

Subject	Operating an External Quality Agency
Segment	Methods of Review and Accreditation
Topic	2.4 Self-Assessment in EQA

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1. Introduction



A common way to think of EQA in a higher education system is as a three-stage process: self-assessment, external review and EQA outcome. This topic covers the topic of the self-assessment document (also known as self-study, self-evaluation and self-analysis) which is prepared by the institution or program as a basis for the review team's work. You will learn how agencies set expectations for the scope and depth of a self-assessment and the different methods used by institutions to carry out the work and overcome what can be significant barriers.

Objectives: Self-assessment in EQA

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to:

- describe the role of self-assessment in the EQA process
- discuss different approaches to completing a self-assessment
- identify the obstacles to development of self-assessment capabilities in HE institutions
- identify some generic strategies for conducting a self-assessment

2. Approaches to Self-assessment

All EQA processes rely to some extent on self-assessment, although the details of how this is done and what it represents vary from country to country. A number of terms are used to refer to more or less similar activities, such as self-study, self-evaluation, self-analysis as well as self-assessment.

Self-assessment is defined as: "the process of critically reviewing the quality of one's own performance and provisions"

(www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/). Watson and Madison (2005) have defined self-study as "...collective reflective practice carried out by a university with the intention of understanding better and improving its own progress toward its objectives, enhancing its institutional effectiveness, and both responding to and influencing positively the context in which it is operating".

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Self-assessment is the central element of most EQA procedures. QA agencies recognise the value of an analytical and self-critical process being undertaken by those embarking on an EQA exercise. A good self-assessment not only enables the institution to provide the information required by the external body, but may also stimulate improvement even without external involvement. There is ample evidence that the most effective EQA process is jointly owned and implemented by the institution and the QA agency – with the latter performing a verification, reporting and enhancement role. For institutions that genuinely use self-assessment to reflect on strengths and weaknesses the self-assessment is a rewarding experience. Institutions that do not see the value of self-assessment or at least a self-analytical attitude will complain of the burden as they labour to produce a report that, in most cases, will be externally audited.

Kells (1995) asserts that self-evaluation combined with external validation contributes to sustainable improvement. He acknowledges that involvement of external peers alone may not be sufficient to inspire sustainable changes and says that "...self-evaluation alone, lacking validation by unbiased external peers, and little concerned with the resulting recommendations or their application to institutional processes and budgetary provisions, will not be effective over time."

Agency Guidance for Self-Assessments

Usually QA agencies give guidelines to facilitate the institutions in this process but there are considerable differences in the level of detail of the guidelines and therefore the expectations as to the scope and shape of the report on outcomes. Some agencies provide only brief guidelines as to how the self-assessment process could be conducted and how the self-assessment report might be organised. This happens mostly in systems where the tradition of QA – internal or external – is well established and where the institutional goals and objectives are the starting points. This provides a lot of flexibility to institutions to present themselves in ways appropriate to their mission and goals, within the broad framework given by the QA agency.

When institutions need to adhere to more specific criteria, agencies provide detailed guidelines and manuals that might include a list of questions to be answered and examples of tables to present data in a particular way. In this approach, one added advantage for institutions is that it helps them to develop information systems, to be used not only for supporting self-assessment but also for management and institutional decision-making. For example, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) encourages the auditees to conduct self-assessment as a part of an ongoing institutional QA process and advises them not to add extra layers of processes and procedures to serve only the AUQA audits. But this may not be possible for institutions that have yet to establish an institutional quality culture. The information below gives a sense of the differences between systems.



[Different Approaches to Self-assessment](#)

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Different Approaches to Self-assessment

Let us review two different approaches followed by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India, and the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA).

National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India.

NAAC uses the term self-study and provides elaborate guidelines about preparing the self-study report (SSR) for the agency's assessment purposes.

...the Leadership - the Head of the institution – must play a positive and creative role. To assist her/him, a Steering Committee consisting of 4 to 6 members will be formed to co-ordinate the compilation and analysis of data related to various aspects of the institution and its functions. This Committee will be responsible for organising the information and data, and to prepare a comprehensive report. The Coordinator of this Committee will function as the institutional facilitator during the on-site visit of the Peer Team. S/he should have considerable communication skills and the ability to organise and direct a complex institutional endeavour. S/he must be able to motivate others. This person may be relieved of her/ his normal duties to the extent that s/he is required to devote the time necessary to lead the team in the SSR preparation. Further, requisite clerical and other office support may have to be provided. Additionally, computer facilities are also necessary for the institution, to use the computer package, which is enclosed along with this document.

If the Committee plans the data collection in a systematic way and sets deadlines for various stages of the SSR writing, like preparing the criterion-wise drafts, analysis, circulating it among the members of the institution, preparing the final version etc., the whole process will be completed in a few weeks' time. Thus, the Steering Committee will have to play an active role in the preparation of the SSR, which has to be submitted to the NAAC.

Source: New Manual for Assessment and Accreditation: For University 2007

Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA)

AUQA uses the term self-review and advises the institution to build it into its total QA system, rather than 'doing it for AUQA'.

There is no single model for self-review. Indeed, the first decision might be whether an organisation interprets self-review as a process or as an event. Self-review might be an ongoing process that is built into all activities in a sense of continuous improvement; it might be an ongoing process that leads to a report to the governing body for confirmation or redirection; it might be a long event that leads to major change; it might be a brief event that provides a snapshot for comparison with an earlier snapshot; and so on.

Another consideration is whether the review (event or process) is designed principally for the organisation's internal needs, or primarily in preparation for an AUQA audit. AUQA strongly urges institutions and agencies to design and implement quality systems that are best suited to their own needs. The extent to which the organisation builds in explicit awareness of the existence of occasional AUQA audit should be determined by the approach that is most effective for the organisation itself. As self-review is an essential feature of an organisation's quality system, this too should be designed primarily for the organisation rather than for AUQA.

Source: AUQA Audit Manual, v5 June 2008

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Here are further examples of the guidelines provided to institutions engaged in preparations for an external quality assurance process:



[Variety in Self-assessment Methods](#)

Variety in Self-assessment Methods

North Central Commission for Higher Learning (US)

....the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) infuses the principles and benefits of continuous improvement into the culture of colleges and universities by providing an alternative process which allows an already-accredited institution to maintain its accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission. With AQIP, an institution demonstrates it meets accreditation standards and expectations through sequences of events that align with the activities that characterise organisations striving to improve their performance.

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), Scotland ([The ELIR approach](#))

The Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR) process is conceived and designed to support institutions' self-evaluation and reflection. Central to the ELIR method, therefore, is the institution's Reflective Analysis (RA), which will highlight the main and distinctive features of the institution's arrangements for enhancing the student learning experience and securing academic standards. Crucially, the RA will set out the institution's reflections on the effectiveness of its approach, citing the evidence on which these reflections are based.....

The ELIR method consists of four integrated elements: an annual discussion with each institution; the production of an RA; a review visit following the submission of the RA; and sector-wide feedback on the learning points from ELIR activity.....

Annual discussions facilitate the review process and provide an important opportunity for information sharing between QAA Scotland and the institution. These annual meetings will be held between a member of QAA Scotland staff and a small group from the institution, which is likely to comprise senior colleagues and a representative of the student body. As was previously the case in ELIR, the annual discussions will not result in any formal judgements or any public reporting. Following the meeting, the External QAA officer will write to the institution to confirm any action points agreed and/or to outline any key topics explored. ...

Other than the year-on response to ELIR, institutions will not be expected to prepare bespoke material for the annual discussions; instead it is anticipated that the meetings will be supported by a set of existing material, ...

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (US)

An institution can select one of several models for self-study. (Candidate institutions must conduct a comprehensive self-study for initial accreditation, and newly accredited institutions must use a comprehensive model for the self-study they conduct for reaccreditation five years after initial accreditation.) Each institution approaching reaccreditation for the second time or later is encouraged to select the approach that best suits its needs and priorities. The specific model chosen is less important than the long-term usefulness of the self-study. ...

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There are three major models for self-study: comprehensive, selected topics, and collaborative. Within these broad models, there are many possible approaches to self-study and evaluation. This flexibility recognises the differences in mission, purpose, internal conditions, needs, and E influences at each educational institution.

A comprehensive self-study enables an institution to appraise every aspect of its programs and services, governing and supporting structures, resources, and educational outcomes in relation to the institution's mission and goals....

An institution may wish to focus on particular standards or issues. The comprehensive self-study with special emphasis provides a structure to do this. It attends to all the standards, as would any comprehensive self-study, but it adds additional focus on standards or issues of particular interest to the institution....

A selected topics self-study allows an already-accredited institution to devote concentrated attention to topics it selects and to concentrate solely on those topics in its self-study. It demonstrates compliance with accreditation standards not related to the selected topics by providing other documents for the Commission to review. Unlike the comprehensive self-study, the selected topics approach requires that there be existing documentation, such as evaluative reports and other information and data, to demonstrate substantive compliance with those accreditation standards not addressed through the topics selected by the institution.

Source: Self-Study: Creating a Useful Process & Report (2nd Edition, 2007)

The MSCHE self-assessment (self-study) options described above are further outlined below:



[Options for Self-Assessment: USA](#)

Options for Self-Assessment: USA

Comprehensive Self-Study with Special Emphasis Model: This model involves more concentrated attention to certain selected areas, units, or aspects of the institution (such as curricular review). Compared to the comprehensive model, the selected topics model is more narrowly focused, but the selected topics should encompass the entire institution, to the extent possible, although giving less in-depth coverage to the comprehensive categories outside the selected topics.

The Selected Topics Model: Accredited institutions may propose to have their own accreditation affirmed through an alternate model they discuss with MSCHE. Key standards selected by the HEI and approved by MSCHE staff are addressed in the self-study and cover both compliance and improvement. Compliance with all other standards is addressed by separate review of existing documentation by MSCHE. Research universities often are best served by devising a self-study approach which addresses a specific theme that is institutional in nature but focused on a current issue. Another approach to the alternate model may be related to the specialised nature of the institution – such as colleges of art or music; seminaries; or other institutions that include specialised programs.

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The Collaborative Model: An HEI may elect to be reviewed by its institutional accreditors and one or more of its specialised/professional accreditors, using one self-study, one team, and one team report. This differs from a joint visit by two accreditors because the accreditors cooperate to eliminate overlap.

Source: MSCHE, 2007; Khawas, 2001

3. Barriers to Implementing Self-assessment

In the initial phase of introducing EQA to a HE system, self-assessment may pose a significant challenge to institutions, even to the well-established institutions. Over a period of time institutions might have developed reporting systems for other purposes which may be totally different from what the self-assessment process requires. So if institutions are not helped to develop their capacity for conducting the self-assessment process, it can result in incomplete reporting. Regardless of expectations however, most QA agencies try to help HEIs to conduct analytical, critical self-assessments. They emphasise that the self-assessment report should not be a mere compilation of data on the achievements as for an annual report.

Some QA agencies require the self-assessment report to be made public. They emphasise that the self-assessment reports provide the stakeholders of higher education with valuable information on the institutions and the institutions can learn from each other's procedures. Those systems that keep the self-assessment reports confidential argue that the institutions will be less willing to present self-critical and analytical reports if these are made public. The choice seems to depend on the national context, the purpose of QA, the tradition for openness in the procedures and competition among the institutions.

Some agencies have developed useful mechanisms they make available to institutions to assist them organise the self-assessment process in a way that suits the stage of stage of development of the institution.

The purposes of EQA will influence the depth of analysis in a self-assessment. As HE systems become more diverse, and as new providers enter the field, it may be necessary to begin with QA mechanisms that are linked to quantitative performance indicators and quality control. When the stakes are high (e.g., when EQA procedures lead to sanctions, or approval is necessary for continuing operation of a program or institution) it is unrealistic to expect institutions to conduct a truly critical self-analysis. An honest self-assessment might be perceived as dangerous; consequently, the self-assessment report may be biased, superficial, or at least subjected to cosmetic treatment.

The EQA process should still require an evaluative self-assessment even where it will be of limited value without verification. It may help the institution develop its capacity for more meaningful reflection. And while encouraging development of self-assessment capacities, it must be recognised that there are obstacles other than anxiety about external scrutiny.

The obstacles range from inadequate information systems, to lack of participation, insufficient faculty involvement, a lack of support staff – and more generally, the absence of an evaluation culture. These may reduce self-assessment to an uncritical description of some of the required issues and a glossing- over of weaknesses.

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One other point to note before moving on is that HEI faculty and staff members, indeed entire institutions, are creatures of the regulatory environment. The information assets of an institution, its schools and faculties, tend to reflect what the national HE authority wants to know from time to time. If the national authority likes to see performance indicators, that is what the inhabitants can produce. Information that is not demanded tends to be unavailable, even when it would be useful to someone. This also signals the absence of an evaluation culture.

4. Conduct of a Self-assessment

In emerging institutions, some QA agencies ask only for basic data from the institution and then conduct the evaluative processes themselves. But when institutions develop beyond this stage, it is possible to increase expectations of their capacity for their self-assessment. The self-assessment report is the resource for EQA processes as it generally brings the focus on the main aspects of the institutions' operations and gives a starting point for reviewers to assess the institution or program.

The set of criteria issued by the EQA agency should form the basis for the self-assessment be they standards-based or based on institution's own goals and objectives (the fitness-for-purpose approach) or something in between. The task of the institution (or program) undergoing review is to report on how it believes it meets the pre-determined standards and criteria.

Strategies for self-assessment

Self-assessment strategies will vary among institutions, programs, or from one occasion to another. King (1998) identifies several possible generic approaches. Click the tabs below to view the strategies for self-assessment.

Survey approach

A questionnaire is administered to staff across the organisation.

Guided self-assessment

This involves structured workshops during which data is collected on the current state of the organisation.

Assessment team approach

A small team of staff, specially selected and trained as assessors, collects data and prepares a detailed report on the organisation.

Structured learning self-assessment

This calls for active involvement of senior management and the collection of objective data on the current state of the organisation.

A few comments are in order. King observed that the survey approach was too limited, and that the best approach may be a hybrid that combines elements of these generic approaches.

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Surveys also have a way of getting lost on crowded desks. Direct interaction may be preferable, particularly when problems often begin in specific functional areas of the institution. Structured workshops may be useful, but more so when they deal with well-defined issues. An internal assessment team simply makes the structured workshop mobile, but problem definition is important, as is a “problem-solving” attitude and visible top-down support. Each of these strategies works better when the assessment team is ready to provide guidance from start to finish. Guidance does not mean filling-in the blanks; it means advice on the interpretation of questions and the choice of supporting information. The self-assessment report that “completes itself” has yet to be invented. Some advice compiled by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) is given below.



[Conducting the Self-review](#)

Conducting the Self-review

One person should be appointed to co-ordinate and lead the self-review process and preparation of a portfolio. This person should be of appropriate seniority to obtain the necessary response from the right people, and to commit the institution to the necessary arrangements. If the self-review involves the whole institution, the coordinator would appropriately be a person at the level of deputy CEO; if it covers a whole faculty, or several programs or departments, this choice would still be appropriate; if the review is of a single department or program, the dean of the faculty could be an appropriate choice. However, when significant institutional commitment is required (e.g., when a program is offered jointly with other institutions or is offered internationally), it may be best to have a co-ordinator at the deputy CEO level again.

The co-ordinator should be supported by a planning group or steering committee, already formed, or convened for the purpose. The former would be inappropriate if the existing committee is likely to be a major subject of the review. The members of a specially-convened self-review committee should be selected with an eye to the scope and purpose of the review, and should normally include both staff and students. The committee should be no larger than is necessary to fit these parameters. Other members of the academic community (outside the committee) should be involved to the extent feasible. The self-review committee will build on existing planning and review structures, and should not need to construct the self-review process from scratch. Nonetheless, the implementation and reporting of the self-review must be seen as an identifiable activity needing careful planning, adequate resources and thorough execution. There will be a significant time commitment, so allowance should be made for this in regard to other work for this committee over the period of the review.

In planning the self-review, the committee may decide that individual members (or subgroups) should concentrate on certain functions or issues. If so, tasks must be allocated explicitly and precisely.

Those responsible for writing the portfolio should analyse the data adequately, distil and simplify their findings, and express them clearly and succinctly. Following committee discussion, it is important for the final draft of the portfolio to be widely

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discussed and generally accepted as a fair representation the areas relevant to the institution (although it may be unrealistic to expect a full consensus).

An institution decides how long to allow for the self-review, given the approach it intends to take, the intended scope and depth of inquiry, and the requirements of any external body. The period might be anything from about two to six months (or even more).

Source: Handout from the INQAAHE 2001 workshop on self-review, Workshop facilitator: Woodhouse, 2001.

The self-assessment process can be complex, time-consuming and might become a resource intensive exercise that does not produce the desired results -- if it is not planned well. A more sustainable and beneficial approach is to make the self-assessment a part of an institution's ongoing QA processes. With this approach the structures will already be in place for the implementation of a self-assessment for an externally-driven process. The EQA literature shows that apart from the benefits of self-assessment as the first stage of an external quality review there are other advantages for this activity when it is part of a general institutional QA framework. However, poorly conceived self-assessment, especially when it is a one-off activity, has many disadvantages.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Self-assessment

Let us learn about advantages and disadvantages of self-assessment in detail.

Advantages of self-assessment

Some advantages of the self-assessment process are detailed below:

- Leads to objective scrutiny
- Assesses the performance of QA & QC systems and procedures
- Ensures faculties/departments /service areas are accountable to the institution
- Enables the institution to meet the expectations/requirements of EQA
- Improves institutional ability to prioritise issues & facilitate decision-making
- Serves as an aid to learning, improvement & development
- Serves as a vehicle for gathering evidence & disseminating good practice
- Raises awareness of quality issues and assists team-building through wide staff involvement
- Assists personal professional development
- Brings service areas into the main stream of the institution

Disadvantages of self-assessment

Some disadvantages of the self-assessment process are detailed below:

- Cost
- Time (reviewers and reviewees)
- Cynicism
- Evaluation fatigue
- Difficulty in maintaining commitment
- Potential for identifying too many areas for improvement

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Whatever the context, a fundamental benefit of self-assessment is that it allows an institution to understand itself, its strengths, weaknesses, and potential. A sufficiently reflective institution is likely to be successful in carrying out its educational mission than one lacking in self-awareness. Acknowledging this in the university context, Frazer (in Green 1994) emphasises that real and enduring quality can only come by actions of the universities themselves and that the basis for these actions must be self-assessment. He further comments that self-assessment is never easy and advocates three aids to make this happen:

- The first aid is a 'mirror', that is external assistance by QA agencies to help those engaged in higher education to be self-critical and reflective.
- The second aid is 'training for the task of self-evaluation'.
- The third aid relates to use of information on performance indicators, best practices and innovations elsewhere.

Frazer argues that these aids have a cost although expenditure on them "should not be seen as an optional luxury but as essential with a high priority".

In summary, self-assessment is the first stage of EQA and the report of that assessment is the foundation on which an external review team builds their understanding of, and tentatively evaluates, the institution or program prior to the site visit.

5. Use of Self-assessment Reports

External review is the essential complement of self-assessment. 'External reviewer' is the term generally used to describe an expert from outside the institution taking part in the EQA process. External reviewers share the language, rationale, codes and values of the institution or the discipline/ profession of the program under review. They are peers of the people they are visiting, and at the same time, they are external to the program or institution. They bring an outsider's perspective that is needed for balance and accuracy.

When an institution submits a self-assessment report, a team of external reviewers formed by the QA agency is directed to analyse the self-assessment report and, either validate the claims it makes, or seek additional information. This occurs through a careful desk analysis of the self-assessment report and team discussion. This is the precursor to a site visit, during which the institution has an opportunity to discuss and target areas in which strategies should be examined or improvements undertaken. Although QA peer review could be improved in some countries, no better alternative has emerged in and among their QA agencies.

The external review team collects information before and during the site visits and through interviews of internal and, sometimes, external stakeholders. The team can then assimilate many views, a wide set of data, and its observations to reach a considered professional judgment and advice to the QA agency on the program or institution. The team is guided by what the QA agency expects of its reviewers and the review process. Thus, the work and effectiveness of the external review depends on both the self-assessment and the external evaluation framework.

As noted in the discussion of self-assessment generally, when taking a critical and analytical view of an operation, it is important to define whether or not it is for the purpose of QA. There is a duality in some situations, when the self-assessment also provides input for internal quality assurance.

Click the link below to learn how self-assessment can have a role in internal and external QA

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[Relationship between Internal and External QA](#)

Relationship between Internal and External QA

Let us learn about the role of self-assessment in external review in detail.

From the European standards and guidelines for QA

Part 1: European standards and guidelines for internal QA within HEIs

1.1 Policy and procedures for QA:

Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programs and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and QA, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality.

Part 2: European standards for the EQA of higher education

2.1 Use of internal QA procedures:

EQA procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal QA processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.....

From the INQAAHE Guidelines for Good Practices

The Relationship Between the QA agency and HEIs The QA agency:

- recognises that institutional and programmatic quality and QA are primarily the responsibility of the HEIs themselves;
- respects the academic autonomy, identity and integrity of the institutions or programs;
- applies standards or criteria that have been subject to reasonable consultation with stakeholders; and
- aims to contribute to both quality improvement and accountability of the institution.

6. Discussion

Discussion: Self-assessment in EQA

- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to conduct of a self-assessment.
- Outline a plan for conducting a self-assessment for an institution or program with which you are familiar. Indicate, for example
 - the main sources of information you might draw on as a source of evidence such as existing documents and data.
 - what new information or perspectives might it be necessary to generate.
 - who would you involve in oversight of the project and other people who would be important in the processes.

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7. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- In the three stage model, self-assessment is the first stage of EQA.
- The self-assessment report is the foundation on which an external review team builds their understanding of the institution or program.
- Self-assessment reports are framed to meet expectations of the QA agency including the quality assurance approach within which it operates
- There are several types of self-report and some agencies provide options for different circumstances
- Self-assessment not only helps HEIs provide the information required by the external body, but can result in improvements even without the external involvement.
- Obstacles to developing self-assessment capabilities may not give a true picture of the HEI or program weaknesses.
- Possible generic strategies for conducting self-assessment are:
 - Survey approach
 - Guided self-assessment
 - Assessment team approach
 - Structured learning self-assessment
- External reviewers analyse and discuss the self-assessment report and validate the claims made by visiting the institution. The team also collects information before and during the site visits and through personal interviews of internal and external stakeholders.