

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance (EQA) – Roles And Responsibilities
Topic	2.3 Generic Functions of EQA Agencies

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1. Introduction



QA conducted by an EQA agency through one or more of EQA approaches may have various purposes and consequences, intended or not. You have learned about the general purposes of EQA in a policy context. This topic will highlight how the purposes of EQA relate to generic functions of EQA bodies. You will also consider the impact of changing national contexts on the purposes of EQA. The topic also examines the core functions of EQA agencies and the roles and responsibilities linked to each function. Finally, the topic will introduce the three stages of EQA.

Objectives: Generic Functions of EQA Agencies

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to

- identify broad purposes of EQA as recommended in recent studies
- describe the role of an EQA agency as a "buffer body"
- explain how EQA purposes evolve with changing national contexts
- identify the core functions of EQA agencies and the associated roles and responsibilities
- identify the three stages of EQA

2. Role and Purposes of EQA

Let us review some broad purposes of EQA identified by Brennan and Shah (2000), European Standards and Guidelines (2005, 2007) and Woodhouse and Stella (2008).

Purpose of EQA – Various Recommendations

Brennan and Shah (2000)

A review of 12 quality agencies identified 10 statements of purpose for EQA:

- to ensure accountability in the use of public funds;
- to improve the quality of higher education provision;
- to inform funding decisions;
- to inform students and employers;

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- to stimulate competitiveness within and between institutions;
- to undertake a quality check on new (sometimes private) institutions;
- to assign institutional status;
- to support the transfer of authority between the state and institutions;
- to encourage student mobility;
- to make international comparisons.

European Standards and Guidelines (2005, 2007)

This document identifies four broad purposes of EQA including:

- safeguarding of national academic standards for higher education;
- accreditation of programs and/or institutions;
- user protection;
- public provision of independently verified information (quantitative and qualitative) about programs or institutions;
- improvement and enhancement of quality.

Woodhouse and Stella (2008)

An analysis of the goals and objectives of a large number of QA bodies determined that EQA can have one or more roles depending on the national context; i.e.,

1. Assist higher education institutions (HEIs) in the development of internal quality management systems (institutional development or capacity building)
2. Assist institutional efforts to improve quality (quality improvement)
3. Evaluate the fulfillment of objectives or standards by institutional systems, and the effectiveness of such systems (audit)
4. Measure institutional quality and/or standards according to an internal or external yardstick (assessment)
5. Provide an explicit comparison between one or more institutions, either within the same country or internationally (benchmarking)
6. Provide a ranking of the institutions according to criteria relating to performance (ranking)
7. Determine the ability of an institution to offer specified programs, or its eligibility for a given benefit (a gatekeeper role, an accreditation function)
8. Define and certify qualifications (qualifications authority)
9. Establish and maintain a framework of qualifications (framework)
10. Assess and document learning, including experiential learning; to enable credit accumulation and transfer (credit accumulation and transfer)
11. Steer the institution in particular directions, in terms of strategy, planning, or methods (steering or transformation; relates to fitness of purpose)
12. Provide a report on the institution as a basis for (government) funding
13. Provide a report on the institution concerning the use of funds and other resources (i.e., act as a buffer or honest broker; accountability)
14. Monitor the financial viability of the institution (viability)
15. Check institutional compliance with legal and other requirements (compliance)
16. Provide independent information about the institution for various constituencies (prospective students, employers, industry, etc.) (information)
17. Report on the quality and standing of the entire HE sector (sector report).
18. Collate the outcomes of the activities of other EQA agencies (coordination)

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Accountability or Improvement?

As earlier discussions indicate, the emphasis placed by EQA on these purposes will vary and change as the national context changes. Consider the current debate around whether QA should be primarily about accountability or improvement. For some EQA mechanisms the predominant objective is quality control; for others, it is public assurance of compliance with certain quality criteria or the accountability of institutions. In yet other cases, institutional self-improvement is the primary goal. In most cases, the objective of QA is a combination of all of the above with national variations in emphasis. This variation depends on the characteristics of the HE system and the degree of accountability required by various authorities. In other words, accountability concerns and improvement plans may co-exist in any QA system, so it is not a question of a stark choice between accountability or improvement.

Accountability vs. Autonomy

Some argue that accountability means less autonomy; the counter-argument is that accountability is the other side of institutional autonomy – in a sense the price that HEIs pay for autonomy (Frazer, 1997). To maintain institutional autonomy and keep government at arm's length, institutions must demonstrate a capacity for effective self-governance and the ability to meet accountability requirements with less direct intervention by government. EQA agencies can provide a way to show government why and how institutions of good quality can be given more autonomy. In doing this, the agency assumes the role of a 'buffer body', i.e., an intermediary body that can represent the institutions to the government and vice-versa. Buffer bodies have been common as funding and policy bodies, while their role as quality bodies has become more significant in recent years. The agency can also help institutions to:

- reflect on accountability-improvement developments;
- assess the credibility of evidence presented to validate institutional accountability-improvement efforts;
- evaluate institutional progress toward the fulfillment of such requirements,
- make professional and legitimate decisions about those evaluations which can have consequences.

3. Evolution of EQA Purpose with Changing National Contexts

For any given purposes, the overall function of EQA involves facilitating, mediating, evaluating and taking an active role in EQA for specific higher education activities. In doing this, EQA causes changes in the HE sector and itself changes as the national context evolves.

Brennan and Shah (2000) point out that the degree of emphasis on EQA accountability/control functions (rather than simply improvement/change functions) not only differs between countries but changes with time. For example, in the mid-twentieth century, the growth of institutional diversity and a lack of consistency in higher education standards brought about the establishment of accrediting agencies in the U.S. The role of those accrediting agencies was to check whether or not a HEI or a study program met predetermined threshold standards. Over time, the accrediting agencies saw a broader role for accreditation, notably their role in helping institutions to improve standards. Today, accrediting agencies in the U.S. are pursuing new initiatives underpinned by the continuous improvement agenda. To cite another example, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), established in

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2001, took on a new set of objectives in 2007 that gives an explicit place to assisting in quality enhancement and advising on QA.

Experience from all over the world indicates that changing the EQA purpose to accommodate changing needs in the national context is inevitable. The Guidelines of Good Practice developed by INQAAHE recommend that the "EQA has a system of continuous QA of its own activities that emphasizes flexibility in response to the changing nature of higher education, the effectiveness of its operations, and its contribution towards the achievement of its objectives." (www.inqaahe.org)

4. Core Functions of EQA Agencies

While a wide range of activities are carried out by EQA agencies, a core set of functions can be identified. Each EQA agency is expected to:

- Facilitate the bedding down of EQA in the HE sector by working with institutions and engaging with key stakeholders
- Conduct an EQA process, validating the process with collective and transparent peer assessment
- Disclose outcomes that will have consequences for the institution

Each of these functions encompasses a number of roles and responsibilities that overlap – administration, coordination and decision-making. Click the tabs to learn more about the roles and responsibilities of EQA agencies.

Roles and Responsibilities

Administration

Administrative functions include responsibilities such as notifying the institutions of EQA policies and procedures; developing a cadre of peers who will be involved in the EQA process; and the publication of the final QA outcome.

Coordination

Coordination functions include activities for development of the EQA framework; interaction with stakeholders; monitoring the major phases of QA; training the peers to perform critical tasks, notably evaluation; and guidance for institutions before and during the EQA process.

Decision-Making

Decision-making functions include participation in review visits to institutions, taking a role in the review such as report-writing, and having a role in making the final QA decision.

Internationally, EQA involves more or less similar processes and procedures in terms of administrative functions, but there is significant variation in how (and by whom) the coordination and decision-making functions are carried out. Administrative functions are generally the responsibility of technical or support staff while staff with QA expertise take major roles in the coordination of functions. In some agencies, the role of staff extends to activities related to making QA decisions, while final decisions are entrusted to a deliberative council or at least to a different group of people. It is not uncommon for a capable staff member to serve as a team 'advisor' or reporter for site visits. There remains a difference between actions that lead to QA decisions

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and making the actual decisions. Good practice dictates that different groups (with appropriate qualifications) assume these sets of responsibilities.

5. Introduction to Phases of EQA

We will now look at how the EQA phases are defined in different systems. EQA processes in higher education generally fall into three 'stages' or 'phases' that may be divided into more specific parts. Click the tabs to look at the three stages of EQA in detail.

Three Stages of EQA

First stage: Information & Self-Assessment

Institutions or programs must provide information relevant to pre-determined, published criteria. In most cases, this is accompanied by a 'self-assessment' or 'self-study' that provides interpretation and analysis. This stage involves a coordination of effort between the institution and agency.

Second stage: Audit of Self-Assessment, Site Visit, Team Report

This stage begins with a review of the self-assessment by the evaluation team – well before the visit. The actual site visit should enable the team of peers to investigate any problem areas, and in the end, to validate the self-assessment. This results in a team report and/or recommendations to the EQA agency about the quality of the institution or program and possible improvements.

Third stage: Formal Decision and Recommendations

The agency makes the final decision, taking into account the peer team's recommendations. The outcome, or action, is valid for a stated period of time. The basis for a final decision may include the review team's review of the self-assessment, the visit report, the team recommendation or other pertinent information, such as actual improvement plans that might warrant a follow-up visit. The extent of public disclosure of QA decisions varies among countries and agencies, while the nature and potential effect of a QA outcome flows from the purpose of the EQA process.

EQA processes

Some EQA agencies split these three stages into four or five steps but the three-stage model is generally accepted in the EQA community. The rationale for more stages is to place emphasis on certain aspects of the EQA process. Thus some models may add elements such as 'Follow-up' on the report and recommendations.

The EQA model of the European Union, for example, was based on a review undertaken by van Vught and Westerheijden in 1993, using the three generic elements. The later Standards and Guidelines for QA in the European Higher Education Area European (ESG, 2005, 2007) continued to emphasize these elements but added the 'follow-up procedure'. Standard 3.7 for the EQA criteria and processes used by the agencies states that the EQA processes will normally be expected to include:

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- a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the EQA process;
- an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;
- publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;
- a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the EQA process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.
http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_v03.pdf

Eaton looks at the bigger picture of EQA and shows the cyclical ongoing nature of the process as another key step.



[An Overview of US Accreditation](#)

An Overview of US Accreditation

Eaton lists the following five key steps in U.S. accreditation:

- **Self-study:** Institutions and programs prepare a written summary of performance based on accrediting organisation standards.
- **Peer review:** Accreditation review is conducted primarily by faculty and administrative peers in the profession. These colleagues review the self-study and serve on visiting teams that review institutions and programs after the self-study is completed. Peers comprise the majority of members of the accrediting commissions or boards that make judgments on accreditation status.
- **Site visit:** Accrediting organisations normally send a visiting team to review an institution or program. The self-study provides the foundation for the team visit. Teams, in addition to the peers described above, may include public members (non-academics who have an interest in higher education). All team members are volunteers and are generally not compensated.
- **Action (judgment) by the accrediting organization:** Accrediting organisations have commissions that determine accreditation for new institutions and programs, reaffirm accreditation for previously-recognized institutions and programs, and deny accreditation to institutions and programs that fail to meet published standards.
- **Ongoing external review:** Institutions and programs continue to be reviewed over time in cycles that range from every few years to ten years. They normally prepare a self-study and undergo a site visit each time. Some agencies have provisions for interim or progress reports.

Source: www.chea.org/pdf/OverviewAccred_rev0706.pdf

The generic QA model has been criticized as cumbersome, so there is a desire by some to find alternative models for EQA. These alternatives may reduce the emphasis on any one phase, either self-study (which could be simply based on statistics) or peer review (which might be conducted at a distance), or the elimination of one of the stages.

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6. Criticism of EQA Processes

EQA processes are sometimes accused of hindering innovation and creativity. It is easy to see how this impression could develop. The common EQA process involves gathering information by some means, and then making a collective professional decision or some sort of judgment. This judgment is based upon criteria set down by the EQA body and the experience and expertise of the people involved in the process - both of which reflect the past, not the future. This is the case in a typical accreditation process where the purpose is to ascertain at least the fulfillment of minimum standards. Arguably, this is not a problem with the method of quality assessment, but rather the process of comparing actual with intended outcomes. Granted, QA may seem to reinforce a retrospective view, at least when an up or down decision must be made at a given time.

One alternative is an Audit approach, with a focus on current processes (as well as current and past outcomes), and on indications that favorable results can be sustained over time. This assumes that an institution can prove its claims. This requires no small measure of flexibility, insight and judgment on the part of the reviewers so that genuinely innovative and creative ideas are not rejected out of hand.

Another alternative, even in the accreditation mode, is a revision of the evaluation criteria; i.e., the addition or reinforcement of provisions for sustainable outcomes. This approach could be regarded as a form of 'continuous improvement' in which demonstrated innovation is valued.

There are many exemplary EQA practices which demonstrate that EQA agencies are not inevitably conservative, and can take a lead in pointing institutions in desirable directions. The U.S. regional accrediting agencies revise their 'standards' from time to time; for example, adding a requirement that institutions address ethnic diversity in student and staff composition. The government, however, initially raised concerns about a denial of accreditation based specifically on such a provision. One issue of note, was whether an accrediting body can enact a policy that encroaches on state and Federal legislative authority. In this case, the argument that QA agencies act as approved surrogates of government was not persuasive.

QAA/UK reviews include submissions by students, a signal to universities that student input is important. In South Africa, multiple definitions of quality are being used to get universities to think widely about their work. It is also worth noting that QA involves deciding the worth of something, but worth is culturally-dependent and its identification will usually have a subjective element.

Some EQA bodies have introduced flexibility in the self-assessment and external review, allowing the two components to be integrated with ongoing institutional efforts toward continuous improvement. Some examples are the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) of the Higher Learning Commission in the U.S.; the Enhancement-led Institutional Review of Scotland, and the freedom given to institutions to select focus topics for review as seen in the Middle States Association (US) and Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA).

In conclusion, debates about the effectiveness and efficiency of EQA continue. Creative thinking will be needed to demonstrate and sustain the value of EQA. You should keep this in mind as you analyse the various roles and responsibilities of EQA and the way that agencies carry out those roles.

7. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- Brennan and Shah (2000), European Standards and Guidelines (2005, 2007) and Woodhouse and Stella (2008) have identified a few broad purposes of EQA.
- The emphasis placed by EQA on those purposes will vary and change as the national context changes. Accountability and improvement plans can coexist in any QA system, especially when the criteria include provisions for an improvement process.
- An EQA agency can play the role of a 'buffer body', ie a body that can in some way represent the institutions to the government and vice versa. Buffer bodies justify to the government why and how institutions of good quality can be given more autonomy.
- It is inevitable that EQA purpose will change with time as the national context evolves. EQA causes changes in the higher education sector and itself changes with time as the national context evolves.
- The core functions of EQA agencies include:
 - Facilitating the bedding down of EQA in the higher education sector calls for close work and liaison with institutions and HE stakeholders.
 - Conducting an EQA process, legitimising the process with collective and transparent peer assessment
 - Proper disclosure of outcomes that have consequences for the institution
- The following are the roles and responsibilities pertaining to administration, coordination and decision-making functions.

Administration	Coordination	Decision-making
Functions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notifying the institutions of what is involved in EQA and its policies and procedures • Developing the roster of peers who will be involved in the EQA process • Publishing the final QA outcome 	Functions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organising activities for development of the EQA framework • Liaising with stakeholders • Management of the major QA phases • Training peers to perform the tasks of evaluation • Guiding institutional preparation for EQA processes 	Functions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating in review visits to institutions • Taking a role in the review, such as report-writing • Having a role in making final QA decisions

- In general, EQA consists of three stages, but more steps can be included to emphasize certain aspects of the EQA process.

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- First stage: submission by the institution (or program) of information relevant to the achievement of pre-determined, published evaluation criteria.
- Second stage: an audit of the self-assessment, then a site visit by an external team of peers to validate the self-assessment and information that will provide the basis for a team report.
- Third stage: the agency makes a final decision based upon the peer team's recommendations, followed by disclosure of an outcome that is valid for a specific period of time.
- Eaton has identified the following five key steps in the US accreditation:
 - Self-study
 - Peer review
 - Site visit
 - Action (judgment) by the accrediting organisation
 - Ongoing external review
- EQA agencies are often labeled as conservative and blamed for preventing innovation or change. EQA agencies, however, have taken a number of steps to enable institutions to move in desirable new directions.