuss the importance of contextualizing the QA process. In addition, agencies facing the issue of 'institutional diversity' and 'contextualization' constitute their review teams carefully. They do so by choosing reviewers who will bring relevant experience and expertise to the team so that the team understands the context but does not on the other hand compromise the application of the quality assurance framework by being too lenient. If reviewers do not differentiate between 'understanding the context' and 'excuses for non-performance', the credibility of the agency and objectivity of the assessment will be damaged. QA agencies must have appropriate training programs and safeguards in place if they wish to introduce flexibility through peer assessment and at the same time maintain consistency between approaches to quality assurance across the spectrum of HIM.

5. Methods and Evidence for QA Outcomes

A critical element in quality assurance is a framework against which review team, and ultimately the agency, can make decisions. A QA process may examine many academic and administrative aspects of the institution or program being reviewed and collect data on those aspects. However, the information gathered does not speak for itself. An evaluative judgment must be made, and the evidence gathered must be interpreted in light of some prior questions. This may be done in a rather explicit fashion, where both quantitative and qualitative benchmarks are set for desirable

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achievements and the reviewer simply establishes the evidence. However, there are also systems in which the assessment is based on the professional judgment of the reviewers.

The use of evidence, judged against a quality assurance framework, leads to decisions with important consequences. Agencies do this in many ways. Some develop standards with or without quantitative targets. Others agree on a set of broad indicators, while yet others define benchmarks, detailed indicators, or broad statements against which quality is assessed by experts.

Use of Standards

QA agencies adopt different ways of developing and using standards. For example, the standards prescribed by the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) mostly relate to 'inputs' to the institution required for offering a quality program. On the other hand, some agencies have shifted their focus to standards based on 'outcomes'. In most program accreditation in professional areas of studies, standards relate to good institutional procedures and practices. A practice-focused perspective is adopted in these cases. These agencies interpret quality in terms of how effectively new entrants to the profession have been prepared for their responsibilities. In recent years, this has resulted in many professional bodies paying attention to competency-based standards. These focus on the appropriate and effective application of knowledge, skills and attitudes. They emphasise the relationship between formal education and work outcomes. This means that they are concerned with the ability to apply relevant knowledge appropriately and effectively in the profession. The agencies that adopt this understanding of quality generally require institutions and programs to demonstrate the 'output' of the program rather than the 'input'. The focus is therefore on developing competence among students to become good professionals, rather than on the number of hours of tutorials or hands-on experience provided. The development of competency-based standards in the USA is described in the information below.



[Move towards Competency-based Standards of Professional Bodies \(USA\)](#)

Move towards Competency-based Standards of Professional Bodies (USA)

The evolution of standards for programs in architecture provides an illustration. As early as 1902, following the procedures established in law and medicine, practitioner groups had developed an examination system in Illinois for graduates of fourth-year programs in architecture. By 1914, minimum standards for architecture programs were established. In 1940, a national board was created in order to oversee accreditation of schools of architecture on a national basis. While numerous revisions of this basic approach occurred over the next several decades, a significant new approach was adopted in 1982. The board's new mandate was to apply "achievement-oriented performance criteria" in its evaluation of architecture programs. Under this approach, each school "...is responsible for seeing that each graduate completes a liberal studies requirement and attains the necessary achievement for each of the ...major areas" of the program. Criteria are grouped under four major headings: Fundamental knowledge; design; communication; and practice. Levels of accomplishment are stipulated for 54 different areas of practice.

Source: El-Chaws, 2001: 63-64

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Professional regulation bodies develop their methodologies based on competency-based standards in many ways. For example, the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants (CICA) has developed 'The CA Candidate's Competency Map' for its qualification (recognition or registration) process of Chartered Accountants (CAs). CICA together, with the CA institutes, represents approximately 68,000 CAs and 8,000 students in Canada and Bermuda. It has identified two types of competencies:

- pervasive qualities and skills (that all CAs are expected to bring to all tasks); and
- Specific competencies.

The specific competencies are grouped into six categories. The competencies listed by CICA for the category 'Taxation' (competencies related to taxation planning, compliance and reporting for various entities) are given in the information below.



[The Competency Map: Canada](#)

The Competency Map: Canada

The specific competencies – taxation

1. Analyses the entity's tax profile and identifies overall tax issues
 - 1.1 Understands the entity's tax profile
 - 1.2 Identifies and advises on compliance and filing requirements
 - 1.3 Describes other types of filing requirements
2. Prepares and files necessary returns in accordance with legal requirements
 - 2.1 Calculates basic income taxes payable for an individual
 - 2.2 Calculates other income taxes payable for an individual
 - 2.3 Calculates basic taxes payable for a corporation
 - 2.4 Calculates other taxes payable for a corporation
3. Practices effective tax planning to maximize after-tax returns
 - 3.1. Identifies, analyses, and advises on specific tax planning opportunities for individuals
 - 3.2 Identifies, analyses, and advises on specific tax-planning opportunities for shareholders of closely-held corporations
 - 3.3 Identifies, analyses, and advises on financial and estate-planning opportunities for individuals and families
 - 3.4 Analyses tax consequences for non-residents
 - 3.5 Identifies, analyses, and advises on tax consequences or planning opportunities associated with certain corporate transactions
 - 3.6 Analyses tax consequences of other corporate restructuring transactions
4. Prepares information to respond to assessments, file objections

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Source: CICA, the UFE candidates competency map

In addition to different ways of using standards most QA agencies have some level of specifications and reliance on quantification.

Use of Quantification

Quality as an idea is complex and multi-dimensional but as in the case of other complex ideas ways to assess quality have evolved. QA agencies may rely on quantification at various levels, such as:

- requiring institutions to demonstrate that they fulfil certain quantitative norms;
- requiring peers to assess whether the norms are fulfilled;
- requiring peer assessment to be recorded on a quantitative scale; and
- requiring the final outcome to be expressed on a quantitative scale.

This raises the question: 'Can quality be assessed against quantitative measures?'

Several points of view exist on this fundamental question. While quality assessment is necessary and inevitable for several human activities the techniques employed may be quite subjective. For instance, we depend to a large extent on human sensory perceptions for assessing aspects such as beauty, music, tea, comfort levels in air-conditioning and perfumes. It is also well recognised that we do not have clear measures for measuring many things in life such as feelings, intellect and emotion. It is widely believed that quality, like beauty, is an elusive characteristic. Nonetheless, there are some established quantitative ways that go some way towards determining whether or not quality exists in a HE institution. These are now discussed.

Quantitative norms

When there is an emphasis on consistency, compliance or agreement on expected levels of performance, QA agencies tend to develop quantitative norms. Hence, some agencies base their decisions mostly on quantitative data. Mexico's accreditation agency for engineering is a case in point where the agency uses quantitative norms as a frame of reference for quality assurance. The AICTE's standards are another example.

There are also cases of agencies which seek to ensure minimum standards that are not expressed quantitatively. The set of eligibility criteria of the accreditation agencies of the USA is an example. On the other hand, some agencies rely on quantification to consider the excellence of institutions. For example, the National Council of Accreditation in Colombia (CNA) has 'excellence' as its focus. It defines quality as the integration of 66 characteristics. For each characteristic, a series of qualitative and quantitative variables have been spelt out. The information below highlights how the variables and indicators for one of the characteristics have been spelt out.



[Variables and Indicators of a Characteristic \(Colombia\)](#)

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Variables and Indicators of a Characteristic (Colombia)

Characteristic 16: In compliance with institutional objectives and relevant program specificities, faculty size is adequate and teachers have both the commitment and qualification the program requires.

Description: It points to the fact that, to achieve the institution and program objectives, the required number of teachers should be available, their level of qualification appropriate and their commitment to the institution and to the program in question adequate. Likewise, efforts are made to find out whether the number of teachers attached to the program and their training and commitment come close to the ideal situation sought after for the specific program and institution. The above examines the quality of education in one of its core aspects.

Variables:

- Adequacy to program requirements of faculty commitment and of their specific training and level of qualification.
- Academic quality of faculty attached to the program

Indicators:

- Qualification (graduate, postgraduate, Master's, Doctoral), rating on the promotion ladder and commitment of teachers to institution and program.
- Other educational experiences of the teachers relevant to their performance in the program
- Period of time teachers have worked in the institution and program, as well as any other academic and professional experiences of faculty involved
- Relationship between the number of students enrolled in a program and the number of teachers involved. A comparison should be established with regard to full-time commitment.
- Assessment by outstanding members of academic communities of faculty committed to program.
- Assessment of program students with regard to both the quality and sufficiency of the number of students enrolled, and of the commitment of teachers involved in the program.

Source: Revelo Revelo and Augusto Hernandez, 2003: 47-48.

In summary, quantification can be used irrespective of whether the agency seeks to ensure minimum standards or standards of high quality. QA agencies that seek to ensure objectivity and reduce subjectivity of peer assessment, especially in systems where identifying competent peers might be challenging, tend to opt for quantitative measures. They claim that quantitative measures help to ensure that the quality assurance process is transparent.

Quantification and reviewer assessments

Reviewers may be required to follow certain guidelines related to quantitative measures within which their qualitative judgment must be made. For example, the accreditation methodology of the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) in India requires reviewers to express their judgment in terms of indicators, with the maximum score for each indicator being predetermined by the NBA. This is despite the NBA's methodology being oriented towards peer assessment.



[Quantification to guide peer assessment: NBA \(India\)](#)

Quantification to guide peer assessment: NBA (India)

Each of the eight criteria has been broken down into parameters, and weightages have been assigned to these parameters by the NBA. The parameters and the weightages assigned to them, which are different for diploma, undergraduate (UG) degree and postgraduate (PG) degree programs are given below:

PARAMETERS	MARKS		
	Diploma	Undergraduate	Postgraduate
I. ORGANISATION AND GOVERNANCE	(30)	(80)	(50)
A. Planning and Monitoring			
B. Recruitment Procedure & its Effectiveness			
C. Promotional Policies/Procedure			
D. Leadership			
E. Motivational Initiatives			
F. Transparency			
G. Decentralisation and Delegation & participation of faculty			
H. Constitution of GC/GB			

Source: National Board of Accreditation website

Quantification in reporting the outcome

In the case of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India, the scores given by the reviewers are used to calculate the institutional scores in percentage form. The institution's score determines its grade on a nine-point scale:

- Grade C denotes the score range 55-60;
- Grade C+ denotes 60-65; C++ denotes 65-70; B is 70-75;
- Grade B+ is 75-80; B++ is 80-85; A is 85-90; A+ is 90-95; and
- Grade A++ is 95-100.
- Institutions that do not get the minimum 55 per cent are not accredited.

Some more recently established systems follow this approach to establish credibility and demonstrate a concern with objectivity. This is especially true in the absence of

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a well-established corps of assessors or in big systems with potential for a great deal of inter-team variance. However, the faith in the existence of a relationship between numbers and objectivity is questionable. Numbers only help when certain assumptions operate. That is, they operate when a reviewer can be sure that the difference between 50 per cent and 60 per cent is the same as the difference between 75 per cent and 85 per cent, for example. This is not usually the case in practice. Quantitative measures give a misleading sense of objectivity, hiding the real subjectivity involved in setting the scores.

Here are some of the arguments for and against quantitative approaches:

Reliance on Quantification: Benefits and Disadvantages

Benefits

- It may help an agency to ensure consistency in its approach and minimise inter-team variance among the review panels.
- It may be useful in emerging systems to assure transparency, and perhaps enhance credibility.

Disadvantages

- It may encourage HEIs to report simple quantitative measures that benefit them instead of more truthful qualitative assessments.
- It may encourage HEIs to chase the measures themselves, rather than what they represent.
- Fears have also been expressed regarding the relevance, accuracy and efficacy of many measures that have been, or are likely to be, employed by the QA agencies.

Reliance on quantification and quantitative indicators becomes most controversial when the emphasis shifts from their use as an input in decision-making, to their use as a ranking device. Much depends on how the reliance on quantifications is balanced with peer assessment or professional judgment.

Use of Qualitative Approaches

While peer judgment may be guided by explicit considerations such as quantitative specifications and indicators (as discussed above), in other situations reviewers are quite free to make judgments against a broad conceptual framework, that is, there is more emphasis on qualitative approaches to making judgments.

Where this approach is adopted by QA agencies it is usually on the grounds that if they provide explicit norms and quantitative targets, these can become counter-productive to fostering institutional diversity and the 'fitness-for-purpose' approach to QA. This does not mean that compliance to standards is not considered important but rather that other mechanisms can be used to ensure compliance. Once the threshold level is already ensured, the agency can then explore how well the HE institution is performing relative to their goals and objectives. If diversity is considered important then a reliance on quantitative approaches is unlikely to be helpful.

Many sets of standards do not specify the exact data needed to demonstrate achievement of the standard but instead require institutions to provide evidence that they have sufficient resources for carrying out an activity or program, or have adequate facilities, or use appropriate teaching methodologies. It is then the

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responsibility of the institution to choose how they demonstrate that what they have in place is sufficient, adequate, significant, and/or appropriate to carry out their work well. The Chilean Comisión Nacional de Acreditación (CNAP) provides a good example of this approach but it should be noted that the agency expects the provision of quantitative evidence even though the standard is framed in a qualitative way.



[Framework: Qualitative Standards](#)

Framework: Qualitative Standards

[The Comisión Nacional de Acreditación \(CNAP\)](#), uses qualitative standards to assess programs. Programs are expected to provide quantitative data and qualitative evidence (including opinions by faculty members, students, graduates and employers) about the fulfilment of given expectations, such as the following:

Human resources

The program must prove that it is adequately staffed regarding its academic personnel—in terms of the number, dedication and qualifications— so as to perform the entire range of functions defined in its purposes. The unit must have clear and established criteria for selecting, hiring, providing further training and evaluating its academic and administrative staff.

(This formulation is followed by more detailed specifications, including a description of what is meant by adequate qualifications)

Source: Lemaître, 2005

The advantage of allowing an institution to choose how to demonstrate that it meets a standard is the acknowledgement that what is adequate for a law program, in terms of the number of faculty members or percentage hired on a full-time basis, may be totally inadequate for an architecture program or a dentistry program. Or, on the other hand, what is sufficient for a teaching institution may be quite insufficient for a research institution.

Another example of a qualitative framework which leaves open the matter of decision on what evidence needs to be provided for review is the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). AUQA provides an indicative list of areas to be covered by the institution in the review but it is left open to the institution to decide what form of evidence they will provide to the review team for determining the QA outcome. And while the approach leaves open the option for provision of qualitative evidence, other parts of the Audit Manual makes it clear that quantitative data are also expected to be provided.



[Indicative scope of QA: AUQA](#)

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Indicative scope of QA: AUQA

The AUQA pays particular attention to the academic activities carried out in the institution's name. Indicative scope of an institutional audit includes:

- organisational leadership and governance, planning;
- teaching and learning (all modes);
- processes for program approval and monitoring;
- comparability of academic standards in on-shore and off-shore programs;
- research activities and outputs, including commercialisation;
- community service activities;
- internationalisation, including contracts with overseas partners;
- support mechanisms for staff and students;
- communication with internal and external stakeholders;
- systematic internally-initiated reviews (e.g. of departments, themes), including the rigour and effectiveness of the review mechanisms employed;
- and
- administrative support and infrastructure.

Source: Audit Manual, 2008 from the AUQA website

The composition of teams, and the way in which they cover different views and disciplinary approaches, are an important factors in framing QA outcomes. Agencies that rely more on the professional judgment of a review team must be aware of the subjectivity that may creep into the quality assurance process. QA agencies handle this concern by developing manuals and guidelines to guide peer assessment. A rigorous training strategy is key to ensuring reliable peer assessment. An interesting strategy that helps enhance the objectivity of a peer review team's judgments is the requirement that they reach their conclusions by consensus, not by vote. Thus, objectivity is enhanced through a measure of inter-subjectivity, as extreme views are effectively balanced. What prevails is what all the members of the team agree on. As the discussions in this topic have revealed, QA agencies generally rely both on quantification and on peer assessment. To suit the context and their mandate, they must choose an appropriate stand. The options discussed above are not to be seen as clear-cut options. Rather, they are approaches that may be used in combination, because they bring different strengths and weaknesses to the fore.

Finally, it should be mentioned also that standards for quality assurance relate increasingly to other tools used by governments to introduce both an improved comparability and readability of qualifications, which are part of the national higher education system, i.e. qualifications frameworks and/or subject benchmarks. Qualifications frameworks provide reference points in regard to the generic competences that should have been acquired by a graduate at a certain level. Subject benchmarks, while also relying on level, also make statements on the contents and competences to be acquired by a graduate in a certain discipline. When quality assurance is conducted at the program level, it is certain that such statements do provide a valuable frame of reference for both internal and external quality assurance processes.

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6. Discussion

Discussion: Implementing an EQA Process

1. Browse the websites of five QA agencies from different regions that assure the quality of institutions and identify the broad scope of the QA activities they conduct – institutional, program or other level
2. Browse the following website for more details on eligibility criteria of Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities: [Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities \(NWCCU\)](#). How relevant are these criteria to your country or region?
3. Browse the websites of the other regional accreditors to explore their approaches to implementing EWQA. The website of the [Council for Higher Education Accreditation](#) provides links to the websites of most of the quality agencies in the US. Develop a table comparing the various stages of accreditation followed by these agencies.
4. Discuss the range of methods for introducing flexibility in an agency you know and how the agency ensures the processes remain rigorous but also appropriate for specific national or regional contexts. If you are not familiar with an agency, find one for close study on the web – you will need to examine manuals and policy documents to find how the agency accommodates differences between institutions and programs.
5. Find the review guidelines issued to institutions by three different quality assurance agencies in different regions. These will be accessible on the agencies' websites and may be labeled as a 'Manual' or 'Handbook'. Compare what each says about the type of evidence they expect to have provided for the review process including mandated sets of data, policies or other documents. Is the emphasis on quantitative data or qualitative approaches which allow the institution flexibility in how it demonstrates quality to the review team?

7. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- The following factors help determine institutions and programs to be selected to undergo an EQA process:
 - What are the eligibility criteria for institutions to go through the QA process?
 - Should both private and public institutions be included?
 - What should be the scope of the review?
 - What should be the focus of EQA: institutional level or program level?
 - How might agencies respond to new trends in HE including growth in on-line learning and cross-border provision
- The eligibility criteria to allow institutions to undergo an EQA process usually do not amount to a rigorous screening mechanism. The eligibility criteria vary between the numbers of years of existence to evidence of fulfilling a set of standards.
- While there are differences in the way private institutions are established and monitored in some countries, increasingly the standards expected from both public and private institutions are the same.
- Most higher education systems have both institutional and programmatic approaches for EQA, and variations occur depending on who is the custodian of the programmatic approach and who is responsible for the institutional level.

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- Depending on the stage of development of the higher education system, QA agencies can assess institutions against minimum standards or set standards of high quality. In some cases, assessing institutions against minimum standards is the priority where the purpose is compliance and the outcome has implications for approvals and sanctions. In other cases, QA agencies set standards of high quality and the frame of reference for assessment here is the level of "excellence".
- One way of being flexible in the application of a QA framework is to allow institutions the choice of the type of evidence they will provide – quantitative, qualitative or a combination
- Several agencies have developed frameworks that allow different weightings of emphasis depending on the type of program or institution
- Reviewers play a key role in consideration of the impact of context and diversification within institutions.
- A framework against which an agency can make decisions is a critical element in quality assurance.
- The use of evidence, judged against a quality assurance framework, leads to decisions with important consequences.
- QA agencies rely on quantification and there are both benefits and disadvantages to reliance on this.
- QA agencies rely on professional judgment when they feel that explicit norms and quantitative targets might become counter-productive to 'institutional diversity' and the 'fitness-for-purpose' approach. However, they do provide guidelines on need for demonstrating adequacy and efficiency.
- There are both benefits and disadvantages to reliance on professional judgment. Agencies should be aware of the subjectivity that may creep into the process.