



## QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**By**

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### Higher Education

Education is important to mankind in many ways; it provides him with the necessary skills for learning to know, learning to do, and learning to be. A good higher education, nowadays, should be student-centred, i.e. customer focused (a pivot point in quality management); able to provide its students with problem-solving skills; sensitive to the community needs; producing graduates that integrate easily into the market force; and is systematic in its approach and in the same time flexible to the ever changing needs of our growing communities.

### Defining Quality Assurance

Quality is usually defined as "fitness for purpose", i.e. that an institution is able to achieve its stated aims and objectives. Quality assurance is the means by which the institution confirms to itself and to others that conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards that the institution has set. Quality assurance requires comparisons between observed and intended outcomes, and constant analysis of the sources of dysfunction. Both internal self-evaluation and external review are vital components of a sound quality assurance system in higher education to demonstrate accountability.

### The National Dimension Of Quality Assurance

In most countries the national structures of quality assurance is established by law and funded by the state, however, the established quality assurance agency should retain its independence from government. The organisation should be governed by an elected board, consisting of nominees from universities including both academic and administrative staff; student representatives, representatives of the employers sector, other stakeholders and lay members representing the role of higher education in the wider society.

This national structure should allow for a certain degree of autonomy of individual institutions, providing the sector with examples of both good and bad practice, nationally and internationally. The organisation should be focused on supporting and advising institutions on quality assurance rather than policing. In addition as an expert in the field of higher education the agency should be able to advise the government on higher education policy.

Many decisions will have to be taken relating to how intrusive inspections/audits/assurance will be, and in many cases this will be in part determined by the state of development of the institution's internal quality assurance structures.

### The Institution Structure In Quality Assurance

It is critical that all higher education institutions maintain their own internal, rigorous quality assurance systems. These structures should permeate every area and every level of teaching and learning. Ideally reports should be presented back to committees at all levels of university administration i.e. course, department, faculty and university. The committees to which reports should be made should include representatives of the internal stakeholders including students, academic and administrative staff. At the higher levels there should also be lay-members involved, representing the interests of the community. In this way the committees should very much reflect the structure of the board of the national agency. At the lower levels of this assurance structure a functioning and effective course/class representative structure will be necessary. These elected representatives are able to act as the voice of their peers, feeding into the process of quality assurance and taking an active role in course/department and faculty meetings and driving forward the process of quality assurance and enhancement.

## The Student Dimension In Quality Assurance

A recent development in England is the creation of a national student satisfaction survey. This tool would allow students to input into an independent and national assessment of student satisfaction. Questions may relate not only to the provision of teaching and learning but also to the provision of support services such as IT, library facilities, careers advice and pastoral support. This provides supplementary evidence to support any system of inspection/audit and can be a valuable source of both qualitative and quantitative data.

## Code Of Practice

Code of Practice is a document agreed by the stakeholders of a discipline, giving general guidance on standards and procedures they would consider as good practice. A code of practice is normally non-statutory, i.e.; having no status in law. It is advisable to have a Code of Practice for the assurance of the academic quality and standards in higher education as it will help higher education institutions to meet their responsibilities for the assurance of academic standards and quality, by providing a framework within which they can consider the effectiveness of their individual approaches to a range of activities related to higher education.

## The Four-Stage Model

The four-stage model is today generally accepted as the shared foundation for quality assurance in higher education and it has a prominent place in European quality assurance systems. The structuring principle of the four-stage model is as follows:

1. Autonomy and independence of quality agencies in terms of procedures and methods concerning quality evaluation both from government and from institutions of higher education.
2. Self-assessment.
3. External assessment by a peer-review group and site visits.
4. Publication of a report.

The self-assessment component of the four-stage model is central to the process of quality assurance in higher education as it encourages the provider of education to evaluate the quality of the learning opportunities offered to the students and the standards achieved by them. It also provides an opportunity for the staff to reflect on What do we do?, Why we do it?, and Why do we do it in the way that we do?

## Procedures In Quality Assurance

There are basically four procedures that are commonly used as methods for quality assurance. They are evaluation, accreditation, audit, and benchmarking. These procedures can be focused to assess the quality of subjects (courses), programmes, institutions or specific themes in education. The combination of procedures and focus areas result in 16 different types of quality assurance activities as seen in the table:

### Types of quality assurance procedures

	Evaluation	Accreditation	Audit	Benchmarking
Subject	+	+	+	+
Programme	+++	+++	++	++
Institution	++	++	+++	+
Theme	+	+	+	+

From the table we can see that the most common combinations are programme evaluation, programme accreditation, and institution audit.

## EVALUATION

Is the base procedure involved in quality assurance. It aims at confirming fitness for purpose through self-assessment. Evaluation can be combined with different focal points leading to the following evaluative procedures:

1. *The evaluation of a subject* focuses on the quality of one specific subject, typically in all the programmes in which this subject is taught.
2. *The evaluation of a programme* focuses on the activities within a study programme, which in this context is defined as studies leading to a formal degree.
3. *The evaluation of an institution* examines the quality of all activities within an institution, i.e. organization, financial matters, management, facilities, teaching and research.
4. *The evaluation of a theme* examines the quality or practice of a specific theme within education e.g. ICT or student counseling.

## ACCREDITATION

Accreditation includes the same methodological elements of evaluation. However, it should be noted that

accreditation differs from evaluation in that it has the following characteristics:

1. It is a process through which a course, programme or institution meets a certain standard, which could be either a minimum standard or an excellence standard.
2. Accreditation always involves benchmarking.
3. Accreditation is always based on quality criteria, never on political considerations.
4. Accreditation findings include a binary element, being always either acceptable or not-acceptable.

### **AUDIT**

An audit can be defined as a method for evaluating the strengths and weakness of the quality assurance mechanisms adopted by an institution for its own use in order to continuously monitor and improve the activities and services of a subject, a programme, the whole institution, or a theme. The fundamental issue in quality auditing is how does an institution know that the standards and objectives it has set for itself are being met?

### **BENCHMARKING**

Benchmarking is defined as a method , whereby a comparison of results between subjects, programmes, institutions or themes leads to an exchange of experience of best practice. It should be noted that accreditation procedures are typically based on minimum standards or threshold criteria, benchmarking procedures are typically based on excellence criteria.

### **QUALITY ASSURANCE REVIEW PROCESS**

The quality assurance process begins with a member of the local quality assurance committee or national quality assurance agency (on request) visiting the institution and having meetings with administration, head of departments, and academic staff. This initial visit is designed to orient the staff to the purpose and procedures of the quality assurance review, provide an opportunity for questions, ensure that the purpose of the self-assessment is clear and allow for discussion on discipline-specific issues in case of subject/programme reviews.

The review team is then appointed with usually a representative from the same discipline, senior academics from outside the region and a professional with expertise in the area.

A key element within the review process is a self-assessment, undertaken by the academic staff of the institution, which takes place in the months before the

review. The review team will consider the report of the self-assessment (subject / programme or institution), along with other documents and information.

The overall aim of an institutional review is to examine the procedures which deal with the institutions responsibility for the quality and standards of its academic programmes, namely: programme design, approval, and monitoring; assessment of students; external examining; and collaborative provision.

The overall aim of subject / programme reviews is to examine the subject / programme provision and aims; learning outcomes; curricula and assessment; quality of learning opportunities, student achievement; and maintenance of quality and standards.

During the visit, which usually lasts for 2-3 days, the review team has meetings with academic staff, students, graduates of the programmes, employers of graduates, and management personnel. The review team provides oral feedback to the staff and a written report is produced and distributed widely to all stakeholders.

As a result of the self-assessment, review and report the institution and members of the academic staff identify issues that require further consideration and improvement. Heads of departments or sections report on action plans to be taken as a result of the review to the institution board, which reports to its higher board. After an appropriate period, the involved departments and sections, report on the outcomes of the activities taken in preparation for the next self-assessment and quality assurance review.

### **Elements Of Quality In Higher Education**

The building blocks of an educational institution that aims at ensuring a degree of quality in its programmes and ultimately at integrating a quality assurance process in its management are the following:

1. Programme design, approval, and monitoring.
2. Curriculum structure and learning outcomes
3. Teaching, learning and assessment
4. Student support and guidance
5. Learning resources
6. Student progression and achievement
7. Quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms

### **Key Issue To Success**

1. **Leadership commitment.** Without the total and demonstrated commitment of the leadership of the institution especially the Dean, nothing much will happen and anything that does will not be permanent.

2. **Planning and organization.** Development of a clear strategy for quality assurance and an action plan with milestones to permit situation analysis and reflection is vital for success.
3. **Education and training.** All staff from top to bottom, including non-academic, should be provided with the right level and standard of education and training to ensure that their general awareness and understanding of quality assurance concepts, skills, competencies and attitudes are appropriate and suited to the continuous philosophy of quality management.
4. **Teamwork.** It is necessary to create an organizational culture, which is conducive to continuous improvement and in which everyone can participate. Teamwork needs to be practised in a manner that recognizes positive performance and achievement and celebrate and reward success.
5. **Documentation and feedback.** The quality assurance process must be well documented in order to provide data on baseline situation; progress and direction; and constructive feedback. Student satisfaction is a core issue and methods of student satisfaction measurement and analysis should be developed.

### Quality Assurance On The Web

The information presented in this article is from the following web sites on quality assurance in higher education

- [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)
- [www.enqa.net](http://www.enqa.net)

### Glossary

In any discussion about quality assurance in higher education it is clearly important to have clear definitions of the terms and phrases that will be used.

#### QUALITY

'Fitness for purpose' – Juran

'Conformance to requirements' – Crosby

#### INSPECTION

Conformity evaluation by observation and judgement accompanied as appropriate by measurement.

#### QUALITY CONTROL

Part of quality management focussed on fulfilling quality requirements .

#### QUALITY ASSURANCE

Part of quality management focussed on providing

confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled.

#### QUALITY AUDIT

Quality Audit is the process of examining institutional procedures for assuring quality and standards and whether the arrangements are implemented effectively and achieve stated objectives.

#### TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT

Applying quality management principles to all aspects of the organisation or institution.

#### STANDARDS

Standards describe levels of attainment against which performance may be measured. Attainment of a standard usually implies a measure of fitness for a defined purpose.

#### ACCREDITATION

Accreditation is the result of a review of an education program or institution following certain quality standards agreed on beforehand. It's a kind of recognition that a program or institution fulfils certain standards.

#### BENCHMARKS

Reference points with which to compare the standards and quality of a programme. Therefore, benchmark statements represent general expectations about the standards of achievement and general attributes to be expected of a graduate in a given subject area.

#### PEER REVIEWER

A person who is professionally equal in calibre and subject specialism to those delivering the provision but not from the same institution or have any other conflict of interest, who can contribute to the review of an educational programme either for internal quality assurance or for accreditation purposes.

#### STAKEHOLDER

A person, agency, institution or society that benefits from a certain educational program (students, parents, employers, research institutions, professional associations.... etc).