

Subject	Operating an External Quality Agency
Segment	Reviewer Roles and Training
Topic	3.2 Reviewer Roles and Profiles

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1. Introduction



This topic discusses different approaches for identifying and formulating the roles of external reviewers and ensuring that they perform their roles effectively. The module also discusses the profiles of effective reviewers and ways of recruiting them. The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) Good Practice principles will be covered in this topic and should be kept in mind as reference points when making decisions related to the selection and role of external reviewers.

Objectives: Reviewer Roles and Profiles

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to

- discuss the role and responsibilities of reviewers in an external QA system
- describe the desirable profile of external reviewers
- explain the different approaches adopted in the identification and selection of reviewers
- discuss the factors to be taken into account in the composition of audit panels

2. External Reviewers

External reviewers, or simply 'reviewers', are an essential part of the operation of an external quality assurance system. They come from outside the institution but understand the context in which a quality review is being undertaken and are able to contribute to the process. They may, or may not, be employees of the QA agency but by definition they should have substantial expertise in higher education and quality assurance. Occasionally, review teams include experts from within the institution being examined as a source of advice on aspects of the organisational context.

The reviewers participate in the site visit and they are responsible for making the necessary judgments in accordance with the purpose of the review. They do

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substantial preliminary work prior to the site visit and provide the analysis of the documentation provided by the institution for the review process. The reviewers are responsible for formulating the conclusions of the review to the agency for its final decision-making.

The work of reviewers in relation to quality assurance of higher education is often referred to as 'peer review'. Peer review is generally understood as a process of subjecting the performance of researchers or institutions to the scrutiny of experts from the field being evaluated. External quality assurance processes in higher education thus builds on a process where reviewers who are considered to have specialised knowledge and understanding in the area to be reviewed, (such as an institution as a whole; an institution's quality assurance mechanisms; or a program in a specific discipline area) make an assessment at institutional or program level.

Reviewers do not work in a policy vacuum. With the rapid expansion of external quality assurance in higher education reviewers operate in specific national and/or regional or global contexts (the latter may, in particular, be the case for professional accreditation such as in the field of engineering). They also work in institutional and discipline contexts.

Brennan and Shah (2000) noted that QA agencies emphasise the place of collective professional judgment in external review to ensure the legitimacy of decisions. They draw from the work of Finch and Webber to explain how the role of peers is central to the EQA process. But peer assessment in EQA is not immune to criticism. Van Hught in Westerheijden et al (1974) points out three criticisms of peer review and says there are three issues as outlined below:

Potential Issues in Peer Review

Social bias

Peers tend to be influenced by social aspects such as the reputation of the institution being reviewed or personal acquaintance with staff members.

Intellectual bias

Specific orientations or methodologies preferred by the peers might influence the judgment of peers.

Random error

Low level of reliability and consistency of peer judgment might lead to a positive outcome which implies that the outcome is a matter of chance rather than a reliable result of peer review.

Source: Van Hught in Westerheijden et al (1974)

In light of the crucial role played by peer reviewers, and to keep potential bias and error controlled, an important role of an external quality assurance agency is to identify reviewers with appropriate profiles and provide them with briefing, information and training. This is essential as the quality assurance agency needs to ensure that its quality assurance processes are conducted consistently regardless of the reviewers and/or staff of the agency involved. It is also necessary for ensuring that institutions or programs are treated equitably in the review process. The

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INQAAHE Good Practice principles are often used as reference points when making decisions related to the selection and role of external reviewers.



[INQAAHE's Statement about External Reviewers](#)

INQAAHE's Statement about External Reviewers

The INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice (August 2007, Section III, Guideline 8) makes the following statement about external reviewers:

- '...The EQAA [external quality assurance agency] also has specifications on the characteristics, selection and training of reviewers. The EQAA's system must ensure that each institution or program will be evaluated in an equivalent way, even if the external panels, teams, or committees (together, the "external panels") are different. The system ensures that:
- The external reviewers meet the EQAA specifications, and the external reviewers are adequate to the tasks to be accomplished.
 - External reviewers have no conflicts of interest.
 - External reviewers receive necessary training.
 - External reviewers' reports are evidence-based and clear, with precisely state conclusions.

3. Role of Reviewers

As mentioned above the external reviewers' main roles in a review exercise are to:

- Analyse the self-evaluation report and supporting appendices;
- Attend the site visit to the institution and/or programs under review
- Make the necessary judgments in the review in accordance with the purpose of the review and the totality of evidence presented.
- Participate in compiling the team report to the QA agency

The examples below illustrate these expectations. One is from South Africa (the Higher Education Quality Committee - HEQC) and the second from the Audit Manual of the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) of Hong Kong.



[Role of Reviewers](#)

Role of Reviewers

'auditors are responsible for making reasonable judgments concerning the institution's quality arrangements in the various audit areas. In order to fulfil this responsibility, auditors will:

- collect and analyse appropriate information and evidence before and during an institutional audit visit
- conduct interviews with various institutional role players during the institutional audit visit in order to substantiate the conclusions that the institution reaches in its audit portfolio as well as the information and evidence upon which the conclusions are based.'

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Source: HEQC, 2007, p 56

'Panel members are expected to read thoroughly the Institutional Submission and associated documents. Adequate identification and exploration of issues by the panel depends on its members being thoroughly familiar with the Institutional Submission at the time of the Initial Meeting and again at the Audit Visit.....In some cases the Panel Chair may take advantage of the particular expertise and interests of a panel member by asking him or her to take special responsibility for one or more of the audit focus areas '

Source: QAC Audit Manual p 61-62

Although not formally appointed as members of the agency's staff, the reviewers effectively enter into a contractual relationship with the agency when they agree to participate in a review. They therefore act on behalf of, and represent the agency hence it is important that reviewers are presented with clear instructions about their roles and responsibilities in the form of handbooks or guidelines as well as briefings on the agency's approach to the review task.

Furthermore, there is a behavioural dimension in the role of reviewers. The acceptance of the outcome of a review process by the institution hinges to a large extent on the level of respect and acceptance attributed to the review team as a whole as well as the individual members. Lack of respect or mistrust of the team or individual team members can have a negative impact on the institution's acceptance of the outcomes of the review.

Remuneration of reviewers

Remuneration of reviewers for the roles that they perform for the agency is a question to consider when setting up agency procedures. In systems that are membership based, i.e. the institutions form the members of the agency, such as the various US regional accreditors, the Japanese University Accreditation Association (JUAA) and the Philippine Accreditation Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities (PAASCU), the reviewers contribute their time to the review process and only their direct costs are covered. But it is also a general practice for many agencies to pay the reviewers an honorarium. In most cases, the fee does not cover all the time contributed to the review but is a token of appreciation of the participation in the review exercise. One of the often applied principles for honoraria is to pay for the number of visiting days and not for the preparation prior to the visit.

Paying a small honorarium also serves the important purpose of making it easier to enforce the QA agency's expectations of the reviewers than might otherwise be the case if all participation was on a voluntary basis. The rationale for the policy to not fully cover the time committed by the reviewers stems from the peer review concept and the expectation that EQA reviews are conducted in the spirit of collegiality. There is also the point that the review experience benefits the reviewers and subsequently it assists them in preparation for reviews in their own institutions including site visits and the preparation of the self-evaluation document.

4. Profile of Reviewers

Before considering the approach for identification of reviewers, it is necessary to consider the possible types of reviewers who may be needed by the QA agency as

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this determines the criteria that need to be taken into consideration when identifying potential reviewers.

Reviewers are involved in a review because of their expertise in the substance of the review be it e.g. institutional review, program review or audit. They are responsible for making the judgments in the review.

The peer review principle that underpins EQA reviews implies that the reviewers are experts in the area of the review and that they are able to provide an appropriate assessment on this area as an equal to the individuals or institutions being assessed. This means that for a program review, for example, the reviewers need to be expert in the discipline area covered by the program. Over time, however, the peer review concept has evolved in step with the changes and expansion of the purposes of external reviews. An example is the emergence of review processes supporting the implementation of national qualifications frameworks (QFs) and thus the compliance with the learning outcomes constituting the basis of the QFs. This has meant that in some contexts, it has become necessary to recruit reviewers with an understanding of the design and implementation of outcomes-based education. In addition, over the past two decades, as the internal quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions have been developed, formalised, and reviewed both internally and externally, review panels have also had to include members with a practical quality assurance background. The aim here is to get sufficient insight into the strengths of the institutional quality assurance or the areas for improvement. In summary, a range of reviewers with a variety of profiles need to be available to the agency so that it can constitute appropriate reviewer teams for different purposes.

The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) referred to this requirement as the multi-professional peer concept. The multi-professional peer concept implies that a review panel can include a range of reviewers relevant for a particular type of review, i.e. labour market representatives, and general higher education experts, e.g. with special educational or pedagogical knowledge.

With respect to the profile of the reviewers, institutions need to be confident that the quality assurance agencies will appoint reviewers with high levels of professionalism and with the basic skills to carry out the review in a fair, credible and competent way. The quality assurance agencies also have a responsibility to ensure that the reviewers are familiar with these requirements through their briefing and training activities.

5. Identification and Selection of Reviewers

The approach chosen to recruiting reviewers depends on the legal structures, and thus the ownership of an agency, and the purpose of the types of reviews that the agency is responsible for. These features form the basis of the criteria for selection of reviewers.

Some agencies recruit reviewers from among their members or on an ad hoc basis for particular reviews, that is, they do not have a general pool of potential reviewers approved in advance. A more common approach to recruiting reviewers is, however, to set up an on-going register of reviewers who are approved by the governing body of the agency. Reviewers for specific reviews are drawn from this pool.

Here is a summary of approaches used:

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Summary of Approaches

Approach 1: Members function as reviewers

Some of the longest established quality assurance agencies in the world, such as the regional accrediting bodies in the United States, JUAA, est. 1947 and PAASCU est. 1978) are membership associations where representatives of members of the Commission or Association function as reviewers.

Approach 2: Establishing a Register of Reviewers

In this case the reviewers are appointed either for a specified period of time, until the person decides to withdraw or when the agency reviews the register against its defined criteria or needs. This approach is applied by Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (NOKUT) in Norway, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK and the Australian Universities and Quality Agency (AUQA) to mention just a few.

These approaches have the advantage that the agency can build up its resources and address its need for reviewers with specific profiles at any given time and it can also establish a more formalised relationship with these reviewers.

Approach 3: Identifying the reviewers on an ad-hoc basis

The third approach is to identify the reviewers on an ad hoc basis. The choices in this case will stem from the characteristics and purpose of the review in question and predefined criteria for good reviewers. This approach is applied by the Danish Evaluation Agency (EVA), the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) in Saudi Arabia and the Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ). In these cases the practice is to build on a core of experienced reviewers known to the agency through past involvements and to simply seek recommendations from the HEI community and colleagues in other agencies, as necessary, for particular reviews before seeking the approval of the governing body (usually designated as the board) of the agency for a particular team.

Regardless of the approach an agency takes, the board of the agency is often an important source for identifying potential reviewers as board members are in most cases appointed on account of their knowledge of higher education and quality assurance. The institutions which are subject to review are another source for identification of reviewers. This can be from their own staff, colleagues from other institutions or from industry or relevant professional association. Professional associations such as professional bodies, unions, student unions and employer organisations are other relevant sources. The sources to consult obviously depend on the profile required for the review team as a whole.

Some agencies are proactive in identifying potential reviewers by soliciting applications from potential reviewers e.g. an open invitation to potential reviewers on the agency website or an open advertisement in the relevant media. There is also use of a strategy of invitation to relevant organisations to nominate or identify relevant reviewers. In the case where an agency includes international members on their review teams the sister agencies are an important source of information.

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Agencies in other countries would both be able to recommend some of their own reviewers and identify possible reviewers from their higher education sectors.

Reviewer Selection Process

Where formal Registers exist, there is typically a standard application process that potential reviewers have to follow. The format may require filling out an application form with the relevant personal data or sending in the CV in order for the agency to assess the relevance of the profile of the reviewer. Some agencies, such as AUQA and the Oman Academic Accreditation Agency (OAAA) also include a refereeing process where 2 to 3 referees are asked to comment on the capability of potential reviewers. Depending on internal decision-making practices of the agency, the approval of the reviewers may be an administrative decision taken by the staff of the agency but more commonly, the decision rests with the board.

Many QA agencies publish lists of the attributes they seek in reviewers – many list up to 20 such attributes. The following is an example of some of the specialist quality audit and HEI-related attributes sought by Quality Assurance Council (QAC) Hong Kong for reviewers who will carry out audits of teaching and learning in the university sector (there is a list of 8 general attributes expected):



[Desirable Specialist Quality Audit and HEI-related Attributes of Reviewers – \(QAC\) Hong Kong](#)

Desirable Specialist Quality Audit and HEI-related Attributes of Reviewers – (QAC) Hong Kong

- Experience in the management and practice of teaching and learning, including research degree supervision
- Experience of undertaking quality reviews (audit, assessment, accreditation etc) in educational, professional or industrial settings
- Knowledge and understanding of the Hong Kong higher education sector, including its broader context
- Ability to understand and evaluate information provided by institutions in a manner that is sensitive to the particular context from which it arises

Source: Quality Assurance Council, Hong Kong. Audit Manual p.59

The process of building up an appropriate register demands considerable efforts, but also maintaining the Register and reviewing it at regular intervals requires significant resources. But the importance of these exercises should not be underestimated as the reviewers are the backbone of the external review process. If an agency is not able to identify adequate and qualified reviewers for a particular review, it may have an impact on the conduct and the outcome of the process.

In the case where agencies set up registers of external reviewers, the reviewers can be considered as having a working relationship, albeit part-time, with the agency in the sense that reviewer and agency enter into a relationship. This relationship has some formal obligations on the reviewers typically involving participation in review exercises within the appointment period (depending on demand and availability) and undergoing training sessions to understand the agency's review approach and related procedures. The relationship may also require the reviewer to provide the

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agency with feedback on critical issues related to the agency's work, e.g. when new guidelines or handbooks are being developed.

The agency on its part also has obligations. It provides its reviewers with handbooks and/or guidelines specifically for the types of reviews that they are going to be involved in and gives guidance on the role of the reviewer either as part of the handbook/guidelines or in separate guidelines or briefing documents. Other means of keeping reviewers up-to-date are through newsletters and annual meetings. For agencies which are member associations, the annual meetings tend to last several days to cover a broad range of topics related to the agency's work and operations whereas other annual meetings may be of one day's duration.

It should be kept in mind that the appointment of reviewers to both a register of reviewers and to specific panels needs to be handled professionally and following clear criteria and procedures. This is essential to ensure the integrity of the process and that panels are established in a consistent manner for all institutions. Institutions undergoing review should be treated in a fair and equitable manner in terms of the way individual members are appointed to the review team.

It is also important to outline the necessity to treat all information received in the course of the review as confidential. The following statement is signed by all panel members involved in QAC audits:



[Confidentiality Declaration – QAC \(Hong Kong\)](#)

Confidentiality Declaration – QAC (Hong Kong)

Audit Panel Confidentiality Agreement: Privacy and Disclosure of Information

'An effective audit requires access to a considerable amount of information, some of which may be sensitive or confidential. The QAC has therefore developed policies and procedures to safeguard such information. Institutions and their staff can be assured that confidential information disclosed during an audit will not be publicly released or used in an inappropriate manner.

The QAC's policy on privacy and disclosure of information is as follows:

- Information provided by an institution is used only for the purpose of audit.
- Information marked by an institution as confidential is not disclosed by the QAC or by individual auditors, though it may be used to inform audit findings.
- Staff, students or other stakeholders who are invited to provide information may elect to do so in confidence, in which case the information is treated in the same way as confidential information provided by the institution.
- Audit interviews are confidential in the sense the panel does not reveal outside a session what is said by any individual, nor are individuals identified in the audit report. The institution is encouraged to require the same degree of confidentiality from interviewees.
- The QAC and auditors must keep confidential information in a secure fashion.
- Auditors are required to destroy material relating to an audit, including the Institutional Submission and any notes or annotations they have made, once an audit is complete.
- Auditors make no media or other public comment on audits in which they participate. The only persons authorised to comment on an individual audit are the Secretary and Chair of the QAC.

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- QAC members, staff and auditors (on appointment to a panel) sign a confidentiality agreement which binds them to follow QAC procedures'.

Practices vary when it comes to disclosing the names of reviewers in the public arena with policy in this regard often linked to policies for disclosure of the review outcome. In systems where only the actual decision on the outcome is public the names of reviewers are rarely disclosed. In the case of the United States this policy is applied to protect the reviewers from being held personally responsible for the review outcome. In systems where the reports are made public the reports typically include a list of review team members. Also some agencies that maintain registers of their reviewers keep the register public. The latter applies for example to AUQA, the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit NZUAAU and OAAA.

6. Establishing Review Panels

In selecting reviewers for specific reviews, most quality assurance agencies select on the basis of the criteria that ensure the review team members, collectively, have appropriate competencies to analyse and formulate judgments that relate to the scope and focus of the type of review to be conducted.

A peer assessment can also be compromised if the peers designated by the QA agency are not well regarded. Also it is possible the credentials of the peers are satisfactory but the tools and information given to them are inadequate. If the agency framework of criteria, guidelines, training and so on, are not of an appropriate standard, or the sector does not accept these, the scholarly, professional or moral authority of the peers is undermined.

Given below are examples of differing profiles of review teams based on the purpose of the type of review they are to be involved:

Purpose of Review and Profiles of Teams

Institutional reviews

The typical competencies to be included in an institutional review team are governance and/or management experience at institutional level, responsibility for quality assurance at institutional level, experience with financial planning management and strategic planning and management. The reviewers engaged in institutional reviews, therefore, tend to hold management positions in higher education institutions or at private companies if industry representatives are involved.

Program reviews

For program reviews, broadly speaking, the focus is on input factors related to the delivery of a particular learning program, the teaching and learning processes, in some cases research-related activities to support the teaching and learning processes and the outcomes of these processes. A program review team would in most cases comprise members who have quality assurance experiences, be outstanding scholars in the core discipline of the program being reviewed, and have experience with academic planning and review processes.

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An example of how the purpose of a review and the characteristics of team members are linked is in the statement of the European University Association (EUA) which has offered an Institutional Evaluation Program (IEP) for its members since 1993.



[Linking the Purpose of Reviews and Team Characteristics – EUA](#)

Linking the Purpose of Reviews and Team Characteristics – EUA

1.1 Introduction

.....The focus of the IEP is the institution as a whole rather than individual study programs or units. It focuses upon:

- Decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic planning
- Relevance of internal quality processes and the degree to which their outcomes are used in decision making and strategic planning as well as perceived gaps in these internal mechanisms.

In addition, participating institutions have the possibility to select a strategic priority for more in- depth analysis and recommendations. This topic will be evaluated within the institutional context and constitute a separate heading in the evaluation report.

1.2 Evaluation teams

IEP evaluation teams consist of highly experienced and knowledgeable higher education leaders. Team members are selected by the Steering Committee of the Institutional Evaluation Program with a view to providing each participating institution with an appropriate mix of knowledge, skills, objectivity and international perspective. The number of team members is determined by the size of the participating institution. Generally, teams consist of five members; institutions with fewer than 2000 students will have a four-member team.

The teams consist of rectors or vice rectors (current or former), one student and a senior higher education professional acting as the academic secretary. Each team member comes from a different country, and none comes from the same country as the participating institution.

Source: EUA, Extract of IEP (Institutional Evaluation Program) Guidelines for Participating Institutions, p. 4.

A second example of the link between team skills and expertise comes from Swedish National Agency for Higher Education:



[Conducting Evaluations – Swedish National Agency for Higher Education](#)

Conducting Evaluations – Swedish National Agency for Higher Education

Purpose of the evaluations

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- To contribute to developing the content and quality of subject areas and study programs
- To ensure that subject areas and study programs fulfil the goals and stipulations of the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance
- To provide students with information prior to choosing a subject area or study program.

Panel of assessors

A panel of assessors is appointed including individuals with research and teaching skills and experience from HEIs in Sweden and abroad, and sometimes representatives from the private sector. There is a student representative and a doctoral student representative if a third cycle program is being reviewed.

Source: The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education Website: Quality Assurance: Subject Areas and study programs: Conducting evaluations

It is clear from the above discussion that there needs to be a direct link between the purpose of a review and the expertise of the peer reviewers. For example, most audit approaches focus on the institutional level or a sample of institutional aspects and is defined as a process for checking that procedures are in place to assure quality, integrity or standards of provision and outcomes. In other words the assessment is of the institution's quality assurance processes and ability to ensure its own and externally required standards. As a consequence of the focus on quality assurance (rather than, say, the context of the teaching and learning or research activities of an institution), the reviewers need to have a thorough understanding of, and experience with, university administration and management and quality assurance processes. But in addition, while the focus of the basic skills of the reviewers are related to quality arrangements, the composition of the review team as a whole also needs to reflect the profile and the major characteristics of the institution which is subject to the audit, eg it would be relevant to have a reviewer with a substantial research profile on review teams responsible for auditing a research-intensive university. The NZUAAU formulates the composition of their review (audit) teams as follows:



[Composition of Review Teams - NZUAAU](#)

Composition of Review Teams - NZUAAU

2.3 Audit panel

The Unit selects potential members for an audit panel bearing in mind the scope of the audit, any special characteristics of the university, and the need to have a panel that is coherent and balanced in background and experience. The size and composition of audit panels is always under review, and there is a tension in gaining a balance between size and a representative composition. For Cycle 4, the panel will normally have the following composition:

- a senior person (usually an academic or academic administrator) from a New Zealand university as Chair
- a New Zealand academic,
- a non-academic with experience and understanding of quality assurance and

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- quality enhancement processes as well as an awareness of the way quality assurance is applied in a university context,
- an academic from an overseas university.

The Unit requires a balance of experience, with an audit panel which, collectively, has:

- knowledge of the processes of universities or those of other tertiary institutions,
- a positive attitude towards the future of the university sector,
- experience of university research and teaching,
- experience resulting from holding university management and administrative posts at least at Faculty/School/Division level,
- the capability of being forward-looking,
- an awareness of the contemporary context in which universities work and of the national and international environments in which students will live and work as graduates.

Source: New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit –NZUAAU. Audit Manual, pp 5-6

As will be clear from the example above, some countries involve international members on the review teams. There are a number of reasons that lead to such a decision. However, involving international members is not without its difficulties.

Involving International Members: Benefits and Drawbacks

Benefits

- The small scale of some academic communities can make it difficult to identify sufficient numbers of independent and qualified local reviewers.
- Due to the increase in the internationalisation of higher education, it is relevant in many contexts to involve an international review team member so that the review team is not appointed in an isolated national context while the institution under review operates in an international context.
- There is increasing interest from governments worldwide to learn about the performance of their higher education institutions in an international and/or comparative context. The development of joint European Standards and Guidelines for higher education institutions and quality assurance bodies is probably the outstanding example of this trend.
- Involving international reviewers in teams is one means of providing a benchmark when assessing institutions, educational programs or research.

Drawbacks

- If it is not always possible to recruit reviewers who speak the local language so there can be considerable resources involved in translating documents and/or proving translation for core documents and the site visit.
- It may also be expensive to bring international members to join a review team due to additional travel and accommodation costs.
- There are also additional time demands on international members to allow for travel and recovery time prior to the review.
- It is also necessary to brief the international members to ensure that they have a sufficient understanding of the national education context.

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Countries that share the same language or where the national languages of the neighbouring countries can easily be understood more often use international reviewers on their teams, such as occurs in the Nordic countries, the German-speaking countries in Europe and Latin American countries. In general, the English-speaking countries have an advantage as reviewers speaking the language are more plentiful and a number of the English-speaking countries have shared principles underpinning their education systems and this facilitates international cooperation.

Over the years, a small group of external quality assurance agencies has included student members on their review teams. Examples of such practice are in the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC), the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) and QAA Scotland. Having a student on the review team can be a guarantee that issues relevant for the student community are appropriately covered and that the voice of the 'users' of education are represented on the panel. The European Standards and Guidelines emphasises the importance of an active involvement of students both in internal and external reviews.

A number of agencies have a policy of ensuring local members such as industry representatives in review activities for example the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) and the Oman Academic Accreditation Agency (OAAA). These members can be a very valuable source of advice to any team they might serve on by providing contextual information to international or student members. The HK Quality Assurance Council (QAC) specifically seeks to include 'lay' members of the community in review teams. These individuals may be professionals in any field of practice and their knowledge of higher education institutions is at a general level only. They can however bring a valuable community perspective to the deliberations and judgments being made.



[Role of Local Experts – HKCAAVQ and QAC](#)

Role of Local Experts – HKCAAVQ and QAC

HKCAAVQ

'The HKCAAVQ's relationship to its local experts is formulated as follows:

- To serve as a panel chair or member;
- To assist HKCAAVQ in quality assurance exercises;
- To provide feedback on quality assurance exercises;
- To share their experience and expertise in the industry
- To be recognised in the Council's Register of Sector/Subject Specialists (SSs) (names to be included on the Council's website subject to consent of SSs);
- To occasionally attend briefing seminars, training workshops and other activities.
- To advise the Council on manpower development, quality assurance and related issues in the sectors; and
- To share experience and expertise in their sectors'.

QAC

'Panel members are drawn from the QACs register of auditors which includes:.....

- Lay persons from outside higher education'

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In addition to the need to draw together a team with the particular knowledge for the circumstances, the QA agency needs to consider general competencies of team members when deciding on the composition of a review team. The competencies include a basic level of professionalism and ability to conduct the review in a fair and credible manner that will live up to the expectation of the institution under review.

Shortlisting of Potential Reviewers

In setting up teams of reviewers for specific QA activities some agencies consult the institution on membership of the review teams and the profile of overall competencies to be covered on the team. This is the approach adopted by the UGC in Bangladesh, the Samoan Qualifications Authority (SQA) and the Malaysian Qualifications Authority (MQA) (Quality Arrangements in Higher Education in the Broader Asia-Pacific Region, 2008, pp 61 – 70). But in these instances, even if institutions are consulted on possible members of the review team, the final decision on the membership of the team rests with the agency for reasons of accountability and independence from the institution under review.

Most agencies develop the list of possible reviewers to be involved in a review exercise without consulting the institutions first. The list is sent to the institution undergoing the review for comment and the institution can record its comments on the basis of set criteria primarily in the areas of conflict of interest. An example of the latter from the QAC Hong Kong is included below.



[Shortlisting Potential Reviewers](#)

Shortlisting Potential Reviewers

A short-list of proposed panel members is provided to the institution before membership is finalised, allowing the institution to object to any person on grounds of conflict of interest or for any other material reason. Potential panel members are also asked to make a statement on possible conflict of interest. The QAC decides whether any perceived conflicts of interest, or any other concerns raised by the institution, are sufficient cause to remove a person from the short-list. The appointment of auditors, Panel Chair and the Audit Co-ordinator for a specific audit are subject to endorsement by the Council.

Source: Quality Assurance Council, Audit Manual, p 23

Some agencies develop a list containing more reviewers than needed for the review for the institution's comment – a so-called 'long-list'. This is to avoid the need to go back to the institution in case the reviewers on the original list are not available. This is the approach of AUQA, HKCAAVQ and Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) but again, the final decision on the composition of the review team rests with the agency.

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One of the decisions that an agency needs to take relates to the procedures it will use for reviewers to declare any conflicts. Conflicts of interest in relation to a review can broadly be defined as private interests and circumstances that may compete with the reviewer's official actions or duties. Reviews should be conducted consistently in line with the agency's policies and procedures as well as impartially and thus not be influenced by the reviewers' personal or professional interests. In order to ensure consistency and credibility in the process, it is essential for agencies to have sound policies for and procedures for reviewers' declaration of any potential conflict of interest. Here is an example from the national QA in Oman (OAAA) which covers a number of aspects including conflict of interest:



[Conflict of Interest Declaration – OAAA](#)

Conflict of Interest Declaration – OAAA		
Conflict of Interest Declaration – Oman Academic Accreditation Agency (OAAA)		
Declarations (selected)	Agree	Disagree
<i>I have read and understood the Quality Audit Manual and will abide by the Roles and Responsibilities for Panel Members.</i>		
<i>I know of no conflict of interest, as set out in Section 10.1 of the Quality Audit Manual, that would jeopardize my participation on this Audit Panel. (If you tick 'disagree', the Executive Officer will contact you as soon as possible to discuss the matter further.)</i>		
<i>I agree to not enter into a consultancy relationship (or similar) with the HEI being audited, from the time of signing this form until one full calendar year after the public release of the consequential OAAA Audit Report.</i>		

In summary, it can be seen from the above that there is no uniform approach to defining the roles, profiles and selection of reviewers. The decisions that an agency needs to take in this area depend on the purpose of the reviews that the reviewers need to be involved in and the scope and complexity of the reviews. Furthermore, the specific approach to the review cannot be seen in isolation but needs to be developed in the light of the role of the agency staff, the resources available to support the site visit part of the review and the academic cultures in terms of what is an acceptable role for the agency to assume in the review process.

A further matter to be considered is the strategy for supporting the organisational aspects of the review and the role of team members including agency staff members on review teams. There are several models operated by different agencies, each with somewhat different scope, for example:

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- An agency staff member
 - is a full team member but has additional responsibilities for organizing the review and drafting the report (AUQA);
 - organises the review and participates in associated activities including the site visit but is not a panel member so does not contribute to the substantive discussions of the panel as it draws its conclusion (OAAA)
- The review team appointed by the QA agency is responsible for all facets of the review including organisational aspects (e.g. some US accreditation authorities)
- The agency appoints a coordinator from outside the agency with the responsibility for producing the report of a specific review and assisting with overall coordination (QAC)

The following examples outline the role of an agency staff member allocated to support a particular review

Supporting Reviews

52 QAA (UK) Assistant Directors [agency staff members]

'Each audit is coordinated by a QAA Assistant Director (AD). In the period preceding the audit visit, the AD provides advice to the institution on its preparations for the audit, and works with the audit team on the initial analysis of documentation. He or she accompanies the team during the briefing visit and for the final part of the audit visit, providing advice as appropriate. It is the responsibility of the AD to test that the team's findings are supported by adequate and identifiable evidence, and that the audit report provides information in a succinct and readily accessible form, supported by reference to more detailed evidence and analysis in the annex to the report.'

54 Audit secretaries will be normally recruited from among senior administrative staff in institutions. They will provide administrative support and fulfil the primary coordination and liaison function during the visits to the institution'.

Source: Purpose of QAA, UK, Institutional Audits and composition Audit panels pp 2 and 12-13.

'In addition to the responsibilities of all panel members...the AUQA staff member is responsible for managing and overseeing all aspects of the audit process and liaising with the auditee on all matters relating to the audit. The AUQA staff member has the authority to ensure compliance with the AUQA Board's approved procedures'

Source: AUQA Audit Manual Version 8 p 73

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7. Discussion

Discussion: Reviewer Role and Profiles

1. Considering that reviewers are generally experienced practitioners in their field of expertise but not necessarily experienced in external review of the type conducted by your local or national QA agency, what do you think might be the most effective way to communicate the purposes of particular types of external review to them?
2. In the case where it is not possible to remunerate reviewers, what methods can the QA agency use to ensure they fully engage with the review process through all stages to completion of the report?
3. What strategies would you use in the event an institution under review objected to all of the short list of potential reviewers presented for their consideration?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having an agency staff member as a full member of a review team?

8. Discussion

Discussion: Identifying and Selecting Reviewers

What are the arguments for and against having a register of reviewers or taking the approach of recruiting reviewers as needed for specific reviews

For either approach what are the implications for the criteria for the appointment of reviewers?

9. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- With the rapid expansion of external QA in higher education, reviewers operate in specific national and/or regional or global contexts. They also work in institutional and discipline contexts.
- The external reviewers' main roles in a review exercise are to:
 - analyse the self-evaluation report and supporting materials and information;
 - attend the site visit to the institution and/or programs under review and on that basis;
 - make the necessary judgments in the review in compliance with the purpose of the review;
 - contribute to the finalizing of the review report.
- The composition of the review team or audit panel also needs to reflect the profile and the major characteristics of the institution which is subject to the audit.
- The decisions that an agency needs to take regarding the profiles, selection and roles of the reviewers depend on the purpose of the types of reviews that the reviewers need to be involved in, the scope and complexity of the reviews.
- The three approaches most commonly adopted in identifying and selecting reviewers are:
 - Approach 1: Members function as reviewers
 - Approach 2: Establishing a Register of Reviewers
 - Approach 3: Identifying the reviewers on an ad-hoc basis.

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- Reviews should be conducted consistently in line with the agency's policies and procedures as well as impartially and thus not be influenced by the reviewers' personal or professional interests.
- It is common for an institution to have an opportunity to comment on a list of potential reviewers for a forthcoming review exercise.