

INQAAHE Workshop

Assuring Effective Site Visits

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1. General

2. Visit Types

3. Preparation

4. Implementation

5. Techniques

6. Afterwards

7. Conclusion



1. General

1.1 *What is a site visit?*

The near-universal pattern for an evaluation of the whole or part of a HE institution by an external quality assurance (EQA) agency is

- 1. documents from the institution;*
- 2. consideration of these by a panel;*



3. visit by the panel to the institution;

4. report by the panel, and

5. decision on the evaluation.

although there is huge variation in the details and hence in the nature and consequences of the evaluation.



The first question to ask is why there is a site visit? what purpose does this step serve? why not merely work from the documents?

*The most common answer is:
'to validate the documentary information';
there is a feeling that one can be misled -
accidentally or deliberately - by documents, and
that one needs to 'see for oneself' -*



but how can a short visit substitute for comprehensive documentary information, perhaps gathered over a period of time?



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*Understand the layout of the institution
Feel the atmosphere of the institution -*

*but many panels stay mainly in one room in
the institution.*



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Site visits are undesirable:

Members of the institution, especially management, may reject the information gathered on-site as partial, and in many cases the complaints of a few unrepresentative disaffected staff



Site visits are essential:

Conversely, members of the institution may feel it would be unsatisfactory for any external body to make significant decisions about the institution 'without even setting foot in the place'



These two reactions indicate that:

- 1. the visit has symbolic as well as practical value, and*
- 2. it is necessary to manage the expectations of the visit (see later).*



It is essential that the various purposes of the visit are clearly understood by all.

The EQA agency carries the greatest responsibility here: it must not include a site visit step merely because almost every EQA process has one.



Each agency must decide why it has a site visit step in its QA process, and precisely what purpose the site visit serves in this particular QA system.

It must then make this purpose explicit and understood by its various constituencies.



1.3 What is meant by an effective site visit?

One that achieves its intended purposes.

The steps in EQA process must not be seen as isolated but as points on a continuum.

In this vein, an effective site visit is one that fits comfortably into its slot on that continuum.



2. Visit Types

2.1 Evaluation types:

Accreditation / Assessment / Audit

- ~ What are the consequences for the site visit?*
- ~ Are there differences between the site visits related to the different evaluation types?*



There are many different types of EQA, and it is reasonable to ask whether the type of EQA affects the nature of the site visit. EQA types include accreditation, audit, assessment, certification, validation, licensure, capacity-building, etc.



Assessment denotes measuring something (eg a program or department or institution).

Assessment gives a snapshot.

Accreditation is a determination of whether something (the institution, program, graduates) qualifies for a certain status, ie 'is it good enough?'



When a certain status is granted, one would like to be sure that the institution or program continues to merit that status.

US accreditors express this by asking not only 'are you achieving the standards?' but also 'are you likely to continue to do so?', and that requires some investigation of the institution's systems.



Audit takes this system-investigation further, giving equal weight to the institution's planning processes, implementation systems, self-monitoring, and action on the results achieved.



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- 1. the differences permeate the whole review process, rather than being specifically identifiable related to the site visit, and*
- 2. differences are more of emphasis than substance, and some of the other variables in site visits that we shall talk about influence the nature of the site visit more than does the type of EQA.*



In an audit, one may sample more than in accreditation or assessment.

Assessment attempts to be comprehensive.

If the evaluation is for ISO9000 certification, or a restaurant hygiene inspection, or a pharmaceuticals safety check, the site visit may concentrate on finding faults ('instances of non-compliance')



Audit involves discussions of how results are achieved, whereas assessment involves meeting staff in their workplaces to see whether results are achieved.



Splitting the panel is less appropriate if the aim is to sense the culture of the institution (eg audit) and more appropriate if there are specific things to check and individual panel members can be allocated to each check (eg assessment).



Some people contrast fitness-for-purpose (FFP) audit with compliance audit, where by the former they mean starting from the institution's objectives, and by the latter starting from some externally specified standards. However, the former is also a compliance audit, but the compliance is with the institution's own objectives.



2.2 Peer review versus Expert inspection

This is another distinction that permeates of the whole evaluation, not just the site visit.



2.3 Evaluation scopes: institution / discipline

What are the consequences for the site visit?

A panel to review a department, discipline or program would typically consist of mainly discipline experts, so a good deal of the discussion at the site visit is about the characteristics of that discipline.



The institution-evaluation panel consists of people who can discuss how institutions operate. Thus, there is some difference in nature between discipline- and institutional-level peer review.



3. Preparation

3.1 Preparing the panel

Use permanent experts - eg ISO9000 certifiers

Train pool of people

Train each panel as needed

Brief the panel.



3.2 Selecting the panel

Factors to consider in selecting a panel:

- ~ size of panel,*
- ~ type/scope of the evaluatee – match panel to institution,*
- ~ gender inclusion,*
- ~ cultural inclusion,*
- ~ interaction between panel members.*



3.3 Preparing the institution - briefing

There should be an EQA manual for the institutions and for the evaluators - maybe the same manual

There is scope for EQA agency training of the institution and its staff for various purposes, eg how to carry out a self-review, how to write a submission to the agency, and also about what to expect in a site visit, and how to get the best out of one.



3.4 Planning the site visit program - scheduling

3.5 Managing the site visit

Role of an EQA staff member:

- ~ none – task left to chair,*
- ~ none – task left to a seconded admin person,*
- ~ present – as secretary,*
- ~ present – as panel member.*



3.6 Managing perceptions and expectations

The institution should know what to expect, including what things might be done unexpectedly

Institutions can get carried away in briefing and de-briefing the interviewees.



Some briefing is actually helpful to the evaluation process, but getting the right balance is difficult.

Institutions stage-managing the visit, so the panel only sees those of whom the institution approves. How to detect / deal with this?



4. Implementation

4.1 *One visit or more?*

- ~ *One-campus institution, all operations (except possibly distance operations) on that campus - non-issue*
- ~ *However, many (?most?) institutions now have multiple campuses and/or multiple partners or franchises.*



- ~ *Partner operations*
- ~ *Partner operations overseas*
- ~ *Is the EQA system such that the agency is evaluating the partner as well?*
- ~ *If not, how does one visit a partner without appearing to be evaluating the partner?*



4.2 Length of visit(s)

Typical length of 'main visit' for an evaluation in a HE institution is three days, but they vary from one day to two weeks.

~ Is there a right length? – some people claim you know the 'answer' after one day, and any more time is just dotting i's & crossing t's, & is diminishingly useful



- ~ How does one avoid incremental creep – lengthening the visit as one always feels there's insufficient time?*
- ~ Any visit is a sample.*
- ~ Short, intensive v. longer, more relaxed – does the latter give more time for reflection and therefore a better result?*



4.3 How do you visit a virtual institution?

This is not a hypothetical question, although there are few 'virtual institutions', because many campus-based institutions have increasing amounts of distance, electronic and flexible learning.



- ~ Visit the main office*
- ~ Talk to the various sorts of support staff*
- ~ Log in as a student and as a staff member*
- ~ Check all the support systems.*



4.4 Structure of the site visit program

- ~ Whom to interview?*
- ~ In what order?*
- ~ How many interviewees per group?*
- ~ To split or not to split the panel –
within a visit? to do different visits?*
- ~ Open Sessions - individual or group:
purpose*



- ~ *Walkabout sessions: purpose*
- ~ *Plenty of 'panel review' sessions*
- ~ *Record interim results along the way*
- ~ *Evening summary of day*
- ~ *Evening or morning planning for coming day.*



4.5 Panel dynamics

Panel member selection and training includes attention to the characteristics needed for members to work together successfully.

For the institution, it is often at the site visit that the tone of the evaluation is set.

Therefore the demeanour and attitude of the panel members at the site visit are essential to the achievement of a successful evaluation.



5. Techniques

5.1 The importance of evidence

Although the purpose of the site visit is often expressed as 'getting a feel' for the institution. 'a feel' will not stand up to challenge including possibly a legal challenge. Hence the importance of getting evidence for all the results of the evaluation.



5.2 Techniques

~ Questioning

~ Sampling

~ Triangulating

~ Trailing



5.3 All of the above built into worksheets

- ~ Preparation of worksheets.*
- ~ Allocation of topics, questions, activities to separate panel members.*

5.4 Interaction with the institution contact person at end of each day



6. Afterwards

6.1 Getting and giving feedback

6.2 Confidentiality of panel members

6.3 Challenges to the EQA agency's findings



7. Conclusion

A check-list for good site visits.



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