

GUEST EDITORIAL

Governments
are seeking
to ensure that
quality agencies
serve society, use
money well, and
provide results to
stakeholders.

Global Trends in Quality Assurance

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Introduction¹

As organizations, generically referred to as “quality agencies” were set up, whether by governments, institutions, or private entities, they needed an “organizing principle.” The two most common, though known by a variety of names, are accreditation and audits.

Accreditation stresses the “gatekeeper” role of an external quality agency (EQA), holding higher education institutions (HEIs) to threshold requirements. An audit permits greater diversity among institutions, but therefore usually presupposes that the institution has already exceeded some known threshold. Conventionally, accreditation has become associated with accountability of the institution (to someone, for something); and an audit is associated with (further) improvement of the institution above the threshold. However, an accreditation approach by the EQA can lead to suggestions for improvement; while an audit can focus on holding the institution accountable for achieving its stated published goals.

Accreditation denotes the process or outcome of evaluating whether something, for example, an institution or program, qualifies for a certain status. The status may have implications for the institution itself (e.g. permission to operate) and/or its students (e.g. eligibility for grants) and/or its graduates (e.g. qualified for certain employment). In theory, the output of an accreditation is a yes/no or pass/fail decision, but gradations are possible, usually in the context of a transitional phase (toward or away from “pass”). Accreditation is also called licensing or registration.

In some cases, there is no intention to implement the gatekeeper role of accreditation, but merely to assess how well the organization is performing. In this case, the term assessment is sometimes used for an evaluation that results in a grade, whether numeric (percentage or 1-4), literal (A-F), or descriptive (excellent, good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory). Thus, assessment and accreditation can both result in one of several scores on a linear scale. There may or may not be a pass/fail boundary somewhere along the grade spectrum.

Accreditation presupposes external measures or standards against which the institution, department, or program is being judged, but there is an argument that this does not allow for the range of higher education institutions and the scope of their purposes. This argument takes us naturally toward the quality audit, which is a check on an organization’s claims about itself. When an institution states objectives, it is implicitly claiming that this is what it will do, and a quality audit checks the extent to which the institution is achieving its objectives.

ISO defines the quality audit as a three-part process: checking the suitability of the planned quality procedures in relation to the stated objectives, the conformity of the actual quality activities with the plans, and the effectiveness of the activities in achieving the stated objectives. This “quality loop” is often referred to using the initials OADRI for objectives, approach (e.g. plans), deployment (e.g. the actual activities), results (the consequences of all this planning and activity), and improvement. Improvement refers to what is done if the loop is not closed (e.g. adjust the objectives, plans, or deployment) or if it is closed (perhaps set more ambitious objectives). OADRI is another name for the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle of the industrial quality movement.

As these various terms multiplied, a generic term was needed and was found in the phrase “quality assurance” (QA), which denotes the policies, attitudes, actions, and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is maintained and enhanced—though not all agree on this. Some see QA as synonymous with the threshold check of accreditation, and some conversely see it as synonymous with improvement above the threshold. This disagreement over meanings extends even to the word “quality” itself.

Future Trends

What is currently exercising the minds of those involved in QA, both staff of quality agencies and staff in the institutions’ internal QA units? This is a brief overview of some of these issues.

1. Value/Legitimacy of QA

Accreditation has a history of more than a century in the United States and in the British Isles of nearly 40 years. National agencies continue to be established (the current membership of the global network of QA agencies (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education or INQAAHE) stands at about 280 organizations from 80 countries and HEIs continue to establish internal quality units and systems (IQA). Higher education (HE) generally has accepted the need for accountability.

Nonetheless, there are concerns about the emergence of an “evaluation bureaucracy,” and tension continues between standardization and conformity: are external quality agencies (EQAs) too conservative? Both internally and externally, is the focus more on what *can* be measured than on what is important? If an EQA is part of the government, do quality checks imply government interference?

Other concerns include “diminishing returns.” In some systems, the EQA is repeating the same process, cycle after cycle, and institutions claim that the improvements they experience from each cycle fall. Some EQAs (AQA in New Zealand and the former Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) in Australia) try to avoid this by changing the focus each cycle while the U.S. agencies try to mitigate it by having a long cycle time and varying the methods used.

Part of the difficulty in establishing the value of EQA relates to the number of stakeholders in HE. These include students, institutions, employers, governments, and society. Students want to know which institution to choose; institutions want confirmation of their standing; employers want to know that graduates can hit the ground running; governments want to know that their money is well spent and sometimes press EQAs to drive institutions in particular directions; society wants a prestigious

local institution; and all want QA decisions and outputs that are intelligible and useful.

It is now clearly established that EQAs do have an effect, and that the effect is mostly positive. The next question that arises is about value for money: do EQAs have enough beneficial effect to justify their costs?

In the debate on the value of EQA, attention must be paid to what can reasonably be expected. Most EQAs are expected to both hold institutions accountable and to enable them to improve. The former is feasible, and EQAs can reasonably be judged on their success in this. The latter is only partially feasible: EQAs can set the context for institutional improvement and can ensure that their processes are not counterproductive, but ultimately it is the institution itself that must improve. (Just as a teacher should teach well so as to encourage learning, but it is only the student who can actually do the learning.)

2. Evolving Environment

EQAs for HE continue to be established, but HE is also changing, and the agencies must change correspondingly. Agencies previously judged on inputs (entry student scores, faculty qualifications, funds available etc.) and facilities on a physical campus. Increasingly, EQA agencies are looking at processes and even more at outcomes. They are also paying attention to electronic and online courses and facilities. This reinforces the attention to outcomes. Evidently the experiences of a student on campus and at a distance are different; similarly, a student in an overseas branch campus is not experiencing the culture of the home institution’s country firsthand. Hence, the desired outcomes are built into the specification of the qualification (see note on learning outcomes below), and the aim is for these to be achieved, even if the processes differ.

In recent years, more institutions have been making educational resources openly available online (open educational resources, OER). A few universities have come together as an OER university to offer some structure to this, and the internal and external quality issues need to be addressed. Also emerging recently are the massively open online courses (MOOCs). These can be seen as a progression of OER, but some would view it as a regression: OER systems exist to support the learner, but MOOCs come with no associated pedagogy or support. Any interested person can study the material for self-interest, but problems of assessment and validation are only just beginning to be addressed. QA may be covered under the category of recognition of prior learning. This evolution will continue as institutions determine how best to ensure a meaningful educational experience online, and how to deal with changes in attitudes and expectations of learners.

Life-long learning (LLL) is receiving increasing attention and this brings a need for the ability to assure the quality of this different style. Correspondingly, there will be increased reliance on the recognition of prior experiential learning (RP(E)L). HEIs will need strategies, and EQAs will need tools to evaluate the strategies.

Dealing with new types of institutions and new modes of learning requires a dialogue between HEIs and EQAs. It must never be forgotten that the quality task is the responsibility of the HEI, not the EQA. The latter is responsible only for validating and assisting in the HEI's work.

3. Accreditation Mills

We are accustomed to the notion of degree mills—entities that do not meet the generally accepted requirements for an institution of the type they claim. There is a spectrum of these, ranging from the totally value free (send us some money and we'll send your degree certificate) to those that are merely of very poor quality (students do work, but a degree is earned for work that is little higher than school level). Such entities are often litigious, so an EQA might hesitate to say publicly that they are invalid. Instead, we call the attention of the public to the nature and meaning of accreditation.

To get around this, bogus accreditation agencies ("accreditation mills") are now proliferating. Lists of these entities can be found (e.g. www.inqaah.org, www.chqa.org, www.accredibase.com), but inevitably they are always somewhat out of date as the mills change form, Prometheus-like, to beat the system.

4. International Issues

In a globalized world QA cannot escape international issues. The first thing to note is that most QA agencies are national or sub-national, with no authority to operate outside those national borders. The second thing to note is that HEIs are increasingly operating across borders, and their students and graduates are moving across borders as well. If an institution in country A operates in country B, who is responsible for the EQA of the latter operation—the agency in A, or the agency in B, or both or neither? In practice, different approaches are taken, although many countries have not addressed the questions of incoming or outgoing education at all.

Increasingly, agencies are collaborating through the development of mutual recognition processes to try to ensure that institutions do not have to jump through two sets of (possibly conflicting) hoops, but conversely that no institution falls through the cracks. This collaboration is far more difficult than might appear, as various agencies have a range of different details of their operations. Furthermore, even if agencies agree,

effectiveness usually depends on government agreement also, which is not always forthcoming.

This problem must be solved for the recognition of students' qualifications, credit for partial qualifications, and acceptability for employment. National recognition entities typically operate separately from the national QA bodies, which is not a productive situation, although the Lisbon Convention does require documents prepared to assist students in achieving recognition of their qualification in another country to describe the EQA regime under which the relevant institution operates. There is also increasing attention to "diploma supplements" or "graduate statements" which set out a student's achievements in the degree program undertaken in a widely intelligible form.

An entire burgeoning area is joint degrees, combined degrees, double degrees, dual degrees, etc. The terminology is still in flux, but the core idea of a joint degree is a one specially designed by two or more institutions, and the student spends time at each institution to earn a single degree awarded by all institutions. Some of these operations slide over into the fraudulent when it is represented that a student has multiple degrees for the same piece of work or into devaluation when a student is allowed to obtain multiple qualifications for only a little extra work. Many institutions are guilty of either of these faults, and EQAs need to be able to detect what is happening. Some of it, however, is entirely within the preserve of the institution, and many EQAs are powerless to require the institution to change.

It was noted above that most agencies are national. Some nevertheless operate abroad by request of the institution (e.g. some U.S. accreditors) or by permission of the system (e.g. EQAs on the European QA register). Also, some international agencies are emerging (e.g. EQUIS and the European quality labels).

5. EQA and IQA

The vastly increased attention to QA over the last two decades has largely been at the behest of governments for various reasons. Governments want to ensure that the institutions serve society, that they use their money well, and that they produce the results desired by the various stakeholders. Hence governments and groups of institutions have established EQA agencies.

These agencies have increasingly expected institutions not to be merely passive recipients of whatever checks and requirements are imposed by the EQA but to take responsibility for their own quality. This has prompted institutions to set up internal QA systems and units. In several countries, the EQA has explicitly required this and in some countries has provided money to support it.

Some institutions have resisted establishing a QA unit on the grounds that this will absolve everyone else in the institution

from thinking about quality: they will take the view that the IQA unit is “where quality is done.” This is a somewhat spurious argument. Most institutions have a teaching support unit, but no academic assumes that this unit does all the teaching in the institutions.

IQA units (or systems), when operating well, can assist individuals and departments in the institution to monitor and improve whatever they are doing. Often such units are combined with the data collection, institutional research, statistics, and/or the planning office.

A thorny issue is the relation of the IQA to the EQA. It should mediate to the institution the requirements of the EQA, and mediate to the EQA the performance of the institution. If it is seen as too close to the EQA, however, it may be perceived by the institution’s staff to be just part of a “quality bureaucracy”—at best irrelevant, and at worst unhelpful, to the “real” work of the institution.

6. Professionalization of QA

Whether or not there is a quality bureaucracy, it is incontrovertible that explicit attention to QA does now take more of the time of many folk within HE. It, therefore, behooves those working in QA (whether IQA or EQA) to perform their jobs with a high level of professionalism.

Over the last 20 years, the INQAAHE has led the push toward professionalization of QA workers. A profession has a code of practice, and in 2003 INQAAHE created the Guidelines for Good Practice in QA (GGP) and encourages its members to act in compliance with these. ENQA, the European quality network, drew on the GGP in formulating the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).

INQAAHE also devised a postgraduate certificate in QA. This is on the INQAAHE website as open-source material, and is offered by the University of Melbourne as a credit-bearing award.

7. QA Networks

INQAAHE was founded in 1991 by a dozen agencies and now has almost 300 member organizations in more than 80 countries. An interesting phenomenon is that despite the existence of a global network, many groups have found it valuable to create smaller networks and to belong to both. The first development was the creation of regional networks, then discipline-related networks, and finally other special interest networks.

The existence of a governmental/political/economic grouping of countries can be a catalyst for a regional network. The European Union gave impetus to ENQA; despite the existence of an Asia Pacific Network (APQN), the ASEAN countries have

created a QA network (AQAN); and despite the existence of an Arab QA network (ANQAHE,) the six Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries are creating a quality network. Special interest networks include one for Islamic countries.

These observations show the value widely seen by EQAs in working together. Networks support emerging agencies within their constituency, share ideas and good practices, collaborate in the QA work, and present a stronger face to national governments on behalf of their members.

A growing phenomenon in Europe is the “quality labels,” e.g. discipline-specific networks, particularly to cover non-professional areas (such as business and engineering) that have long had their special-purpose agencies. Some tension is evident between the national agencies that are general purpose and cover “everything” within one country and the label networks that argue they are the best judges in their specific areas.

8. Qualifications Frameworks

Qualification frameworks (QFs) are very much the flavor of the day. Most countries that lack a QF are creating one. The core reason for this is to ensure consistency between institutions (Does a degree denote the same thing at all institutions in the country?) and, with that consistency, facilitate mobility of students? These are valid and useful goals, and many students have been assisted to combine qualifications and “staircase” to a higher level. However, QFs tend to assume a life of their own, and can be very directive, becoming restrictive and stifling.

In some systems, the national QF resides within the authority of the national EQA, whereas in other systems the QF is outside the EQA but used by it in reviewing institutions’ operations.

Associated with the growing number of QFs is a growing attention to learning outcomes (LOs). This is not a new idea. Bloom’s taxonomies for outcomes dates from 1956. It was mentioned above that EQAs historically focused on inputs, and more recently have moved to consider processes and outputs. The emergence of different modes of teaching and learning and of different types of institutions has emphasized the importance of considering processes and increased the emphasis on outputs and outcomes rather than on inputs. Hence, increasingly institutions are expected to state specifically the intended and achieved learning outcomes for courses and programs, to show that they align with the requirements of the national qualification network (where one exists), and to demonstrate that students’ achievement of these LOs are appropriately assessed. EQAs check these in their accreditation processes.

9. Data

Historically, too much HEI planning has been data free. Writing in 1963, Sir Eric Ashby, former master of Clare College, Cambridge, said: “All over the country, these groups of scholars, who would not make a decision about the shape of a leaf or the derivation of a word...without painstakingly assembling the evidence, make decisions about admission policy, size of universities, staff-student ratios, content of courses and similar issues based on dubious assumptions, scrappy data and mere hunch” (Ashby 1963, p. 3). Since then, the wheel has turned, and HEIs gather enormous amounts of information and data—but use only a fraction of it. Thirty years ago, I urged my faculty to gather more data on student opinions; for the last 10 years, I have been urging institutions to gather less data but to use it more effectively.

In most developed countries, there is now a great deal of HE data in the public domain, and institutions should use it, together with their own data, for comparative analyses, benchmarking, and improvement. EQAs have a role in this as they constantly ask data for evidence—e.g. information turned to a particular purpose—to show institutional performance and student achievements.

One increasingly common misuse of data is for institutional rankings. I call it “misuse” as the rankings are largely based on arbitrary indicators with arbitrary weightings and an emphasis on research. They still fail to tell prospective students and their parents much about which institution to attend or why.

Attempts to avoid the worst effects of rankings include ratings (e.g., grouping institutions or factors into bands as done by the Australian Good University Guide), providing the basic data and allowing users to specify their weightings (e.g., the German CHE rankings), and classifying institutions more precisely (e.g. the European U-Multi-rank).

Conclusion

As stated above, it is now clearly established that EQAs do have an effect, and that the effect is mostly positive. For example, there are many positive comments from institutional leaders about the beneficial effects of the audits of AUQA. One notable area is that Australia’s overseas operations were much improved over a five to six-year period. In New Zealand, students believe that a university’s Academic Audit Unit (now Academic Quality Agency) led the universities to pay more attention to student concerns. In the UAE, institutions affirmed to an international review of the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA)

that the CAA’s standards and support had led to improved institutional quality in a range of areas. Many institutions in different countries report that student teaching and assessment has improved because of the IQAs which universities created as a result of the EQA demand for more effective use of data in providing evidence of quality performance.

Sometimes, though, EQAs are expected to take on conflicting roles. Also, the effect of an EQA can easily be outweighed by force majeure, such as government policies and funding or lack of them.

There continue to be challenges to QA, some of which have been mentioned above. External quality agencies must continue to self-reflect (as they expect of the institutions) and develop to continue to serve as agents for improvement in higher education.

¹The introduction section of this article was originally found in Woodhouse, D. (March 2009). *Putting the ‘A’ into Quality*. Melbourne: Australian Universities Quality Agency.

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