Subject	Operating an External Quality Agency
Segment	Site Visits
Topic	4.3 Main Site Visit

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

This topic discusses the main site visit including activities such as creating schedules, conducting interviews and drawing conclusions. A lot of ground work is done during the planning meetings but there are invariably arrangements that need to be effectively addressed in the lead up to and during the main site visit. Designing the main site visit schedule and keeping enough flexibility to deal with emerging issues is key to the success of the visit.

Objectives: Main Site Visit

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to

- define the different purposes of site visits
- discuss the pros and cons of different approaches to organising site visits
- describe the factors that underpin the design of the schedule for the site visit
- demonstrate how review purpose and issues drive the collection of evidence
- explain the important aspects of conducting successful interviews
- discuss different panel strategies for drawing conclusions at the closure of the site visit

2. Purpose of Site Visits

Site visits conducted as part of reviews are used for many purposes including determining continuing compliance, evaluating new locations and gathering information. They may also be focused on an audit approach to examine the quality assurance arrangements in place in an institution. Reviews may be conducted at the institutional level or at the program level. The following illustrates the different purposes of site visit:

Purpose of Site Visits:

Centre Européen pour l'Enseignement Supérieur (UNESCO-CEPES)

A component of external evaluation that is normally part of an accreditation process. It may be initiated by the institution itself. It consists of external experts visiting a higher education institution to examine the self-study produced by the institution and to interview faculty members, students, and other staff in order to assess quality and effectiveness (and to put forward recommendations for improvement).

Source: http://www.cepes.ro/publications/pdf/Glossary_2nd.pdf

Quality Assurance Council, Hong Kong

The purpose of the Audit Visit is to allow the panel to test the material presented by the institution through first-hand experience and personal interactions. The visit allows the panel to clarify and interpret the material it has been given, to examine evidence, and through meetings staff, students and other stakeholders, to verify that policies and procedures are carried out in practice. The visit is organized so as to allow the panel sufficient time to pursue documentary audit trails and to form valid, evidence-based judgements about the institution's processes and outcomes

Source: http://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/doc/qac/publication/auditmanual.pdf

Depending on the exact type of review, the site visit needs to be designed accordingly. As a general rule, QA agencies provide frameworks for use in the different types of review they undertake. These might be expressed as standards, indicators, criteria and so on and are the touchstone for the work of the team. Nonetheless, regardless of the nature of the review, there are some basic principles to be followed in the design of a site visit.

Prior to the commencement of the site visit the team will already have considerable documentation on the HEI or the program being reviewed for example:

- Self-evaluation document
- Supplementary materials specified by the agency for all reviews such as student enrolment, research publications and supplied with the Self-evaluation document
- Additional material supplied by the institution at the request of the review team on the basis of preliminary analysis of information supplied at the outset. These requests are typically framed by the team at its first planning meeting.
- Publicly available information collated by the QA agency or by team members including contextual information on the education system in the country or region

Important goals of any site visit it to validate the claims in the materials supplied by questioning the academic community of the institution being reviewed. The process of checking the validity of claims made in respect of aspects of the program or institution is referred to as 'triangulation'. Triangulation requires the team to ensure it has a sound basis for its conclusions and is not relying on only one source of evidence for any of its conclusions. This is how one agency defines the idea:

Triangulating Evidence

Triangulating Evidence

The Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training – QAAET: HERU (Bahrain)

'The Panel also seeks to triangulate evidence, especially through the Site Visit. Triangulation is the technique of investigating an issue by considering information from sources of different types. For example, the Panel may discuss selected policies and their implementation with senior management, with other staff and with students to see if various opinions and experiences of the policy and its workings are consistent. Aspects of a topic may be checked through committee minutes, course and teaching evaluations, program reviews, reports of professional association accreditations, or external examiners' reports.

Where conflicting information is received from different sources, the Panel must decide how to investigate further the topic, so it can reach a considered view.

Source: QAAET, Bahrain University Quality Review Handbook http://en.qaa.edu.bh/

Also at the site visit further evidence is sought on issues that have been identified by the review team in its early deliberations Evidence in a site visit can come in various forms, including written documents, oral communication and visual inspection.

3. Organising the Site Visit

The organisation of a site visit is a collaborative effort between the institution and the QA agency or its representatives. How this is managed is a function of the way in which individual agencies operate and how they divide responsibilities.

In some systems, the agency is responsible for appointing the team members but the liaison with the institution under review and the detailed planning and the implementation of the site visit (including the writing of the review report) rest with the panel members with the Chair taking a leading role. In other words, the review team is also charged with the responsibility of organising the site visit and thus the external part of the review. The following example from Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) illustrates this approach.

Visits: Roles of Team Members

Visits: Roles of Team Members

Leader:

- The team and the institution look to YOU as the embodiment of the Middle States system and as arbiter of the ethics of peer review

Facilitator/Coach

- Develop the strategy for the team visit
- Review with the team the role of team members and the ground rules for the visit
- Review with the team Characteristics of Excellence and related accreditation materials

Organiser

- Set dates for visits
- Conduct preliminary visit
- Manage communications
- Review visit arrangements
- Analyse self-study
- Review documents
- Make team assignments
- Chair's brief Evaluation Committee Meeting
- Oral exit interview
- Final report

Source: Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)

A second approach is for agency staff to be involved in, and responsible for, the planning of the site visits including the liaison with the institution and the decision on the site visit schedule. When this approach is applied, the agency staff members typically attend the site visit and provide support to the team in the process. The agency staff members are also responsible for briefing the panel about the agency's review procedures and any special characteristics of the educational system that are relevant for the review. In this approach, the staff member is not a member of the review team, and therefore, does not participate in the discussions and deliberations of the review team. The staff member does, however, record discussions and prepare summary documents at the request of the team. The Centre of the Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Swiss Universities (OAQ) role in the lead-up to the site visit is explained below as is the role of the Audit Coordinator within the Quality Assurance Council system in Hong Kong.

Preparation for Quality Audits - OAQ

Preparation for Quality Audits - OAQ

6 On-site visits

6.1. Preparation of the on-site visit

The OAQ gives advice to the university during the self-evaluation phase if needed. It sets up the list of interview partners and the schedule of the site visit in the agreement with the management of the university and the peer leader.

Source: OAQ 2007/08 pg 7

There are two broad aspects to the role [of Audit Coordinator]. The first is essentially administrative, making all the necessary arrangements for the audit to run smoothly…The second aspect is professional, using knowledge and experience of *quality audit to advise and support the panel and to advise the institution as appropriate…he/she is not a member of the panel…*

Source: QAC Audit Manual p 66 http://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/doc/qac/publication/auditmanual.pdf

In some other systems, the staff member from the agency is a full member of the review team. This approach is, for example, practiced by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) and Higher Education Review Unit (HERU) in Bahrain. In this situation, the agency review team member also assumes the role of main liaison person with the institution under review and consults with the institution about the site-visit schedule. The visit program is designed based on the principles defined by the agency and the requirements of the panel based on their analysis of the self-evaluation report.

When an agency staff member attends the site visit (as in this approach and the second approach described above), it provides a means of ensuring that the procedures stipulated by the agency are followed and that review team members follow good practice. In addition, where the agency staff member is a full member of the team, the level of influence of the agency in the review is reinforced through review team deliberations and formulation of recommendations.

4. Site Visit Schedule

To facilitate validation and the gathering of evidence the site visit must be based on a carefully structured program that enables additional information to be collected and triangulated. The overall design of a site visit is mainly driven by the following three principles:

Principles behind Designing a Site Visit

Criteria or accreditation standards or issues to be explored

The schedule for the main site-visit should be designed in a way to collect sufficient evidence for evaluation against the standards or issues to be explored.

Triangulation

The schedule for the main site-visit should allow ample opportunities for evidence to be collected and verified from multiple sources, including stakeholders, written or visual evidence.

Follow-through on Issues raised

The schedule for the main site visit should ensure that all the concerns from the review team should be explored with the institution.

The duration of a site visit varies significantly with the nature of the review. In the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) Institutional Audits Manual 2007, the sample schedule of a site visit lasts for five days. As suggested earlier, the EUA

Institutional Evaluation Program has two 4-day site visits built-in and in the case of Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), two days are devoted to the site visit for program evaluation. But it is quite challenging to cover all aspects of an institution or a program during a site visit. These are some of the strategies used:

Designing the Visit Program: Key Considerations

Dividing interviewees into groups

Dividing interviewees into groups helps, as it can facilitate them freely expressing their views. However, it is advisable not to include supervisors and those who are accountable to them in the same group as rank and file employees are often reluctant to express their views in front of their supervisors. Generally, individual interviewees are seen once only but it may be necessary, if the review team is agreeable, to see the same interviewees more than once if there is a suggestion of reticence to speak freely in the presence of colleagues. Seeing interviewees more than once may in fact be hard to avoid in smaller institutions where the same people perform several key roles. There should also be clear rules as to whether the institution can have an observer in the interview sessions. Most external quality assurance agencies avoid this as it can hamper the interviewees' ability to express their views freely.

Ensuring adequate time for interviews

It is important to ensure that there will be sufficient time to go through the topics to be explored with each group. As a rule of thumb, approximately 10 minutes should be allowed to thoroughly explore one issue. This provides some estimation for the duration of each session, depending on the number of issues to be explored within individual session.

Having sufficient breaks

It is important to have sufficient intermissions between sessions for discussion, revision, consolidation and rest.

Interviewing senior management first

Senior management is usually interviewed first to obtain an overall picture. However, there should also be opportunities later in the schedule to clarify issues with the senior management for new issues identified during the site visit.

Usually there will be an ‘exit’ or feedback meeting with the senior management to share the key findings. In many systems, the review team provides an oral report on the main findings of the team that will form a basis of the final report. But depending on the duration and parameters of an individual review exercise, it may not be possible, or desirable, to provide oral feedback at the exit stage in the site visit. If oral feedback is provided, it is important that sufficient time is set aside in the site visit program for the team to deliberate and decide what findings might be conveyed to the institution at the conclusion of the visit.

It is common practice that the institution under review is invited during the planning stages to comment on the visit schedule. It is useful to bear in mind that significant effort is required for an institution to arrange attendance of interviewees. For the senior management, the positions of those to be involved in the site visit are usually identifiable in the submission. For other stakeholders, such as students and employers, some criteria should be provided to the institution for the selection of participants. In this case, it is important that it is possible for the review team to check the background of the proposed participants against the selection criteria. For example, it is not uncommon that students at different levels of academic achievement are selected. Sometimes, negotiation may be required to come to a right mix and size of the group of interviewees. Therefore, a sufficiently long lead time should be allowed to finalise the schedule in consultation with the institution.

In addition to scheduled sessions for interview, there are other activities that can be included in visit program:

Activities in the Site Visit Program

Document review

A site visit is also used for reviewing documentary evidence. It is normal to set aside sessions for this purpose. The institution should be requested to arrange a room with the full set of labelled documents so that the review team can examine the documents in private. It is useful to have a photocopier in the room but make sure that agreement has been reached with the institution about whether the documents can be photocopied. It may be that some documents are confidential and therefore cannot be taken away by the review team.

Walk-around

In addition to touring of facilities, a walk-around session where the review team members meet representatives of the institution outside the organised meeting without a strict agenda can also be included to obtain an overall impression of the operation of an institution. Permission to conduct these sessions should be sought from the institution.

Open session

An open session is one which is open to everybody in the institution to come forward on their own initiative to meet the team. If there is such a session, the institution has to make sure the session is publicised and arrangements made to allow participation.

External sites

Excursions to other local, national or international campuses, collaborative partners and internship providers may be included. If it is not possible, the institution may be required to provide audio visual materials to cover these facilities or to arrange teleconferences.

With so many aspects to be scheduled, the construction and negotiation of a program is a major task for the QA agency, the team and the institution. Below is an example of a set of factors to be considered for the construction of a visit schedule, in this case for an audit visit over four days.

Construction of the Schedule

Construction of the Schedule

Factors to be taken into account in constructing the draft site visit schedule include:

- There are approximately 30 time slots for use over 3 days of interviews (day 4 is reserved for call-backs and discussions).
- Time slots for interviews are generally 45 mins long.
- The panel meets privately to de-brief after each set of 2 interview sessions.
- The maximum number of interviewees per session is normally no more than 8.
- No interviewee will appear before the panel more than once unless absolutely crucial – for individuals holding more than one position a decision needs to be made in what capacity they should meet the panel.
- Student sessions will run in parallel with each panel member leading discussions with a group of students.
- Where a panel selects programmes for close scrutiny there will be some groupings that will be duplicated or triplicated depending on the numbers of programmes selected eg several groups of students from each of the sampled programme are likely to be met in parallel sessions.
- An Open Session is included for self-nominated interviewees.
- As a general rule it is preferable to interview the Deputy Chairs of Comittees where the Chair is a member of eg the management team and is already been interviewed in that capacity. (For example, the President would be interviewed as CEO rather than as Chair of the academic policy body)
- Interviews on Days 1-2 of the audit visit generally start at 9:00am and finish after 5:00pm at which point the panel meets for 1.5-2hrs to review the day as a whole and plan the questions for the following day.
- The Day 3 schedule will end with a general discussion during which the Panel will start the process of sharing impressions and perspectives on the University. This will lay a foundation for the work of reaching conclusions on Day 4.

Other factors to take into account are:

- Staff groups should include as far as possible:
  - Staff from the sampled programme areas
  - New staff (up to one year)
  - Newly promoted staff
  - Teaching award winners at Institute and faculty/departmental level
  - Staff at different levels
  - Tenured/untenured staff
- Student groups should include
  - Students from the sampled programmes
  - Student leaders
  - Peer mentors
  - Mainland and international students
  - Students at different stages of their programmes
  - Exchange scholarship recipients

Reading: Examples of Visit Programs

Examples of visit programs can be found in the following documents:

- EUA, Institution Evaluation Program (IEP), Guidelines for participating Institutions, Brussels, 2008.
- Higher Education Quality Committee, HEQC Institutional Audits Manual 2007, Pretoria 2007.

An example from the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in India is attached. It should be noted that in the international QA arena this schedule would be considered to be very demanding. The formal schedule extends over a longer working day that most review schedules and does not include time-slots during the day for review and private discussion between members as the interviews proceed. In addition, the review team prepares their report on the evening of the second day, shares findings with the institution at the start of day 3 and seeks institutional feedback. The more usual approach is to provide a brief oral statement of findings to senior management at the end of the meeting and seek feedback after the institution has formally received a written report and has the time to read it carefully.

Visit schedule – NAAC

Visit schedule – NAAC

Day 0: Arrival of the team members and peer team discussion I 17:00-19:00 hrs: Peer team discussions – I: At the place of stay
(Private meeting for the peer team only)
Agenda for the discussion:

- Compare notes on the individual tentative evaluation
- Identify issues that need further probing
- Share the responsibility of collecting further evidence
- Share the responsibility of report writing

Day 1: Visit to the Institution

Session 1: 09.00 – 10.00 hrs: Meeting with the Head of the Institution and members of the steering committee that prepared the self-study report
Session 2: 10:00 – 11;00 hrs: Meeting with the Governing body
Session 3: 11:00 – 12.30 hrs: Visit to the library and computer centre and interaction with the staff there (12:30 – 14:00 hrs: Working lunch with the members of the governing body and steering committee)
Session 4: 14:00 – 15:30 hrs: Visit to a few departments and interaction with the faculty there (the team goes in sub-groups)
Session 5: 15:30 – 16:00 hrs: Verification of documents
Session 6: 16:00 – 17:00 hrs: Interaction with Parents and Alumni (and Tea)

19:00 – 21:00 hrs: Peer team discussion – II: At the place of stay
(Private meeting for the peer team only)
Agenda for the session:

- Discuss the evidence collected so far
- Identify the issues to be checked further
- Agree on the provisional evaluation of the team
- Discuss the tentative highlights of the report

Day 2:

Session 7: 09:00 – 13:00 hrs: Visit to the college office and remaining departments and facilities (13:00- 14:00 hrs: Working lunch with heads of the departments)

Session 8: 14:00 – 15:00 hrs: Interaction with a group of students
Session 9: 15:00 – 16:00 hrs: Checking the documentary evidence
Session 10: 16:00 – 17:00 hrs: Seeking further clarification and sharing the issues of concern with the Head of the Institution

19:00 – 21:00 hrs: Peer team discussion – III: At the place of stay
(Private meeting for the peer team only)

- Agenda for the session:
- Agree on the scores
- Agree on the draft report

Day 3: Final day of the visit

Session 11: 09:00 – 10:00 hrs: Sharing the draft report with the Head of the institution
Session 12: 10:00 – 11:00 hrs: Receiving feedback from the Head of the institution
Session 13: 11:00 – 12:00 hrs: Finalising the report in the light of the feedback
Session 14: 12:00 – 12:30 hrs: Exit meeting

5. Logistics

Before the site visit, the following logistical arrangements need to be considered in light of the visit program:

- Meeting room and furniture
- IT facilities
- Note taking
- Name plates
- Location map and fire exits
- Lunches and refreshments
- Transportation between campuses or other external sites, if necessary

Let us discuss some of these arrangements in detail.

Logistical Arrangements

Meeting room and furniture

These should be appropriate for the activities planned and have an appropriate size and table and chairs to accommodate the biggest groups of interviewees.

IT facilities

A computer, projector, printer and photocopier are highly desirable. Sometimes, video conferencing may be required. However, attention should be paid to security issues to ensure the confidentially of the review proceedings.

Note taking

It is important to decide how notes from the interviews are taken, i.e. by the members of the review team, by a transcriber or by a staff member from the QA agency. There are also examples of interviews being recorded.

Name plates

It is impossible for the review team members to remember all the faces in a site-visit. Therefore, it is important to ask the institution to provide a list of the participants for each session in advance and have name stands in place in each session.

Site visits are also used to study evidence provided by an institution, and it is not unusual for a large amount of documents to be tabled during the site visit. A good practice that helps the panel considerably is systematically listing and numbering of the documents so that they can be easily referenced. This can also facilitate reference to the relevant evidence when drafting the review report.

The review team may ask for additional written information as the visit proceeds but this should be kept to a minimum with each item carefully logged as it is received.

6. Exploring the Issues on Site

Having studied the self-assessment report in detail and the additional information provided, the team will have come to grips with the issues for the review. The line of questioning for the site visit will then flow from this identification and understanding of the issues relative to the standards, criteria, indicators or other framework set out by the agency to guide the review.

The following example for a hypothetical review shows a summary of issues (*What needs to be explored?*), who might be questioned about the issues (*Who should be asked about the issues?*) and what is the evidence that is sought (*What is the relevant evidence?*). This summary is the springboard for the questions to put by the team to the interviewees. It is important to note that while there will be some commonality in questions that might be asked from review to review, each question needs to be tailored for the circumstances and be focused on the issues.

Issues for the Site Visit

Issues for the Site Visit

What are the issues?	What needs to be explored about an issue?	Who should be asked about the issues?	What is the relevant evidence?
Learning outcomes	Are they set out clearly? Have they been set appropriately in relation to external benchmarks? Have they been communicated	Teachers Students Examiners/Assessors Quality assurance staff	Program specification; learning goals Program handbook Qualifications descriptors Industry Training

	clearly to students and staff?		Standards Professional body requirements
Curriculum	Is the curriculum effective in supporting achievement of the learning outcomes? Is the curriculum organised effectively, in terms of level, balance, coherence and progression? Is the curriculum up to date?	Teachers Students Examiners/Assessors Quality assurance staff	Curricular materials Program handbook Samples of student work Program monitoring reports
Assessment	Does assessment enable learners to demonstrate achievement of the intended learning outcomes? Are assessment methods valid, reliable and secure? Do assessment criteria enable clear distinctions to be made between different grades awarded? Do students get adequate feedback? Are students achieving the intended learning outcomes?	Examiners/Assessors Teachers Students External examiners/verifiers Quality assurance staff	Assessment criteria Examination papers and exercises Marking schemes Examiners' reports Examination board minutes Records of student achievement Samples of student work
Teaching and Learning	Does teaching have appropriate breadth, depth,	Teachers Students	Student feedback questionnaires

	pace and challenge? Is there a suitable variety of teaching methods? Is teaching effective in promoting learning? What arrangements exist for gathering student feedback? Are suitable learning materials available?	Quality assurance staff	Staff development documents Program handbooks Observation of teaching Notes, handouts and other learning materials
Student support and progression	Does recruitment match the abilities and aptitudes of students to the demands of the program? Are any special learning needs identified and addressed? Do students have regular access to counselling and guidance on their progress?	Admissions staff Teaching staff Students	Statistics on recruitment, progression and completion Written policies on student admission Written policies on student support and guidance Data on student destinations (employment or further study)
Resources	Is the deployment of resources planned appropriately, in relation to the programs offered? Is suitable teaching and learning accommodation	Teaching staff Library staff Technical staff Students Managers	Physical inspection of facilities Equipment lists Library stock lists Minutes of committees with academic planning responsibilities

	available? Are libraries, laboratories and workshops adequate to support the programs offered?		
Staffing	Is the collective expertise of the teaching staff suitable and available for the delivery of the curriculum? Are appropriate staff development opportunities available? Is appropriate technical and administrative support available?	Teachers Managers Other staff	Staff lists Staff CVs Staff development policies
Overall management	Does the institution have coherent and realistic strategic, operational and financial plans? Does the institution have effective means of communicating with, and listening to employers and other stakeholders? Is there an effective overall system of internal quality assurance?	Senior management Head of Finance Head of Quality Employers	Strategic plan Operational plan Annual budget and accounts Communications strategy documents Minutes of management meetings Minutes of quality meetings Notes meetings with employers
Program management	What process is in place for the	Senior management	Written policies and procedures

	initial approval and periodic review of programs? What process is in place for the on-going monitoring of programs? What action is taken to identify and remedy any shortcomings in programs?	Teachers Head of quality Students	for program approval, monitoring and review Minutes of meetings of academic committee or other body charged with program approval Internal self-evaluation documents
Governance	Does the governing body operate effectively and with probity in the discharge of its responsibilities?	Chair of governors Non executive members of governing body Senior management	Constitution Minutes of meetings Reports to governing body

How the panel pursues matters during the site visit will, as mentioned above, be determined by the purposes of the review and the associated framework of criteria or indicators being used relative to the institution or program being examined. An example of how lines of questioning might be developed relative to criteria is given in the (US) Council of Regional Accrediting Commission's document Preparing Teams for Effective Deliberation which is a helpful resource for teams and institutions. The team's planning meetings should have resulted in an agreement on the roles of individual members of the team in terms of which one, depending on their background and expertise, will take the lead on probing certain areas. It is usual for detailed questions on each topic to be drawn up in advance of the visit. Advance planning of questions ensures full and efficient coverage of the issues during the visit but as the site visit proceeds, the team needs to ensure that it takes account of evidence that is emerging from interviews when reviewing the questions set out for the subsequent day. In some jurisdictions the QA agency takes a more open-ended approach to questions so the emphasis in planning interviews is on developing checklists as prompts for panel members who can then pursue topics as they see fit.

7. Interview Protocols

The site visit is the main face-to-face interaction between the institution and the reviewers and is a crucial channel of communication between the institution and the agency via the review team. It is also an important occasion for collecting evidence in the review process.

It is important that the reviewers act professionally and in compliance with the processes described by the agency. Also they need to behave ethically with respect for the institution throughout the process. A positive atmosphere for the site visit is crucial to encourage engagement between the representatives of the institution and the review team.

A major contributor to success in an interview session is the method of questioning used. In general, there are two types of questions:

- Open question – An open question is one which invites the interviewee to elaborate on a certain issue.
- Closed question – a closed question is one that can be answered by 'yes', 'no' or very short phrase.

Both types of questions have their merits in an interview session. Normally, a dialogue can be started with an open question. After a response has been obtained, there are usually areas in the response that can be probed further or confirmed with specific pieces of information. In the latter case, closed questions can be used.

There is one type of question that should be avoided as far as possible – the leading question which is a question phrased in such a way as to prompt a particular answer. Leading questions generally result in false or slanted information. For example, the question, ' how do you manage classes where some of the students have poor mathematics skills' suggests that there are students of low ability in the classroom. On the other hand the question 'how do you manage classes with varying levels of mathematics skills' does not pre-judge the situation and gets to the information required by the interviewer.

No matter what type of question is used, the review team should evaluate the response and should not accept evasive answers. If the interviewee does not answer the question, the review team should stand firm and try to pin down the answer to the issue.

Good questioning must be supplemented by good listening. The following are some effective listening behaviours to be encouraged by the review chair:

- Know what is expected, and note discrepancies;
- Listen for information to determine whether a criterion or standard has been met;
- What is not told is often as important as what is told;
- Listen for information that confirms opinions or views obtained from other sessions;
- Listen for information that contradicts opinions or views obtained from other sessions; and
- Keep accurate notes.

During the interview, the team chair should watch the time carefully and should not allow discussion to digress to interesting, but non-relevant areas. However, this shouldn't stop the other members from asking follow-up questions on interviewee's response. Before the end of a session, interviewees should also be given the opportunity to bring up issues for discussion.

Given below is an extract from the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) Institutional Audits Manual on the interview protocol.

Protocols for Interviews – HEQC

Protocols for Interviews – HEQC

9.7 Protocols for interviews

9.7.1 Guidance of the panel during interviews

Before beginning the interview, the chairperson ensures that panel members know what questions will be asked, in what order and to whom. The chairperson reminds the panel, of the following:

- Interview sessions are not the forum for discussion or for interviewees to ask questions of the panel, except by way of clarification.
- The panel's questions should consistently be linked to issues of quality at the institution.
- Questions should be direct and simple. Panel members should avoid long explanations as introductions to questions.
- Only one question should be asked at a time.
- Panel members should ensure that all interviewees are invited to respond and participate. One person should not be allowed to dominate the responses.
- Panel members should not ask inappropriate questions or follow personal agendas.
- It is important that panel members should keep a professional distance from members of the institution during the visit. Discussions and comment on the audit must be avoided.
- Panel members should avoid the temptation to:
    - editorialise
    - comment
    - praise or commend
    - criticise, advise, explain, correct or recommend
    - ask questions that have no purpose
    - compare the institution to any other institution.

9.7.2 Introduction for interviewees

At the start of each session, the chairperson:

- welcomes interviewees; thanks them for participating in the audit process. (Panel members have their name-cards in front of them. Interviewees will bring their own name cards. No introductions are required.)
- states clearly that that the purpose of the interviews is to help the panel to validate the information and evidence contained in the audit portfolio and other documentation that has been supplied by the institution, and to gain a detailed understanding of how the institution's quality systems operate.
- emphasises that while the interview will pursue issues and lines of enquiry that have been identified before or during the audit visit, its purpose is not to test individual people's knowledge. The HEQC's audit report will commend good practices and recommend areas of quality improvement in the institution.
- encourages the interviewees to provide concise answers
- reminds the interviewees that all comments made to the audit panel are treated in strict confidence, and that their names are not used in the report, even though the issues raised may be included in the report.

9.7.3 Conclusion of the interview

At the end of the interview, the panel chairperson should thank the interviewees for their

- participation, and inform them that the HEQC will produce an audit report that will be sent to the head of the institution in due course.

Source: Higher Education Quality Committee, HEQC Institutional Audits Manual 2007, p.62

In addition to the protocols described in this topic, there is one fundamental principle that should be observed by all review team members during the site visit. A quality review is not an event for evangelising educational philosophies, expressing personal views or telling anecdotes. The evaluation of an institution should not be biased by the philosophy of the review team or its individual members but follow the procedures for review and be based on relevant evidence. Similarly, recommendations to the institution should not be coloured by particular educational philosophies.

An important part of a review is critical evaluation of the information being provided to the team. During the interview sessions, the review team could be given a description of a process or an outcome with supporting evidence that this is 'real' and more than an assertion. But it is essential that the review panel makes an assessment as to whether the evidence is actually driven by the process and supports the achievement of a particular outcome. For example, the institution may provide a fully documented manual of its QA system and data on very impressive student performance during examinations. It could be easy to jump to the premature conclusion that there is an effective system in place but this may or may not be the case. The student performance levels may be driven by other factors such as low standards, an exceptional student population or may even be a result of poor security on examination papers. By the same logic, a poor graduate employment record does not necessarily mean that the quality of the graduates is poor. Therefore, evidence should be evaluated beyond its face value.

In order to judge the effectiveness of a system, the causal relationships between the input and the output needs to be established. By linking the outcomes to the causes, the causal relationships can help to achieve the following purposes:

1. formulating decisions and making sure that the decisions can be traced back to evidence;
2. resolving disagreement within the panel by discussing the causal relationships. Sometimes, disagreement may originate from differences in educational philosophy and values. In this case, the panel members should be reminded to put individual's belief and value aside;
3. minimising subjective judgement; and
4. identifying areas for improvement or commendations.

Through the establishment of causal relationships, the logic generated forms a very good basis for evaluating the effectiveness of a system. In addition, when the logic is translated into written language, it will become a very good starting point for report writing.

8. Drawing Conclusions

At the end of the site visit the task of drawing conclusions on the review and formulating a consensus view that will form the basis of the review report is a demanding and complex activity. But it is crucial to draw together the strands of the review and the information processed, relative to the goals of the review before the team disbands. In any event, in many cases the team is expected to present an oral (or even written) report to the senior management before exiting from the institution.

When the interviews have been concluded, the panel will be in possession of a vast array of evidence. There are the documents provided by the institution as well as documents found or generated by the team or agency. In addition, there is the extensive oral evidence from interviews. The key points emerging in this latter category should be summarized as the site visit progresses for example, overnight by the secretary or chair, to give a day-by-day compendium of key points.

It is the chair's role to lead the final discussions according to their personal style and preference. Many choose to use a whiteboard to record key points during the discussion but whatever method of managing the discussion is adopted it is crucial to keep a record of what is concluded.

The following is an example of a strategy for the final discussions, put forward for discussion by a team in a QA system that conducts audit site visits over a 4 day period. This item is included in the agenda of the planning meeting that occurs the day before the site visit. Even if the panel chooses another way to conduct the final discussion, the inclusion of such a strategy in the agenda papers triggers discussion and, at the least, some agreement in advance on the approach to be used in that session. This saves time debating the matter at the end of the site visit interviews.

Drawing Conclusions – Strategy for the Panel

Drawing Conclusions – A Strategy for the Panel

DAYS 3 AND 4: PROPOSED SCHEDULE FOR PANEL DISCUSSION

A critical part of the process of drawing conclusions on which to base the Audit Report, including the Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations, is the private discussions between Panel members.

These discussions occur throughout the days of the visit including over breaks for refreshments and lunch and are described as 'Panel Meetings' in the schedule. On the afternoon of Day 3 and during the morning of Day 4 the Panel has a more extended period for discussion leading up to the Exit meeting when the Chair conveys the views of the Panel to the University.

The following is a draft outline for these discussions. The times will depend on the Open Session and the need for Call-back of interviewees.

Day 3
3:45 -7:00pm (session may be punctuated by an Open Session if there are requests initiated by university staff or stakeholders)

- Individual Panel members privately review their notes from the interviews and the documentation provided by the university. They make notes of their main observations including their views on the areas of special responsibility (45 mins?).
- Members share their views around the table, facilitated by the Chair. Emphasis is on simply recording views on each of the Focus Areas rather than on evaluating the relative merit of points or the strength of evidence in relation to the points being made.

- Preliminary discussion of potential Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendation occurs and views are recorded.

Day 4
9:00 -11:30am (session may be punctuated by Call back of interviewees)
- Audit Coordinator distributes summary of points made in Day 3 discussion
- Chair facilitates discussion with the goal of reaching broad agreement on the substance of Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations with an emphasis on ensuring that there is strong and triangulated evidence to support these.
- Chair withdraws to prepare text of findings to be conveyed in the Exit Meeting

11:30- 2:30pm (including lunch)
- Chair works on preparing text for Exit Meeting
- Individual Panel members compile notes for use by the Audit Coordinator in preparing the first draft of the Report – handwritten or prepared on computer. Notes should focus in the first instance on the Panel members' areas of special responsibility

2:30 – 3:00pm Exit Meeting

3:10pm Panel departs from University campus

The record of the panel's discussions towards framing the conclusions of the review is the cornerstone of the review report. It is also the reference point for the Chair in cases where an oral report is presented to the senior management as the final act in the site visit.

9. Discussion

Discussion: Main Site Visit

Consider the following questions:
- What do you think are the most important factors to take into account when negotiating the site visit schedule with the institution?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of preparing detailed interviewee questions prior to the commencement of the site visit?
- Can you suggest a number of ways in which a team chair might approach the leadership of the session to frame the conclusions?

10. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:
- Site visits may be used for determining continuing compliance, evaluating new locations and gathering information. Reviews may be conducted at the institutional level or at the program level and audits may be used to examine the quality assurance arrangements in place in an institution
- The organisation of a site visit is a collaborative effort between the institution and the QA agency or its representatives. How this is managed is a function of the way in which individual agencies operate and how they divide responsibilities.
- To facilitate validation and the gathering of evidence the site visit must be based on a carefully structured schedule that enables additional information to be collected and triangulated.

- Having studied the self-assessment report in detail and the additional information provided, the team has to come to grips with the issues for the review. The line of questioning for the site visit will then flow from this identification and understanding of the issues.
- During the site visit, which is the face-to-face interaction between the institution and the reviewers, it is important that the reviewers act professionally and in compliance with the processes described by the agency and also behave ethically with respect for the institution throughout the process.
- At the end of the site visit the task of drawing conclusions on the review and formulating a consensus view that will form the basis of the review report is a demanding and complex activity. But it is crucial to draw together the strands of the review and the vast amounts of information processed, relative to the goals of the review before the team disbands.

