Subject	Operating an External Quality Agency
Segment	Site Visits
Topic	4.2 Planning Meetings

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

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1. Introduction

In the practice of QA in higher education, a lot of emphasis is placed on selecting and training expert reviewers to ensure they are competent for the review task. But it is also essential that both the team and the institution are well prepared for the work to be completed for a particular review. Hence it is necessary for the QA agency to arrange what are, effectively, planning meetings between the different parties involved in a review.

This preparation phase typically involves a series of meetings and extensive correspondence with both the institution and the review team. The meetings, which sometimes involve teleconferencing, are labelled in different ways in different jurisdictions but are all focused on preparation for the interactions that occur between the team and the institution during the formal review processes. This phase is necessary even where the review panel does not visit the institution and relies on examination of documentation as a basis for formulating their decision on the outcome of review.

Objectives: Planning Meetings

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to

- identify the purpose and structure of planning and pre-visit meetings for review teams
- identify the purpose and structure of planning and pre-visit meetings from the perspective of the participating institution

2. The Team's First Planning Meeting

The higher education institution (HEI) subject to review and the QA agency usually collaborate extensively while the HEI is conducting its self-assessment and compiling its submission. In some cases, particularly in reviews that are focused on quality improvement rather than accreditation, agency staff members visit the institution and meet informally with the HEI staff. The main goal is to clarify agency requirements for documentation and evidence and there is a focus on explaining the QA processes for the forthcoming review. The agency representatives need to take care that they do not stray into coaching an institution but at the same time they need to maintain a collegial and helpful attitude in the interactions. It is not unusual for QA agency staff to give briefings on the process to large groups of interested HEI staff as well in a more focused way to the team driving the HEI preparations. There is also in at least one QA system (the Hong Kong Quality Assurance Council - QAC) a practice of provision of comment on the main draft submission for audit and quality improvement purposes.

The extensive documentation provided by the institution to be reviewed is supplemented by publicly available information such as media coverage and websites that may be sought out by the agency or the panel itself. The bulk of the documentation is sent to the team well ahead of the formal commencement of the review and team members are expected to read the material in depth. They are also expected to make note of any issues or gaps in the information they believe need to be elucidated by the institution ahead of a site visit or during the site visit. As well as identifying queries and clarifications needed panel members are also expected to frame, usually in writing, a broad preliminary assessment of the case being made by the institution, be that for accreditation, audit or evaluation. Typically, these initial impressions are shared between the review panel members prior to a face-to-face meeting or teleconference.

The meeting at which panel members share their preliminary views, and start the process of working as a team is referred by various names such as planning meeting; portfolio meeting; initial meeting, or simply panel meeting and is conducted face-to-face or by teleconference (or a combination).

The following example from the Bahrain Higher Education Review Unit (HERU) illustrates the scope of the business of such a meeting. In the Bahraini case the meeting is held two to four weeks following distribution of the self-evaluation document and after written comments have been shared by team members.

Bahrain Higher Education Review Unit (HERU)

Scope of Panel Meeting to Plan for the Review – HERU, Bahrain

Scope of Panel Meeting to Plan for the Review – HERU, Bahrain

'Review audit processes and the use of indicators

Discuss the Self-Evaluation Report in detail

Plan the Review in detail, including any sampling of programmes and faculties

Identify any further information or clarification required from the HEI or other sources

Decide which information is needed in advance of, and which at, the site visit

Decide whether information will be sought from partner institutions

Decide categories of persons to be interviewed at the site visit and which campuses to visit if more than one campus'

Source: HERU Institutional Review Handbook, Kingdom of Bahrain

The duration of the team meeting varies from several hours to a full day. At the end of this meeting the person responsible for steering the review process, be they team member or not, should be in possession of the information and decisions that will guide the next stage of preparatory work. This will include:

- Lists of questions and broad issues to be pursued in interviews at the site visit
- Queries to be forwarded to the institution to prepare for presentation to the panel such as additional statistics, clarification of facts
- Lists of additional documents required by the team (for example the HEI's policy on student assessment) and the date by when these will be required.
- Lists of categories of persons the panel wishes to interview and how these might be clustered in interview groups (such as staff of the library and IT departments, or staff teaching in a particular program)
- Indication of which panel member/s will take special responsibility for different aspects or tasks during the review. While all members are expected to be familiar with all documentation and features of the institution it is not unusual to ask individuals with special expertise to be responsible for oversight of a particular area e.g. a team member expert in student services might take a special interest in student service provision.

3. The Planning Meeting with the Institution

Following the first team planning meeting, the agency and a representative of the review team usually visit the HEI in person to convey the team's requirements and to discuss the logistics for the site visit. This meeting is variously described as the preliminary meeting, the pre-visit or the planning visit. There are also circumstances where the team as a whole undertakes this visit e.g. the European Universities Association procedures for the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) involves two site visits by the team as a whole.

The primary purpose of a planning meeting with the institution is to convey the requirements of the review panel and foster a common understanding about the procedures and objectives of the site visit. It is also the arena for discussion of the practical arrangements related to the visit. This meeting would not normally be the first occasion on which the agency and HEI have been interacting in relation to the review so it can build on earlier informal contacts and provision of guidance to the reviewee. It is likely, however, to be the first occasion when the HEI meets the chair or other representatives of the review panel.

The following is an example of a meeting agenda from the Quality Assurance Council, Hong Kong.

Example of Meeting Agenda

Example of Meeting Agenda

AGENDA

1. Introductions and overview of purpose of meeting (Audit Manual pages 29-30)

2. Discussion of programmes for sample review
3. Draft schedule and interviewees
4. Questions in advance and additional information requested by the Panel
5. Arrangements for the exit meeting
6. Venue for audit visit and logistics
7. Next steps
8. Any other business

The planning meeting usually requires a half-day with inspection of the physical facilities proposed for the site visit. While the tone of the meeting is collaborative, the agency makes the final decisions following discussions and follows up with formal notification of decisions made. This will include due dates for submission of additional documents and so on.

Following receipt of additional information and documents from the HEI, these are forwarded to panel members as early as feasible before the second planning meeting is scheduled.

4. The Team's Second Planning Meeting

In the period between the panel's initial planning meeting and the start of the site visit there is a great deal of activity in furthering the preparation for the site visit. Examination of the results of this activity, discussion of additional information and detailed planning for several days of individual interview sessions usually take place the day before the site visit when all panel members have travelled to the location of the HEI. This second planning meeting is held on campus at the institution or in a convenient location such as a hotel and typically goes for 3-4 hours.

The work to be completed includes:

- Review of developments since the first planning meeting
- Confirmation of 'special responsibilities' of members for topics or aspects
- Up-date on additional materials requested by the team from the HEI
- Answers to any questions sent in advance by the Panel
- The interview schedule
- Review of interview session protocols such as timing, confidentiality
- Schedule for production of the report
- Discussion of daily worksheets and detailed planning for at least the first day of the site visit

The bulk of the time of this second meeting is usually focused on fine-tuning the daily 'worksheets' which contain the session-by-session lists of interviewees and the questions to be asked in each session. While the detail of who will be in attendance at each session is confirmed in advance by the HEI, there is variation in the extent to which panel questions have been enumerated in advance in the worksheets by the agency or whoever is responsible for preparing the documentation for the site visit. In some jurisdictions, the daily worksheets contain only a few general suggestions for a line of questioning in a session while in other situations, particularly in audits, there is a tendency for more questions to be specified in advance. But regardless of the number and level of specificity of the questions presented in the worksheets there should be a direct relationship between the concerns of the team as discussed in the initial planning meeting of the panel and the questions to be asked at interview. The interview questions need to be designed to elicit the information required by the team so that it can legitimately draw conclusions for the review based on solid evidence that has been triangulated.

Another task for the second planning meeting is to decide who will ask particular questions (or be responsible for framing questions if these are not enumerated) for individual sessions to ensure the information needed is gathered.

5. Discussion

Discussion: Planning Meetings

- What strategies might be used to effectively engage participants scattered across the globe in teleconferenced planning meetings?
- What are the pros and cons of advance preparation of detailed questions for each interview session in the site visit?
- What are the pros and cons of the different ways in which the institution might supply additional material requested by the team?

6. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- It is essential that both the team and the institution are well prepared for the work to be carried on at an institution under review and hence it is necessary for the QA agencies to arrange meetings between the different parties to the exercise in the lead up to the review.
- The institutional planning meeting is an opportunity for the agency, panel representatives and the institution to understand the different perspectives and negotiate mutually satisfactory arrangements for provision of additional information and for the site visit.
- Panel planning meetings are important as team building exercises and for ensuring a professional approach to the work of the review so that the evidence necessary for drawing conclusions is available.

