

Sets of standards for QA agencies: a comparison of networks

Introduction

There are several networks of quality assurance agencies and therefore also several codes of practice and member regulations. Is there a degree of transparency and comparability between the standards and criteria that are applied by the different networks?

The answer to this question is linked to a triad of other questions:

- are there strong similarities or essential differences between standards of different networks?
- the interpretation and implementation given to each of these standards may differ as well. Are the differences minimal or fundamental ?
- Can the same standard be interpreted and implemented differently within the same network?

In the comparison we take as the starting point "The guidelines for good practice of INQAAHE" as INQAAHE is not only the organiser of this workshop, but this network is also worldwide operating, has an extensive experience and its guidelines can serve as a model for other networks.

The codes that are included in the comparison "The standards and guidelines for QA in the European Higher Education Area" which we will for easy reference call the ENQA code, the "Code of Good Practice" of the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA), "The criteria for membership of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network" (APQN), "The code of good practice of ASPA" (the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors), and finally "The guidelines for quality provision in cross-border Higher education jointly elaborated by OECD and UNESCO".

The aims and objectives of all those networks are not the same. However, there are more points of agreement than differences and some specific standards are rather points of common interest, especially in the discussions of mutual recognition of QA bodies.

Standards taken in consideration

The mission statement (1)

- A **“written” explicit statement of goals and objectives** is requested.
- The **cultural and historic context** within which the quality assurance agency has to work has to be taken into account.
- **QA has to be the main activity** of the agency.
- A **policy and strategic plan** that has to be drawn up.

Point of interest

- QA is to be the **main activity of the organisation**

The relation between the QAA and the HEI (2)

- QA is the **primary responsibility of** the HEI.
- The QAA have to respect the **autonomy** of the institutions.
- Regular **consultations of stakeholders** are explicitly mentioned.
- The eventual result of the QA has to lead to an attitude of **accountability and improvement**.

Point of interest

- Only an attitude of openness, communication and mutual respect can effect that the result remains in line with the principle.

Decision-making (3)

- Criteria and procedures have been **laid down beforehand** and made public.
- The **SER** (Self Evaluation Report) and the **predefined terms of reference**, available to the public, form the basis of the external evaluation.
- **Independence in decision-making and the assessment of the panel** are primordial.
The decisions will be **consistent**.

Point of interest

- The notion “independence” is understood and implemented in different ways.

The external committee (4)

- The **composition of** the panels is in agreement with the specific **terms of reference** and the aims of the external evaluation.
- Most codes request that parties lay down explicit rules for the appointment of panel members.
- Attention for the formulation of **“no conflict of interest”**.

- The principle of **independence** of panels throughout the evaluation process is mentioned in all codes.

Point of interest

- “The more independent, the less expertise”.
- The presence of students in the panels.

The public face (5)

- **Documents, criteria, procedures as well as processes, review decisions and outcomes have to be made public.**

Point of interest

- What is to be published?

Documentation (6)

- **Documents as regards criteria , procedures and processes have to be available.**
- Sufficiently comprehensive description of what the SER has to consist of, with clear **listing of expectations and requirements.**
- If the assessment **leads to accreditation,** the **rules of both processes have to be made transparent.**

Resources (7)

- There have to be **sufficient means to develop the activities freely and independently.** Such means also have to be **freely available.**
- The term ‘means’ should be interpreted as both **human and financial** resources.

System of appeal (8)

- A **system of appeal has to be in place** and all parties must know it.

QA of the agency (9)

- The **system has to be continuous.**
- The evaluation of the QAA has to be based on a **SER and an external evaluation.**
- The external evaluation is **cyclical.**
- The QA policy has to be made known to the public and **feedback on the evaluation to stakeholders** is essential.

Points of interest

- Who conducts the evaluations, what are the rules?
- What will be the consequences of a negative assessment ?

Collaboration with other agencies (10)

- Collaboration between QAA, exchange of good practice or experts, inform each other about evaluation decisions.
- Allow succession of international providers.

Point of interest

- Attention for information regarding diploma and accreditation mills.

Topics not included in the INQAAHE code

Official status (11)

→ This item is mentioned in the ENQA code (3.2) and in the ECA code (2).

- formally recognised by the competent public authorities in the EHEA as an agency responsible for external quality assurance.
- Established on a legal basis.
- Complying with any requirements set by the legislative jurisdictions.

Point of interest

- What means “recognised by public authorities” and what are the consequences for some internationally operating high qualified QA agencies

Elements of external review of QAA (12)

It is striking that most codes lay down few or no explicit rules that the external reviews have to comply with.

For this reason, a number of items for consideration can be underlined:

- The review is an external evaluation of the agency, whereby, in addition to the quality requirements laid down in the code of the network or the umbrella organisation, a number of specific (national, regional) requirements can be set;
- If a review is carried out by national authorities, it must in any event be ensured that the evaluation panel possesses sufficient international expertise and an international dimension;
- The reviews have to take place periodically, with a reasonable interval between two reviews;
- The evaluation report has to be available to the public.

Issues specifically relating to accreditation (13)

The networks that focus on accreditation usually formulate “specific” standards or points of reference in addition to the standards and criteria mentioned above. These obviously do not conflict with the general conditions, but rather specify them.

Conclusion (provisional)

Taking into account that a degree of diversity within and between networks has to be accepted, that mutual trust is a prerequisite for developing reliable quality systems and networks, and that reliable systems and networks function within a framework of very clear and verifiable agreements, we may conclude that there is considerable transparency and comparability between the codes of the major international networks of quality assurance agencies.