

External Quality Assurance for
Higher Education in CIS and
South-East European countries

Module

Making basic choices for external quality assurance systems



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



International Institute
for Educational Planning



External quality assurance: options for higher education managers

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Module 1

..... .MAKING BASIC CHOICES FOR EXTERNAL
QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS

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List of abbreviations

AAAHE	Albanian Accreditation Agency for Higher Education
AAC	Austrian Accreditation Council
AACSB	Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (US)
ACCR	Accreditation Commission of the Czech Republic
ACQUIN	Accreditation, Certification, Quality Assurance Institute (Germany)
ACSR	Accreditation Commission of the Slovak Republic
ADRI	Approach, deployment, results and improvement
AQA	Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance
ASHE	Agency for Science and Higher Education (Croatia)
AUQA	Australian Universities Quality Agency
CEEC	Central and Eastern European countries
CEEN	Central and Eastern European Network
CEPES	European Centre for Higher Education (Romania)
CESU	National Council for Higher Education (Colombia)
CHEA	Council for Higher Education Accreditation (US)
CNA	National Council for Accreditation (Colombia)
CONEAU	National Evaluation and Accreditation Council (Argentina)
CQAHE	Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (Lithuania)
DCI	Development Cooperation Instrument
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System for higher education
ECVET	European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training
ENPI	European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument
ENQA	European Network for Quality Assurance
ENQA-AVET	European Network for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
EQA	External quality assurance
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
FHR	Fachhochschulerrat (Austrian Polytechnic Council)
GATS	General Agreement on Trade in Services
HAC	Hungarian Accreditation Committee
HEQEA	Higher Education Quality Evaluation Agency of the Republic of Macedonia
HEQEC	Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (Latvia)
HEI	Higher education institution

ICT	Information and communication technology
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
LLP	Lifelong Learning Programme
MOE	Ministry of Education
NAA	National Accreditation Agency
NAC	National Accreditation Centre of the Russian Federation
NCA	North Central Association (US)
NCAAA	National Council for Academic Assessment and Accreditation (Romania)
NEAA	National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (Bulgaria)
NWCCU	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (US)
QAA	Quality assurance agency
UAC	University Accreditation Commission (Poland)
UGC	University Grants Commission
WASC	Western Association of Schools and Colleges (USA)
WTO	World Trade Organization

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Presentation of the module

Welcome to Module 1 “Making basic choices for external quality assurance systems” of our distance course on External Quality Assurance.



Objectives of the module

This module will:

- present international trends driving countries to establish systems of external quality assurance (EQA);
- explain how EQA mechanisms fit in overall quality assurance systems;
- problematize the notion of ‘quality’ and define basic concepts related to EQA;
- discuss overall purposes of EQA systems; and
- relate those overall purposes to basic organizational and methodological options.



Outcomes

On completion of this module, you are expected to be able to:

- understand contextual factors and policy rationales for setting up EQA systems;
- define different concepts related to EQA such as assessment, audit and accreditation;
- understand the role that EQA plays in the quality assurance function performed by governments; and
- identify major organizational choices in setting up an EQA mechanism.



Questions for reflection

Before reading this module, we suggest you to reflect on the following questions:

- 1) What are the prevailing structures for quality assurance in the higher education system of my country?
- 2) What functions of quality assurance at the national level are currently weak and need to be developed?
- 3) What role does or could an EQA mechanism play in this respect?
- 4) What organizational options within an EQA system would be most appropriate in my country?

Module 1

..... .MAKING BASIC CHOICES FOR EXTERNAL
QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS



Introduction

Policy-making and management of higher education have traditionally been concerned with maintaining and enhancing academic standards and processes. To do so, they use different instruments according to the administrative set-up of each system. Higher education systems located in centralized countries emphasize bureaucratic input steering, while decentralized countries leave much of the authority to higher education institutions (HEIs) to establish their own quality assurance system. External quality assurance (EQA) mechanisms can address the shortcomings of traditional mechanisms for quality assurance found in both administrative realities. Indeed, national authorities are often far away and not able to judge fairly the quality of academic programmes and institutions. At the same time, it is difficult to compare standards when academic institutions are both providers and judges of their own services. In addition, globalization is widely affecting higher education and creating new challenges for its regulation and steering. While the provision of higher education is becoming ever more diversified, globalization also creates the need for more standardization so that qualifications can be more easily assessed. This is why there is demand for EQA in many administrative cultures and traditions.

This module is the introductory module to a series of five on EQA systems. Chapter 1 places EQA within the broader system of quality assurance at the national level. EQA adds a new function to quality assurance, which is understood here as a national function to be performed by higher education authorities. Chapter 1 also defines some basic concepts with the aim of developing a common understanding and enhancing conceptual clarity. Chapter 2 then presents the now commonly-accepted three-stage model of EQA as well as a number of basic choices that must be made when designing an EQA system. These basic choices depend very much on the overall purpose of the EQA system, which itself is a function of the added role it plays in the overall national quality assurance system.



The role of EQA in quality assurance systems

1. Trends in higher education systems

Higher education systems worldwide are heavily affected by a number of common and frequently interrelated trends. These trends require ongoing change and adaptation both at the national and institutional levels.

Growing social demand and expansion of systems

Social demand for higher education has been growing over the past decades, in particular in developing countries. Systems are therefore expanding, while the financial capacity to respond to this demand is often inadequate. Across the world, enrolments increased from 69.4 million in 1998/1999 to 152.5 million in 2007. China alone increased its share from 6.4 million in 1998/1999 to 25.3 million in 2007 (UNESCO, 2009, *Table 8*). In order to enrol greater numbers of students, systems have become more diversified. Thus, a non-university, post-secondary sector has developed and increasingly courses are taught through distance education. As a result, national authorities have found it more difficult and more complex to assure quality through traditional mechanisms.

Privatization of higher education

Many countries that in the past were committed to public-only systems of education now no longer have the financial capacity to respond to demand for it. They have therefore adopted legislation that allows for the development of a private higher education sector. This has led to tremendous growth in the private provision of higher education over the last decade, particularly in developing countries. Public higher education institutions (HEIs) have also undergone major privatization processes through growing reliance on cost-sharing arrangements and income generation measures. In many countries, privatization processes have made the provision of higher education more unequal in terms of quality.

Higher education increasingly perceived as a private good

There is increasing recognition of the private component of higher education. This is particularly true for professional degrees, which undeniably lead to greater benefits for the individual. In particular, higher education for working adults (lifelong learning) has been targeted by both public and private HEIs as both a national and international market. Consequently, specific segments of higher education (professional higher education for adults) are considered in many countries as a market good. Certain governments actively encourage their public HEIs to become active players in this field. With the blossoming provision of professional higher education, much of it being organized by private providers, the traditional quality assurance role of governments is also being questioned as well as the methods governments use for carrying out this role.

Deregulation and governments' demand for value for money

In many countries, governments have been reorganized according to the New Public Management model. This has led them to redefine their roles as public authorities. One of the emerging trends under this model is greater reliance on deregulation and decentralization of power from government, or government agencies, to institutions. In many countries, deregulation is part of a broader reform of public organizations. Where this is the case, the predominant tools are the decentralization of decision-making incentives for units and individual staff, negotiation of objectives and targets, output control and a funding system based on measures of output. These tools relate to notions such as self-regulation and autonomy. Within this context, governments tend to stress the need for enhanced mechanisms that can provide quality control at a distance, with a focus on accountability.

Where higher education is steered 'indirectly', authorities limit their role to setting guidelines and providing resources and incentives. At the same time, institutions and the state negotiate more detailed objectives in terms of activities and outputs. Demand for accountability and trust is thus raised on political agendas, along with HEIs being given greater freedom to make their own decisions. However, politicians, government, parliament and citizens need to be assured that HEIs offer an adequate provision of services to society.

More than ever, governments expect institutions to guarantee and demonstrate 'value for money' and be accountable to their customers and the public at large. Consequently, institutions in many countries worldwide have been urged to provide information on their results as well as on their expenditure.

A shift to the market and consumer demand for market transparency

New forms of government steering are frequently linked to a greater reliance on market mechanisms. Some countries have a strong tradition in this area, while others have adopted them more recently. In highly diversified and market-oriented systems, such as in the United States of America (USA), the provision of information to consumers and the public at large through accreditation is a longstanding practice. Requests by students and parents for information on institutions' performance have also become apparent in other regions that tend to be increasingly steered by market forces. Even in highly centralized higher education systems, there is a shift towards greater institutional autonomy. However, in these cases EQA schemes must adjust to the culture and usually emphasize the control of inputs rather than results.

Globalization

Higher education systems are also increasingly affected by globalization. Recent advances in regional integration processes and trade agreements, as well as information and communication technology (ICT), have led to growing potential for the international movement of goods, capital and persons. This has had a significant effect on the structure, content and delivery of higher education system worldwide. Indeed, trade agreements have led to an unprecedented level of mobility in certain professions. The globalization of some professions and increased professional mobility create stronger pressure on countries and institutions to obtain qualifications recognized by the international labour market. Furthermore, there is growing concern with the comparability of educational standards.

GATS and borderless markets for higher education

A direct manifestation of globalization in higher education is the continuous growth of 'transnational higher education'. This includes study programmes, sets of courses of study or educational services (including distance education) in which learners come from a country different from that in which the awarding institution is based. Transnational education is often conducted with a commercial aim and referred to as 'international trade in educational services'. It should be underlined that both transnational education and its commercial application are not an entirely new phenomenon. However, the speed of its evolution is quite recent and expected to grow. Indeed, the World Trade Organization (WTO) is considering including 'educational services' within the framework of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). This has raised awareness of the fact that higher education has become a global market good for which there are currently no regulatory forces at the international level. Particular issues related to transnational higher education will be dealt with in *Module 5*.

International market for quality assurance services

The movement towards the globalization of educational services also includes quality assurance and accreditation services. Indeed, many of the private accreditation agencies operating at the national level, in particular those in professional areas of study such as management or engineering, offer their services to organizations located in other countries. For this reason, there have been attempts to build new organizations (for instance the Global Alliance for Transnational Education) that offer their services at an international level. Some of the US-based regional and professional accreditation agencies have accredited programmes in as many as 40 different countries. However, international providers of quality assurance services frequently impose their own values and standards, which are not always in line with national perspectives. This puts additional pressure on national governments to establish their own structures, which can be more easily geared to the preservation of national values and interests.

HEIs worldwide are thus faced with a new set of trends at both the national and international levels, which affect their higher education systems directly. *Box 1* presents the Bologna Process in the European region. This example illustrates how regional integration processes based initially on the intention to create an internal market for goods, services, capital and the free movement of people affect educational developments and provide an impetus for the development of quality assurance systems at the regional level. *Box 2* provides information on the international role of US accreditation agencies.

Box 1. Regional integration processes and quality assurance: The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area

The Bologna Process aims to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010 in which students can choose from a wide and transparent range of high quality courses and benefit from smooth recognition procedures. The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 has put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and for students and scholars from other continents. Reform was needed then and reform is still needed today if Europe is to match the performance of the best performing systems in the world, notably the United States and Asia.

The three priorities of the Bologna process are: introduction of the three-cycle system (Bachelor/Master/doctorate), quality assurance and recognition of qualifications and periods of study.

Every second year, ministers responsible for higher education in the 46 Bologna countries meet to measure progress and set priorities for action. After Bologna (1999), they met in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007), and Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve, Belgium (2009).

Steered by European Ministers responsible for higher education, the Bologna process is a collective effort of public authorities, universities, teachers and students, together with stakeholder associations, employers, quality assurance agencies, international organizations and institutions. Although the process goes beyond the EU's borders, it is closely connected with EU policies and programmes. For the EU, the Bologna process is part of a broader effort in the drive for a Europe of knowledge which includes:

- Lifelong learning and development;
- The Lisbon Agenda for Growth and Jobs and Social Inclusion;
- The Copenhagen Process for enhanced European co-operation in vocational education and training; and
- Initiatives under the European Research Area.

The EU supports a broad range of measures to modernize the content and practices of higher education in the 27 Member States and the EU's 28 neighbouring countries, including with the support of the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), the Tempus programme, and the EU's programme for worldwide academic cooperation: Erasmus Mundus.

The EU also works to support the modernization agenda of universities through the implementation of the 7th EU Framework Programme for Research (European Research Area) and the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme as well as the structural funds and loans from the European Investment Bank.

To establish synergies between the Bologna process and the Copenhagen process, which concerns vocational education and training in co-operation with Member States, the Commission has established a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF). The EQF is linked to and supported by other initiatives in the fields of transparency of qualifications (Europass), credit transfer (the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System for higher education - ECTS - and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training - ECVET) and quality assurance (European

association for quality assurance in higher education - ENQA - and the European Network for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training - ENQA-AVET).

The Commission contributes to the Bologna Stocktaking exercise through country analyses as well as comparative overviews. A special Eurobarometer survey was completed in early 2009, which shows strong and encouraging support for modernization among students in higher education; many of the student views echo the perspectives of teaching professionals in higher education surveyed in May 2007.

Source: Official website of the European Commission.

Box 2. The international value of US accreditation – CHEA database reveals range of non-US universities with US accreditation

The US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the co-ordinating body for higher education accreditation in the United States, has released an updated database of all institutions/programmes accredited by its members. As previously reported by the Observatory, as universities increasingly seek international reputation, there is a trend of resort to non-national accreditation or other recognition. The most obvious examples are non-US business schools that have obtained accreditation from the US Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), and business schools from a range of countries that have sought accreditation under the EQUIS scheme in Europe or from the Association of MBAs in the UK. The CHEA database reveals examples of US accreditation obtained by higher education institutions in 31 countries/territories outside of the United States – including Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom.

Source: Observatory on Higher Education website.



Activity 1

(a) List national and international trends in your country that create pressure to establish a system for external quality assurance.

(b) Are a regional trade agreement or other international agreements part of those trends?

(c) Has your government recently introduced changes in the steering of higher education, such as more autonomy for higher education institutions in exchange for greater accountability and quality assurance?

2. Alternative policy instruments for regulating academic quality

The above trends have led to an ever-growing concern with the issue of 'quality' of higher education and subsequently 'how to assure it'. Quality assurance of higher education by state authorities, collective HEI bodies or HEIs themselves is by no means a new practice or request. Nor is the concern for quality. Traditionally, most systems of higher education control academic activities through various mechanisms. The nature and extent of these mechanisms vary widely according to the different higher education systems.

Systems of higher education that are strongly influenced by state control and intervention (such as continental European higher education systems as opposed to institutions in the United Kingdom and its former colonies) have traditionally operated through controlling what goes in to the system ('inputs'). This can be done, for example, by enforcing yearly 'item-line' budgets, giving academic staff civil servant status and setting minimum qualifications, and running state-regulated admission systems. Educational processes have been controlled in the same way. Thus, the curriculum of new study programmes may require approval, with the state setting standards for their work load and minimum contents, as well as the types of examinations to be conducted.

At the institutional level, evaluations of the academic performance of individual scholars – in particular their research performance – has generally been conducted by heads of departments or departmental committees, or by disciplinary committees at the national level. Performance has been measured taking into account the number and quality of publications. This type of staff appraisal has been conducted in relation to decisions on either promotion or recruitment. The assessment of research outcomes within the community of scholars, most often informally by peer assessment, has become a rather well-established practice in higher education systems.

The newly emerging concern and pressure for EQA, requested in particular by governments and international funding agencies, bring with them three types of innovation:

- first, they refer to areas of academic life in which governments or funding agencies interfered only marginally in the past. In particular, a special interest in the quality of teaching/learning has emerged in countries where governments either create mechanisms to investigate the teaching or learning conditions or encourage institutions to set up their own mechanisms for assuring that established standards are met;
- second, national authorities or institutions request assessment to be conducted on a regular basis (and no longer on an irregular basis for certain types of decisions); and
- third, the current movement of quality assurance is concerned more with outcomes (in particular student learning and graduation) than with inputs and throughputs. In some Latin American countries, such as Brazil,¹ Colombia and Mexico, public mechanisms have been created to test the knowledge and competencies of university graduates in selected study areas. This measure has been introduced to create more transparency as to the real performance of the many public and private higher education institutions.

.....
1. The Brazilian mechanism for assessing the knowledge of graduates in a number of study programmes, the National Course Examination (ENC-Provão) was established in 1996 and abolished in 2003. A new mechanism testing mechanism called ENADE has been established in 2004.

Governments have a broad range of policy approaches for influencing academic standards. Clark (1983) sets out three co-ordinating powers in higher education: the academic oligarchy; the state; and the market. These encompass, broadly speaking, three different types of instruments that can be used for quality assurance, depending on which power is the strongest:

- direct monitoring by the state of the quality of institutions and programmes;
- providing incentives to professional organizations for their self-regulation; and
- relying on market mechanisms for improvements to academic quality.

Table 1. Alternative policy instruments for regulating academic quality by locus of influence

Focus	Professional self-regulation	State (direct) regulation	Market regulation
Research	Professional peer judgment	Research assessment	Competitive allocation of research funds by the State
Teaching/learning	Professional disciplines/organizations Professional certification/licensing External examination systems Voluntary accreditation	Assessment 'regulation' Academic audits Subject assessment State certification/ licensure State conducted accreditation Performance indicators National examinations	Student-based funding and tuition fees Information provision

Source: Dill, 2003.

As can be seen in *Table 1*, the set of instruments chosen for the regulation of academic quality depends on the relative forces played in a higher education system by the state, the academic oligarchy and the professions, and the market. They are usually chosen by a government authority, so that they are in harmony with a prevailing philosophy for the steering of higher education. The change from one type of instrument to the other is often indicative of a system intending to strengthen one force, usually to the detriment of the other.

3. Role of EQA in the overall quality assurance system

Quality assurance systems consist of a variety of mechanisms that build on each other. As a result, they evolve as a system. A change in any one of the functions naturally has repercussions on the others.

Quality assurance systems relate to institutions and programmes (both undergraduate and graduate). They address different functions that can include:

- assessments related to the initial opening of programmes and institutions (commonly called 'licensing' and leading to the status of a publicly-recognized entity);
- supervision of the current functioning (commonly relating to minimum standards, also including the supervision of administration and finance);
- accreditation (frequently of advanced levels of quality);
- professional certification of graduates in chosen professional fields; and

- the provision of information on the recognition and accreditation status of both institutions and programmes.

These functions are not necessarily present in all systems. However, if they are not, the quality assurance function will not be completely fulfilled.

Different entities (government or non-government) may be responsible for these different functions. The main actors are typically the Ministry of Education (with the main responsibility for quality assurance), bodies with delegated authority such as an inspectorate (less frequent in higher education than in other levels of education), more recently parastatal or private entities such as quality assurance agencies, and finally professional bodies, when a system requires professional certification. The issue of institutional affiliation will be discussed in more detail in *Module 3*.

As shown in *Table 2*, the quality assurance continuum can often be presented in a matrix with the following distribution of responsibilities:

Table 2. Matrix of quality assurance functions in a higher education system

Unit of assessment/ function	Institutions	Programmes (undergraduate)	Programmes (graduate)	Students
Opening- Initial assessment (licensing)	MOE Specialized public agency	MOE or licensed HEI	MOE or licensed HEI	Admission test
Supervision	Inspectorate	HEI	HEI	HEI
Accreditation	Buffer organization or QA agency	Buffer or agency Professional organization	Buffer or agency Professional organization	Outcome Assessment among graduates
Professional certification		Professional organizations	Professional organizations Peer review	Professional organizations
Public information	MOE and/or agency	MOE and/or agency	MOE and/or agency	

Source: World Bank, 2003.



Activity 2

(a) Prepare a matrix of existing quality assurance mechanisms in your country using the types of regulation discussed above. What conclusions can you draw from this matrix?

(b) Prepare a matrix of quality assurance functions for your higher education system and state what national body is responsible for them. Does any quality assurance function remain unfilled?

(c) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the existing system of quality assurance in your country?

4. Quality: A complex and multi-dimensional concept

As a part of the quality debate in higher education, the concept of quality is highly disputed. Moreover, it is often used by stakeholders in order to legitimize their specific vision or interests. There are two reasons for the difficulties that the notion of quality encounters with regard to higher education:

1. There is no consensus on the exact objectives of higher education. The following objectives can be distinguished, among others:
 - higher education as the production of qualified manpower;
 - higher education as training for a research career;
 - higher education as the efficient management of teaching provision; and
 - higher education as a matter of extending life chances.
2. Higher education, like any education, is a multi-dimensional and complex process based on the interrelationship of both teachers and learners. It is difficult to grasp the interaction of inputs and throughputs, and what exactly determines the outputs.
3. As higher education becomes more inclusive and the student population more heterogeneous, demands on HEIs and on the provision of courses grow increasingly more diverse. What might seem an adequate definition of quality for one type of course or institution may therefore be quite inadequate for others. Green (1994) singles out five approaches in considering quality:
 - quality as exceptional (highest standards);
 - quality as conforming to standards;
 - quality as fitness for purpose;
 - quality as effectiveness in achieving institutional goals; and
 - quality as meeting customers' stated or implied needs.

These approaches to quality will be further discussed in Module 4. Indeed, they are fundamental to the way in which 'quality' will be put into practice by the quality assurance agency.

Who defines quality and in what interest?

The meaning given to quality is not only a matter of its underlying conception. It is also very much a matter of who defines it and in what interest. Is it the academics themselves, students, government and its agencies, professional bodies or employers? Academics will define quality in higher education by emphasizing the quality of research work done by a colleague or an institution. Undergraduate students will focus on the quality of the teaching, their learning experience and the environment. Meanwhile, professional bodies tend to focus on professional standards and skills related to the professions that students are trained for. This means that any methodology for EQA must balance the different interests of stakeholders so that consensus on the meaning of educational quality can be achieved.

One of the main tasks of a quality assurance agency (QAA) is precisely to determine the main approach it will take to the definition of quality. It must consider the stakeholders it will consult, the way in which it will take into account international standards and definitions, and how it will legitimize and make this definition acceptable throughout the system.

5. Definitions: Quality assurance, quality control, quality assessment/evaluation, quality audit and accreditation

The way in which the term 'quality' is defined and put into practice has obvious effects on attempts to manage or assure it. However, it is also important to understand the different terms used in the discussion and practice of EQA. These terms are frequently used very loosely. It is therefore important to consider the following terms commonly used in quality assurance language:

- quality assurance (internal and external);
- quality assessment/evaluation;
- quality audit; and
- accreditation.

There is no general consensus on the exact meaning of each of these. Some of them are generic for the whole field, such as quality assurance (internal and external) and quality assessment, while others relate to more specific approaches (quality audit and accreditation). They also relate also to the responsibility of different actors in the system and to different areas of attention.

Quality assurance (QA) is a generic term used as shorthand for all forms of external quality monitoring, evaluation or review. It may be defined as a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process and outcomes) fulfils expectations or measures up to minimum requirements.

At the institutional level, QA is generally defined as the part of the overall management function that determines and implements the quality policy (intentions and directions of the organization). Procedures might be imposed on institutions by the government or funding agencies (e.g. for purposes of accountability and conformity). The institutional or departmental management might also set them up internally. They may be part of a traditional process (i.e. of institutional accreditation or programme validation/review) or relate to new practices such as the use of student ratings of the teaching staff. They may be geared towards: 1) research activities; 2) courses; 3) academic staff; or 4) support functions (e.g. administrative audit). These procedures may also analyze these functions in an aggregated manner, in either departments or in an entire institution.

Internal quality assurance refers to each institution's or programme's policies and mechanisms for ensuring that it is fulfilling its own purposes as well as the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular.

External quality assurance (EQA) refers to the actions of an external body, which may be a QAA or another body different from the institution, which assesses its operation or that of its programmes in order to determine whether it is meeting the standards that have been agreed on.

Quality assurance and accreditation: a glossary of basic terms and definitions (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea, 2007), published by UNESCO/CEPES, defines quality assurance as follows:

Quality assurance relates to a continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions or programmes. As a regulatory mechanism, quality assurance focuses on both accountability and improvement, providing information and judgment (not ranking) through an agreed and consistent process and well-established criteria. Many systems make a distinction between internal quality

assurance (i.e. intra-institutional practices in view of monitoring and improving the quality of higher education) and external quality assurance (i.e. inter- or supra-institutional schemes of assuring the quality of higher education institutions and programmes). Quality assurance activities depend on the existence of the necessary institutional mechanisms preferably sustained by a solid quality culture. The scope of quality assurance is determined by the shape and the size of the higher education system. Quality assurance varies from accreditation, in the sense that the former is only a prerequisite for the latter. Quality assurance is often considered as a part of the quality management of higher education, while sometimes the two terms are used synonymously.”

A related, equally broad concept, is quality assessment. Often, this is a synonym of ‘evaluation’ or ‘review’. Many countries have started by establishing quality assessment mechanisms that do not produce any type of grading or ranking of institutions, but rather a set of recommendations on how to improve the quality of a given institution or programme.

“**Quality assessment** (often called also quality review or evaluation) indicates the actual process of external evaluation (reviewing, measuring, judging) of the quality of higher education institutions and programmes. It consists of those techniques, mechanisms and activities that are carried out by an external body in order to evaluate the quality of the higher education processes, practices, programmes and services. Some aspects are important when defining and operating with the concept of quality assessment: 1) the context (national, institutional); 2) the methods (self-assessment, assessment by peer review, site visits); 3) the levels (system, institution, department, individual); 4) the mechanisms (rewards, policies, structures, cultures); 5) certain quality values attached to quality assessment, such as academic values (focusing upon the subject field), managerial values (focusing on staff and their teaching skills and classroom practice), employment values (emphasizing graduate output characteristics and e-learning outcomes)” (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea, 2007).

A rather particular approach to quality assurance is quality audit. This does not assess quality or performance as such, but rather the quality of existing quality assurance mechanisms. It can be used to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the quality assurance mechanisms adopted by an institution. This can help to monitor and improve the activities and services of a subject, a programme or the whole institution.

“**Quality audit** is the process of quality assessment by which an external body ensures that: 1) the institution or programme quality assurance procedures; or 2) that the overall (internal and external) quality assurance procedures of the system are adequate and are actually being carried out. Quality audit looks to the system for achieving good quality and not at the quality itself. A quality audit can be realized only by persons (i.e. quality auditors) who are not directly involved in the areas being audited. Quality audits can be undertaken to meet internal goals (internal audit) or external goals (external audit). The result of the audit must be documented through an audit report” (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea, 2007)

Accreditation is the most widely used method of EQA and has recently been introduced in many higher education systems. It can represent either a transformation of other existing methods of EQA, or an entirely new method. Based on assessment and evaluation, it makes an explicit judgment as to whether a programme or institution meets particular quality standards. These standards may be either a set of minimum standards, standards of high quality or excellence, or the institution’s own purposes.

Accreditation therefore always involves some kind of benchmarking and a set of existing quality criteria. It is thus the only method within the quality assurance spectrum that makes an explicit judgment about the degree to which an institution or programme actually meets pre-determined standards.

Accreditation against minimum (also called 'threshold') standards provides assurance of acceptable programmes or institutions. When it is also linked to the authorization to operate, it is usually called *licensing*. Some systems also apply high quality standards. This makes it possible to differentiate between those programmes or institutions that meet threshold standards (and are thus acceptable) and those that are excellent. Some systems also accredit institutions or programmes solely against their own purposes. However, these are becoming rare, unless they can also show that their purposes meet the basic standards for the profession or for higher education in general.

“Accreditation is the process by which a government or private body evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole or a specific educational programme in order to formally recognize it as having met certain predetermined minimal criteria or standards. The result of this process is usually the awarding of a status (a yes/no decision), of recognition, and sometimes of a license to operate within a time-limited validity. The process can imply initial and periodic self-study and evaluation by external peers. The accreditation process generally involves three steps with specific activities: 1) a self-evaluation process conducted by the faculty, the administrators, and the staff of the institution or academic programme, resulting in a report that takes as its reference the set of standards and criteria of the accrediting body; 2) a study visit conducted by a team of peers selected by the accrediting organization, which reviews the evidence, visits the premises, and interviews the academic and administrative staff, resulting in an assessment report, including a recommendation to the commission of the accrediting body; 3) examination by the commission of the evidence and recommendation on the basis of the given set of criteria concerning quality and resulting in a final judgment and the communication of the formal decision to the institution and other constituencies, if appropriate” (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea, 2007).

This discussion on some key concepts shows the difficulties in defining and categorizing processes and procedures. It is particularly difficult when international experiences are being considered. This is because existing country realities show a variety of practices that use concepts in a necessarily untidy manner. There is therefore no point in attempting to be conceptually pure. However, there is a definite need to establish a common language for pedagogical reasons.²



Activity 3

Consult the INQAAHE glossary on basic terms in quality assurance under www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary. Review the discussion of the concept of accreditation. How do the definitions in the INQAAHE glossary compare with the UNESCO/CEPES definitions?

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2. A more complete discussion of concepts, including an analysis of conceptual variations, can be found in a glossary prepared under an INQAAHE project on the following website: www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/

6. Users and purposes of accreditation systems

EQA and accreditation provide information on the quality of programmes and institutions. This information may be used by a variety of stakeholders, including:

- government;
- students;
- employers;
- funding organizations; and
- institutions of higher education. Lenn distinguishes the following uses of EQA systems applying in particular to accreditation systems (see Table 3; Peace Lenn, 2004):

Table 3. Uses of accreditation systems for different stakeholders

Users	Uses
Government	To define higher education country-wide To assure quality higher education for citizenry To assure quality labour force To determine which institutions and programmes receive public funding To accept into civil service only those graduated from accredited institutions To generally use quality assurance as a means of consumer protection
Students	To assist in selecting an institution for study To ensure transfer between accredited institutions To ensure admission at the graduate level a different institution from undergraduate degree To assist in employment, particularly in civil service and in the professions
Employers	To assure qualified employees
Funding organizations	To determine eligible institutions for funding
Higher education institutions	To improve institutional information and data To enhance institutional planning To determine membership in certain organizations To facilitate transfer schemes To assure a qualified student body

Source: Peace Lenn, 2004.



Activity 4

(a) Who are/would be the main recipients of information related to EQA in your country?

(b) Should information on the recognition or accreditation and/or QA of institutions and programmes be made publicly available in your country? If so, by whom and how?



Major organizational and methodological choices in EQA systems

The definitions of EQA concepts may give the impression that the methodology and organizational options in EQA are homogeneous. Although the purposes of EQA may seem similar, many important differences become evident when we compare methodological options. This shows us that while some basic elements in the process are common, EQA systems vary both in their underlying objectives and approaches.

It is agreed that EQA should ideally be based on internal self-assessment by the professionals located in the basic unit level (department, faculty or institution) responsible for decisions concerning education or research. Self-assessment is commonly guided or helped by a list of areas of attention to be addressed. This provides a framework conducting the process. However, self-assessment needs external validation of both the procedures and criteria used. A team of external experts that examines the self-study report and visits the unit is best placed to give such validation. This team will then prepare a report on the basis of which EQA decisions are taken. The basic structure for accreditation processes therefore comprises the following three elements:

- self-assessment;
- peer review; and
- decision-making and public reporting.

These commonly accepted process elements will be discussed fully in *Module 2*.

1. Overall purposes of EQA

EQA in higher education refers to a wide range of purposes and related methodological frameworks. Some of these reflect government interest and demand, while others address the internal needs of institutions more directly. As a result, the purposes of EQA are tightly linked to the use that will be made of information outcomes.

EQA systems have three main broad purposes:

- quality control;
- accountability/guidance; and
- improvement purposes.

Quality control relates to the traditional role of governments in ensuring that higher education provision is in line with minimum requirements of quality. Where higher education systems are mostly public, this function used to be less prominent as it was assumed that sufficient input steering would produce acceptable levels of quality. This is now brought into question. In addition, ongoing privatization and growth in the numbers of private national and international providers have enhanced the need for national governments to check quality, if only to protect national consumers and ensure that higher education provision relates to national development objectives.

Second, although EQA is mainly geared towards **accountability**, it is often also commissioned by public authorities as part of their higher education policy agenda. It is frequently linked to concerns over 'value for money' and creation of transparency and public assurance. To make higher education accountable and have it conform to standards set, the public must be kept informed and judgments made about

institutions' fitness for purpose, soundness or public satisfaction with them. EQA is often conducted mainly to enforce accountability in order to reassure external stakeholders about levels of 'quality', acceptable or high standards, and the 'international comparability' of both public and private providers (Harvey, 2001).

EQA models can also be used by government to make HEIs **conform** more to general policy and reform initiatives. They can do so through the quality model and by setting criteria and standards to be measured. Indeed, quality assurance standards provide detailed information on how institutions will be judged. Together with legal frameworks and funding methodologies, accreditation thus becomes a strong instrument for steering academia. In particular, reporting systems between institutions and government authorities can be highly enriched through regular provision of data and reports.

Third, EQA may also be geared explicitly towards **improving** existing practices. To achieve this, it must rely largely on the individual or collective involvement of academic staff. EQA will naturally lead to improvement, partially through the compliance objective, and partially through the setting of high or good practice standards that provide targets towards which institutions and their departments will strive. But the main reason why EQA brings about improvement is the formal and systematic self assessment procedures it helps establish within HEIs. Indeed, 'transformative' quality improvement happens more easily when academics start self-assessment by reflecting on their own teaching reality. Otherwise, an EQA system may simply produce a 'compliance culture'.

Ensuring minimum quality standards is important in higher education systems that have become highly diversified and heterogeneous, or where public trust in HEIs is eroding. In these cases, it is essential to provide a basic assurance that HEIs operating within the system comply with minimum or threshold standards. Threshold standards are normally linked to some degree of sanctions. This means that institutions or programmes that do not meet these standards are forced out of the system, their degrees are not officially recognized, or some similar measure is applied.

Accountability or compliance with standards, including the institution's own purposes, is used when public information about the quality of a given institution or programme is important. In some cases, this is also linked to sanctions or incentives. At the very least, however, the information provided enables market forces to act. This helps stakeholders make decisions on the basis of quality.³

Quality assurance focusing on improvement is normally possible only in more mature systems, where threshold standards have already been met and institutions have developed a basic understanding of self-regulation. This does not mean that the other approaches cannot promote quality. However, making quality improvement the main concern imposes certain requirements on HEIs and on the EQA scheme.

There has been lengthy discussion on whether control, accountability and improvement objectives are compatible or mutually exclusive. While it is certainly true that EQA systems address them all in one way or another, the particular shape an EQA system takes is usually more geared to one than to the others.

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3. It must be recognized that not all stakeholders consider quality their main concern. There are other important criteria for decision-making. At the very least, quality assurance empowers those willing to make quality their main consideration.

2. General approaches to EQA

Compulsory vs. voluntary EQA

One of the most important questions in setting up an EQA system is deciding whether it will be of a compulsory or voluntary nature. A compulsory system requires all institutions or programmes that fall under EQA mechanisms to periodically undergo the QA process. Generally, however, a compulsory EQA system is not just concerned with checking that minimum standards are met. Compulsory systems are frequently set up because there is no licensing system or it is deficient. They may also apply to types of programmes where the State has a special responsibility, such as teacher training or programmes preparing for professions vital for national development and security, such as medicine, architecture and civil engineering.

Some EQA systems are, of a voluntary nature. This means that institutions and departments may apply to undergo EQA. Their motivation to do so may be the chance to acquire a special status through accreditation, which would give them an advantage in a competitive environment in finding students and funding. Or they may be motivated by access to specific funding (such as student funding or special incentive schemes). When EQA systems are voluntary, however, there is an expectation that the advantages related to EQA will create a movement through which all or, at least the majority, of institutions will be pulled into the system. Voluntary EQA systems are often more directly related to the improvement policy agenda. This is because institutions and departments can decide themselves whether they wish or not to join the process, depending on whether they wish to adhere to the proposed quality model. Voluntary EQA systems are also more easily acceptable to the higher education community.

While there were many more voluntary EQA systems at the early stages of the EQA movement, an increasing number of countries have either moved their existing systems to a compulsory procedure. As outlined under Box 3, the Russian Federation operates a compulsory institutional accreditation system since 1992, which has however undergone many changes since its creation, not the least under the impact of the Bologna process.

Box 3. Compulsory accreditation in Russia

The QA system in the Russian Federation was established by Law "on Education" in 1992. In April 2007, amendments in the legislation were adopted which put the Russian system of quality assurance of HE in line with the European system: the former procedure of attestation was integrated with accreditation.

In July 2008, new "Regulations on state accreditation of educational and research institutions" were adopted (approved by Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation of 14 July 2008, A 522).

As of today, the quality assurance system in education comprises two procedures: (a) **licensing of educational activity** - an authorizing procedure allowing offering educational programmes; (b) **state accreditation of educational institutions**, which involves an external evaluation of the content and quality of education and training and their compliance with the federal state educational standards.

The system also evaluates indicators of a HEI's performance, which is necessary for the determination of its status: type (a higher education institution) and kind (university/academy/institute). The state accreditation procedure is conducted on the

grounds of application from an institution and is compulsory for all previously accredited higher educational institutions regardless of their legal organizational form (state, municipal, private) and location. The normative and legal basis of the state accreditation procedure containing requirements, indicators and criteria of accreditation, is formally approved and publicly accessible. It is uniform for all higher educational institutions. Accreditation in the Russian Federation is national and institutional (accreditation of the whole institution), it also includes programme accreditation in accredited HEIs. Institutional accreditation is conditioned by the size and structure of education in the Russian Federation. Programme accreditation under such conditions would not be cost-effective.

State accreditation is conducted on the basis of:

- self-evaluation of a HEI (it is performed by a HEI during the year preceding external evaluation; a self-evaluation report is published on the HEI's site three months prior to the site visit);
- a site visit by a peer review panel, for a duration of 5 days. External evaluation reports contain conclusions and recommendations on enhancing HEI's activity. (In 2007 the law stipulated that experts involved in external reviews of HEIs should be specially trained);
- evaluation of the compliance of the HEI's performance indicators to the predetermined criteria (fulfilled by the National Accreditation Agency (NAA) on the basis of all reports on review results and analysis of information from the Central Data bank of state accreditation);
- collective accreditation decision making (by the Accreditation Board) and its official presentation (by the federal state executive body. The Accreditation Board comprises representatives of education authorities, HEIs, employers. The Accreditation Board also includes representatives of public and professional bodies and the president of the National Union of Students;
- publication of results of accreditation (registers and directories of accredited higher educational institutions in software and hard copies, reports from the Accreditation Board meetings and materials from accredited HEIs in the journal "Accreditation in Education").

Source: National Report of Bologna Stocktaking in the Russian Federation 2007-2009

Fitness for purpose vs. standard-based approach

The related dichotomy between the objectives of EQA systems and their fundamental nature (whether compulsory or voluntary) is also directly related to the approach used to assess quality. This can either be the 'fitness-for-purpose' or the 'standard-based' approach. The 'fitness-for-purpose' approach begins by analyzing the stated purpose of an HEI or programme (mission statement). It may also consider whether this purpose is acceptable in higher education or not (fitness of purpose). This approach has been heavily supported. Indeed, institutions and programmes cannot all be judged against the same standards, since they may serve specific types of clients and service groups in a diversified system of higher education. For instance, a traditional university located in a major city and that places strong emphasis on the excellence of its research may not be judged against the same set of standards as a teaching-only institution that emphasizes recruitment of non-traditional student groups. It has, however, also been argued that certain standards (in particular minimum norms) must be required of all HEIs. This way of thinking is becoming increasingly established, in particular within the context of a growing desire for international comparability. More and more systems of

quality assurance are therefore moving towards a standard-based approach to accreditation. The 'fitness for purpose' approach is usually understood as the more appropriate approach for quality improvement, whereas the standard-based approach is more easily associated with accountability and conformity.

When the aim of EQA is to judge whether an institution or a programme can be accredited or not, it is necessary to use a standard-based approach. This is the case of the regional accreditation agencies in the USA, as outlined under *Box 4*.

Box 4. Standard-based approach used by the regional accreditation agencies in the USA

Accrediting agencies have a long history of requiring institutions to provide evidence about what they do. When USA accrediting agencies got underway early in the twentieth century, they required very specific information on the college's structure and programmes. Standards were limited in number, generally relied on available information, and were usually quantitative. During the 1920s, for example, typical requirements asked for information on the number and capacity of classroom buildings, the number of volumes in the library, the number and credentials of academic staff, and the size of the annual budget. The purpose, generally speaking, was to ensure that academic institutions had adequate organizational resources or sources of stability that could support a quality education. Notably, the focus was on the institution, and not on students nor on learning and instruction.

This approach was criticized on several grounds. First, it was said to give too much attention to fragmented information that, while 'countable', was not necessarily meaningful. Second, it did not allow for differences in institutional mission and type. Third, these measures gave too much emphasis to 'inputs' or 'resources' rather than to what use was made of them. Adding to these arguments, undoubtedly, was the fact that, as experience accumulated with accreditation, and with lists of accredited institutions offering programmes of good quality and deserving to be accredited, even if they failed to meet certain prescriptive requirements, the requirements themselves were increasingly seen as not meaningful.

By the 1930s, with the North Central Association taking the lead, the idea of a single set of standards was dropped. The NCA instead decided to focus on the 'total pattern' of an institution's activity and to take into account the purposes that the institution itself had chosen. A small, religiously affiliated college may have very different purposes than one of the Mid-West's large state universities, it was recognized, and should be judged according to its own purposes.

To implement this new approach, the NCA revised its approach to accreditation review. Evidence gathered about an institution was to be assessed in terms of overall pattern the evidence presented, instead of the previous emphasis on meeting each specific standard. Standards were from then on known as 'criteria' to reflect their change in purpose. Under this 'holistic' approach, an institution could be deficient in one area but have offsetting strengths in other areas.

This attention to a university's overall pattern of activity was adopted by the NCA and used throughout the 1930s and 1940s (NCA, 1997, p.4). Other regional accrediting agencies took similar actions during this period. Notably, although they took steps to offer greater flexibility in how their standards were interpreted, they did not change their wording from 'standards' to 'criteria'. Numerical information continued to be used but it was given less importance. Qualitative judgement became more important. Still, the

focus was on the institution, its organizational strengths, and distinctive educational offerings and mission.

In retrospect, it can be said that this 'holistic' emphasis may have slowed but did not stop a gradual process of increased detail in accrediting requirements. The wording changed, the guidance became more flexible, but the number of standards grew. Most accrediting agencies today work with quite detailed standards, intended to reflect both the general responsibilities that all institutions or programmes should meet, and the criteria by which to judge whether those standards are met. The Northwest Association (NWA), for example, currently has nine standards, with a total of 45 subparts (Northwest Association, 1999).

Source: El-Khawas, 2001.

Module 4 will further discuss and deepen the 'fitness-for-purpose' and standard-based approaches to EQA, which are fundamental system choices.

Minimum standards vs. high level (or good practice) standards in accreditation

EQA systems may use either **minimum** or **high level (or good practice)** standards. They more commonly use minimum standards. When they do so, they tend to be conceptually close to a licensing scheme for institutions or programmes and thus act as a periodic licensing mechanism. Such minimum standards frequently address input factors relating to students, staff, buildings, facilities and finances. They also include process elements such as governance and management systems, as well as the basic research activities perceived to be necessary for higher education to be meaningful. Overall, an EQA system based on minimum standards aims to enforce conformity with standards as well as accountability.

EQA based on high standards assumes that either the minimum standards are already checked through a different mechanism or that quality in the system is relatively even. This is the case, for instance, in Western Europe, where the state has long assumed the major responsibility for funding a largely public system. Assurance of high or good practice standards is also predominant in countries where universities traditionally have a high level of autonomy and where compliance with minimum standards, particularly at the programme level, seems contrary to the local understanding of autonomy. EQA based on high level or good practice standards seems to be the mechanism for quality improvement as it provides a set of references towards which institutions should strive. Again, it is easier to implement as it is frequently of a voluntary nature and may be driven by the better-quality institutions. The problem with this mechanism is that it is not very effective in weeding out unacceptable levels of quality. It is thus not an effective mechanism to deal with uneven and sometimes unacceptable programmes offered by a multitude of (commercial) providers.

Box 5 presents the Colombian approach to accreditation which is a standard based system but whose aim is not to provide assurance of minimum quality standards, but which certifies high quality standards and is thus organized on a voluntary basis.

Box 5. Accreditation of high quality in Colombia

Higher education in Colombia is complex and heterogeneous. It consists of a multi-layer system of universities, colleges, technological institutions as well as intermediate technical-professional institutions. Social demand for higher education from an increasing number of secondary school leavers has grown tremendously over the past two decades. However, due to funding constraints public provision could only satisfy part of this demand, which has led to a proliferation of multiple private programmes and institutions that offer higher education with different levels of both quality and relevance.

As part of a reform of the higher education system in Colombia proposed in 1992 (Law 30), the system of accreditation of Colombian higher education institutions was created under the auspices of the National Council for Accreditation (CNA), which had been precisely perpetrated by this Law. CNA functions under the National Council for Higher Education (CESU), which is the main body for policy-making in Colombian higher education. CNA consists of a group of highly respected Colombian academics and of a secretariat that is in charge of co-ordinating ongoing accreditation processes.

CNA is in charge of voluntary accreditation for high levels of quality. “*Accreditation of high quality*” is both a voluntary and temporary process and its methodology stresses quality enhancement rather than quality control. In consequence, “*Accreditation of high quality*” adopted a system whereby ideal characteristics of quality are compared to reality, thus creating strong incentives for quality improvement.

The methodology for the *Accreditation of high quality* of academic programmes and institutions is founded on a process consisting of basically four stages. Once an institution has requested accreditation of its programmes, the first phase concerned with checking the eligibility of criteria may begin. Following this stage, the academic undergraduate programme of the institution undergoing accreditation conducts a self-evaluation based on a pre-established methodology and set of criteria and quality characteristics. An external peer visit of the institution then follows, which leads to the preparation of a report on which the institutional management may comment. The concluding report of the peers is submitted to CNA that thus proceeds to the final evaluation or synthesis and issues a recommendation to the Ministry of Education to accredit the programme for a given duration ranging from three to ten years.

CNA has prepared a model for the *Accreditation of high quality*, which is based on the following seven factors:

- institutional project;
- students and teachers;
- academic processes;
- institutional well-being;
- organization, administration and management;
- graduate students and impact on the environment;
- physical and financial resources.

The factors are described and organized into a total number of 66 characteristics. Each characteristic includes indicators that allow measuring the degree of compliance with an ideal value. According to the object for accreditation (university or non-university institution), certain characteristics are more important than others and some are considered as crucial. This leaves institutions and peers with a checklist of items to be

interpreted with regard to a particular department or specific institutional circumstances. Institutional accreditation assessment is based on similar factors and characteristics but the focus is more on the institutional and organizational processes.

Source: Revelo and Hernandez, 2003.

Accreditation/assessment vs. quality audit

EQA systems may focus on the quality of activities and services provided by an institution or department through an *accreditation* and *assessment* system. Or, they may focus on the quality of the quality assurance system (through *quality audit*). Quality audit is conceptually different from assessment or accreditation, in that it judges the extent to which an institution (or one of its sub-units) has a monitoring system in place that clearly conveys its strengths and weaknesses. This means that quality audit focuses on an institution's internal reporting mechanisms, on data collection mechanisms on 'teaching performance', and on whether an institution collects systematic data on student, graduate and employer satisfaction. It also means that an institution has mechanisms in place to deal with low quality and continuously enhances good quality. Since it focuses on processes, quality audit is thus very much in line with the 'improvement' objective of EQA. However, it does not lead to the certification of or compliance with a particular level of expected quality. Nor does it lead to comparability of quality levels, which is the case of quality assessment when it is standard-based. The below *Box 6* outlines quality audit as implemented by the AUQA of Australia.

Most quality assurance agencies operate a series of mechanisms for quality assurance. These frequently include 'institutional audit' and programme assessment, which may or not be sanctioned by an accreditation decision.

Box 6. Quality audit used by AUQA in Australia

AUQA's audit method evaluates the aspects of an institution's quality assurance arrangements on four dimensions: approach, deployment, results and improvement (ADRI) and this has made a significant impact on institutional attention to many areas including equity goals.

The 'approach' includes the trail from an organization's mission, vision and values (i.e. its overall objectives) through to more specific goals and the planned arrangements for how these will be achieved. The latter may culminate in written policies and procedures. Broad audit questions in relation to the 'approach to equity goals' include:

- What is this organization about (in relation to equity goals)?
- What outcomes is it trying to achieve?
- What, if any, reference points (internal or external) are used in establishing the organization's objectives?
- How does the organization plan to achieve its (equity) objectives?
- Does it understand its context and capabilities?
- Are the organization's (equity) objectives set against appropriate benchmarks?
- What risk management processes does it have in place?
- Is the approach aligned and communicated throughout the organization and more widely?

In understanding an auditee's approach, an AUQA audit panel is likely to discuss with the auditee such things as the ways in which particular objectives have been decided,

the factors that were taken into account in their development, and the stakeholders that were consulted. The 'deployment' dimension considers whether, and how effectively, the approach is being put into effect. Broad audit questions include:

- Is the approach (to equity goals) being deployed in the best possible manner? According to whom?
- What standards and benchmarks is the organization using to assess this?
- If the approach is not being deployed, why not, and how is this managed?
- Are staff appropriately trained and resources appropriately deployed to fulfil the approach (to equity goals)?

The 'results' dimension looks at an organization's results as a means of determining how well the deployment is achieving the planned approach. Broad audit questions include:

- Is the organization achieving its intended (equity) objectives and outcomes?
- Does the organization understand why and how it achieved those particular results, i.e. are the results a consequence of the approach and deployment?
- How are the results reported and used within the organization?

The 'improvement' dimension focuses on whether the organization is actively and continuously engaged with understanding its performance in each of the A-D-R dimensions, and is using this understanding to bring about improvements. Broad audit questions include:

- Does the organization know how it can improve (its equity outcomes)?
- How does it know this (e.g. through the use of external benchmarks)?
- How is it acting upon this knowledge?
- Does the organization have a sustained history of improvement?

Source: Stella, 2009.

Quality audit is commonly the preferred mechanism of quality assurance when there are other mechanisms in place that ensure minimum quality standards, or when there is relatively little diversity in the quality levels of the higher education sector. With the rapid development of private higher education in nearly all regions, national activities have been placed with the need to establish new legislative frameworks that cover both licencing and accreditation procedures. In some countries, such as Croatia, evaluation/assessment and accreditation are conducted simultaneously, but they apply to different units of assessment. Accreditation refers to newly proposed academic programmes, while evaluation to higher education institutions. Both procedures lead to the granting of a license needed to operate (see *Box 7*).

Box 7. Accreditation and evaluation in Croatia

Accreditation of academic programmes

The process of accreditation is carried out for all newly proposed academic programmes that higher education institutions wish to introduce.

The procedure of accreditation of academic programmes is carried out by the National Council for Higher Education with the professional support of the Agency for Science and Higher Education.

At the beginning of the evaluation procedure, the National Council appoints an expert committee. Members of the expert committee (reviewers) submit their report to the National Council through the Agency for Science and Higher Education. The National Council makes the final assessment of an academic programme and submits its opinion and recommendation to the Minister either to issue or deny the license.

Based on the results of the evaluation of a certain academic programme, the National Council for Higher Education will give a suggestion to the Minister in the form of a recommendation to:

- issue a license;
- address a letter of expectation; or
- deny the license.

A license is a document which establishes that a particular higher education institution meets the standards and requirements for the running of a particular academic programme. A letter of expectation expresses an expectation that specific shortcomings will be remedied within a certain deadline. The National Council can recommend the Minister to issue a license for a certain academic programme on the condition that the institution in question in the upcoming period submits proof of the measures taken in order to fully meet the standards and requirements for a certain academic programme, which mostly refer to the employment of a sufficient number of teachers.

The period from proposing a new academic programme to the issuance or denial of the license lasts between three and six months.

An administrative dispute can be initiated against the decision on license denial.

Evaluation of higher education institutions

The external evaluation of existing higher education institutions and their academic programmes (re-accreditation), pursuant to the Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education (Articles 16-18) and Regulations for the evaluation of quality and efficiency of higher education institutions and academic programmes, is carried out by the Agency for Science and Higher Education and the National Council for Higher Education.

According to the established evaluation plan for higher education institutions, all existing higher education institutions in Croatia should be evaluated within a three-year period. Outside of that plan, the evaluation of a certain higher education institution can be requested by the Croatian Parliament, the Government of the Republic of Croatia, or the Minister of Science, Education and Sports.

In 2008, the external evaluation of 10 higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia was carried out, and the final reports on these conducted evaluations are to be published on the ASHE's website upon their definite adoption.

The following documents are used in the evaluation procedure of higher education institutions: evaluation procedure in higher education institutions, evaluation criteria for

the higher education institutions that are a part of the university, evaluation criteria for polytechnics and higher professional schools, instructions for drafting self-analysis of higher education institutions that are a part of the university, instructions for drafting self-analysis of polytechnics and higher professional schools, instructions for making tables accompanying the self-analysis of the higher education institution that is a part of the university, instructions for making tables accompanying the self-analysis of polytechnics or higher professional schools.

The above-mentioned documents were drafted in accordance with the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education, which is a prerequisite of sorts for the successful implementation of the procedure as a whole, and of its recognition in the European context.

Apart from the self-analysis, the adopted documents stipulate a visit to the institution, as an integral part of the evaluation procedure, by the expert committee appointed by the National Council for Higher Education. The expert committee consists of five members, including one member from abroad, one that is an expert in the area of quality assurance systems in higher education, and one student. A member of the committee can also be a known expert from the business sector. One member of the committee is nominated by the National Council for Science and is responsible for the evaluation of scientific activity at the faculty that is being evaluated. Coordinators, i.e. employees of the Agency for Science and Higher Education, also participate in the evaluation procedure of higher education institutions.

In its final report, the expert committee shall assess the quality of each academic programme and the institution's overall fulfilment of its mission. The outcome of the evaluation is the recommendation of the National Council for Higher Education referred to by the Minister of Science, Education and Sports, who will:

- issue a license;
- address a letter of expectation; or
- deny the license for the institution and each academic programme separately.

Source: Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education website

The above discussion of mechanism alludes to the difficulty to compare systems which seemingly function with similar mechanisms, but each of taking specific shapes in a given country setting. In addition, it needs to be acknowledged that, increasingly, one finds a sequential linkage between assessment/evaluation and accreditation. In fact, assessment is becoming a process element which leads to an accreditation decision. The linkage between evaluation and accreditation in Central and Eastern European (CEE) network countries is presented under *Box 8*.

Box 8. Conceptual link: evaluation and accreditation (CEE countries)

A great majority of the agencies describe the relationship between accreditation and evaluation in terms of their own procedural approach. They conceptualize a multilayered quality assessment according to which:

- evaluation precedes accreditation;
- evaluation presents results and recommendations;
- evaluation follows a clear set of criteria and/or standards and procedural rules (e.g. self-evaluation plus external evaluation);
- in comparison to evaluation, accreditation is defined as the act of decision-making (as a yes-/no-decision);
- accreditation decision has defined consequences;
- accreditation as decision-making is based on the results of the evaluation, “especially in the case of re-accreditation” (3);
- accreditation itself may precede the act of ministerial recognition.

The Accreditation Commission of the Slovak Republic (15) highlights the specific role of evaluation in institutional accreditation; its aim is to evaluate the complex activities of the higher education institution. The Austrian Accreditation Council (2) relates the topic of evaluation to the institution being accredited itself; in that case the quality management of the institution is being monitored.

	EVALUATION	ACCREDITATION
(1) AAAHE (Albania) (3) FHR (Austria) (5) NEAA (Bulgaria) (6) ACCR (Czech Republic) (7) ACQUIN (Germany) (8) HAC (Hungary) (9) HEQEC (Latvia)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluation precedes accreditation • evaluation provides results and recommendations • evaluation follows clearly set criteria and/or standards and procedural rules (e.g., self-evaluation plus external evaluation) 	
(10) CQAHE (Lithuania) (11) HEQEA (Rep. of Macedonia) (12) UAC (Poland) (13) NCAAA (Romania) (14) NAC (Russian Federation)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accreditation is decision-making (a yes-/no-decision) • accreditation is based on the results of the evaluation • accreditation may be followed by ministerial recognition, i.e. a formal approval
(15) ACSR (Slovak Republic)	institutional accreditation	
(2) AAC (Austria)	quality management	
(4) AQA (Austria)	evaluation preceding accreditation or recognition, evaluation as an element for institutional quality development	

Source: Hofmann, 2006.

Following the management principle that ‘structure follows purpose’, it is possible to relate major choices to be made for an EQA system to its overall purpose. A combination of both basic purposes is admissible. However, it is generally understood that any system will be predominantly geared to one or the other purpose. A relationship between the three major purposes of EQA and the basic system options discussed above is presented in *Table 4*.

Table 4. Classification of basic options used in EQA systems

Purpose	Quality control	Accountability/public assurance	Improvement/guidance
Preferred mechanism	Licensing	Accreditation/assessment	Quality audit
Framework for QA	Standard-based approach	Fitness for purpose + fitness of purpose	Fitness for purpose
Procedures	Mostly external assessment	Both external and internal assessment	Mostly self-assessment
Nature	Compulsory	Compulsory or voluntary	Voluntary



Activity 5

What should be or is the most important purpose of EQA in your country? What do you think should be the preferred mechanism(s), framework for quality assurance and nature of the system?

3. Scope of EQA systems

A third set of basic options in EQA relates to its *scope*. It may deal with the entire higher education system or with some segments only (university and/or non-university sector), public and/or private higher education institutions, etc.

Public institutions and/or private higher education sector

It is first necessary to decide whether EQA will deal with both public and private institutions. In many cases, this is both a legal and a political choice. In many systems, public institutions are financed mostly by the state and may therefore be of more even quality than private providers. Moreover, public institutions, particularly universities, are often a powerful pressure group that may oppose the establishment of an EQA mechanism relating to their own sphere. As a result, EQA systems have been set up in some countries specifically for the private sector of HEIs. In others, governments and citizens expect their public institutions to show that they make good use of public resources, and therefore are the primary targets for EQA. Finally, some countries expect both public and private HEIs to contribute to national policy objectives (i.e. human resource development, social cohesion, and scientific and cultural development). Their quality assurance system must therefore check whether institutions are contributing appropriately to these objectives is necessary. Box 9 refers to the Austrian Accreditation Council, a state authority, specifically set up to license and accredit private higher education providers.

Box 9. Accreditation of the private sector by the Austrian Accreditation Council

The Accreditation Council is a state authority which assesses the quality of private universities through accreditation and supports the quality development of these institutions.

Those who want to run a private university in Austria with the right to offer educational programmes leading to an academic degree must be awarded state recognition. This recognition can be obtained through accreditation.

As of June 2006, the Austrian Accreditation Council (AAC) has examined a total of 24 applications for the accreditation of private universities, 25 academic programmes of private universities, and two applications for the extension of accreditation (re-accreditation), respectively. Additionally, about 50 project planning teams have contacted the AAC for preliminary counselling or for presenting their projects in a AAC's meeting. An updated overview on the accredited private universities and academic programmes is available on the AAC's website: www.akkreditierungsrat.at.

Another main task of the AAC is to carry out the continuous quality control of accredited private universities. Private universities must submit an annual report to the AAC. This report must enable the AAC to ensure that the conditions under which accreditation was granted are being fulfilled and that the envisaged developments are implemented.

In 2003, the AAC withdrew the accreditation of one private university (the International University Vienna) because it did not meet the conditions of its initial accreditation.

The last years have shown that private universities in Austria are attracting students through new programmes which are not being offered by the public university sector. The following factors substantially influence the students' decisions to enrol in a comparatively expensive programme (between 100,- Euros/semester to 49,020,- Euros/academic programme):

- completion of degrees on time (within the limits of prescribed requirements);
- intensive support/small classes;
- innovative forms of training;
- selective admission requirements;
- student contract makes services enforceable;
- same rights as students of Austrian state universities (residence permits, study grants, family allowance, health insurance).

Although the private sector is still small, recent developments show that accreditation contributes to create productive competition within the Austrian higher education sector and at the same time responds to the growing demand for transparent and reliable 'quality marks' in a booming sector of new programmes and providers.

A trend setting measure was the accreditation of Universtättslehrgänge (university level continuing education programmes) at private universities. Depending on the duration of the course and the admission requirements, the university can award Masters degrees or a certificate upon the completion of studies. At the moment, Austria's state universities offer nearly 400 Universtättslehrgänge in a wide variety of disciplines. Currently the ACC has accredited nine Universtättslehrgänge at the private universities. These programmes have become an important component in the spectrum of

educational offerings that universities provide. They reflect the increasing interest in and need for additional qualifications. Quality assessment through accreditation increases the transparency of the fast-growing continuing education sector and is a significant help for both employers and students.

Source: Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education website

University and/or non-university sector institutions

An EQA mechanism may relate to the university and/or non-university sector of higher education. Most commonly, EQA covers the university sector, as in the past this was the segment of higher education with the highest degree of academic autonomy, in particular regarding the development of study programmes. Since non-university tertiary institutions, such as polytechnics, institutes or community colleges were established more recently, they were frequently put under the direct supervision of a government authority. This authority is generally responsible for creating and supervising new study programmes.

In some countries, however, EQA mechanisms address institutions in both the university and non-university sectors. In this case, however, the question arises as to whether the same methodology and set of criteria can apply to both types of institutions. Many universities claim a more academic dimension; their teaching should thus have a sound theoretical foundation and be research informed. This is not necessarily the case in other tertiary level institutions, which are often of an applied nature and should offer employment-oriented training that conveys practical competences. Some of the regional accreditation agencies in the US have a specific commission that accredits universities and another that makes judgments about community colleges (see *Box 10*).

Box 10. Flexibility in the US accrediting system

Regional accrediting agencies have tried to maintain a single set of standards and rules while also acknowledging important differences in institutional type and mission. This tension has not been entirely settled, even today. At issue is whether expectations and requirements can be uniform across differing types of institutions, and whether all institutions need to provide comparable forms of evidence. This is pertinent especially to regional accreditation, where the entire institution is being evaluated. Even when it is acknowledged that there are important differences among institutions, difficult issues remain: what distinctions, and how many, are to be accommodated and how distinctive can expectations be?

Responses have taken different forms. Some accrediting agencies have created separate subunits for different types of institutions. For example, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) has one accrediting commission to review community and junior colleges and another commission to review colleges and universities offering a baccalaureate or higher degree. The two separate commissions establish their own standards and monitor policies for each type of institution. They are similar in many respects but different in others.

Accrediting procedures make other adjustments to respect differences in institutional mission, allowing each institution to be judged in terms of its own chosen mission. A school of music, in this view, would be judged on different grounds than a school of engineering. Under this approach, the accrediting agency still examines whether a clear and coherently-stated mission exists, whether there is evidence that this mission is being accomplished, and whether the institution has the resources necessary to be able to accomplish this mission in the near future. This approach, which had strong advocates during the 1970s, is still found in the practices of regional accrediting agencies.

Some intrinsic aspects of accreditation's evaluation procedures lend flexibility. For example, the present accreditation practice continues to look at both the strengths and weaknesses of the institution. This approach gives flexibility because, even as evidence is assembled, there is room for applying discretionary judgment in the weighting of the evidence. Where certain areas are weak, the tradition of organizing evidence and reports that balance strengths and weaknesses serves to soften the impact of negative information as long as there are offsetting factors.

Another approach makes small adjustments for institutional differences. Under this approach, the accrediting agency applies a single set of standards and criteria but, where possible in the accrediting review process, small adjustments are made to reflect institutional differences. For example, the accrediting review team may be composed of educators from similar institutions. A team sent to evaluate a small, relatively new college would not be made up of educators from the largest, most prestigious university, but in turn would expect that its visiting team were made up of persons from similar institutional backgrounds. So, too, judgments about each institution are made in light of what can be expected for its size and relative resources.

Source: El-Khawas, 2001.

Institutions and/or programmatic EQA

Another basic question that all EQA systems must address is the *unit of analysis* – that is, whether EQA should be institutional or programmatic.

Institutional EQA is naturally far broader than programmatic EQA. According to Peace Lenn (2004), it focuses most frequently on the following areas of analysis:

- mission;
- governance;
- effective management;
- academic programmes;
- teaching staff;
- learning resources;
- students and related services;
- physical facilities; and
- financial resources.

Institutional EQA investigates whether the mission and objectives of an HEI are appropriate. It also considers whether its resources and processes are suitable to achieve them (under the fitness-for-purpose approach) or whether certain standards are attained. Institutional EQA looks at the institution as a system of which academic programmes are a part. It therefore needs to be relatively generic and to only take into account in a relatively small way the differences in objectives and performance among

the different institutional sub-units. Institutional EQA may be the preferred option in a system in which quality varies widely between institutions and when institutional management is rather weak. It may therefore be a strong way of strengthening the management capacity of an HEI.

Programmatic EQA focuses on individual study programmes, many of which prepare students for a specific profession. Each study programme may have its own policy on student recruitment, standards and curricula, and in addition be subject to requirements arising from national qualification frameworks. It therefore makes sense to quality assure individual programmes. In particular, programmatic EQA may assess whether an educational programme is related to the professional expectations for entry into a specific profession. Over and above this, institutions may offer programmes of different quality in different disciplines that cannot be recognized by institutional EQA. Programmatic EQA is therefore a strong tool to address issues of deficient quality at the departmental level, where improvement decisions must be taken.

However, programmatic EQA must also address many of the dimensions that relate to the broader institutional environment. This can include management of the institution, department and facilities with a direct impact (constraint or enabling) on the quality of the study programme. Programmatic EQA must therefore also have an institutional dimension.

Most countries focus on programmes. This provides useful information for stakeholders, who must normally make decisions based on the perceived quality of a degree. Moreover, it is generally easier to bring it into an HEI, since it encompasses fewer people and actions are circumscribed to a specific programme. Furthermore, improvement measures are usually less expensive and thus more easily carried out. At the same time, some countries with a long experience in institutional accreditation (such as the US) argue that many of the issues related to programme quality actually operate at the institutional level. Besides, it is much easier to cover a relatively reduced number of institutions than to assess a larger number of programmes.

Both types of EQA are thus very linked. Institutional EQA cannot be conducted without looking at programmes, but programmatic EQA must look into the broader institutional environment. Countries usually start off with a focus on either the institution or its programmes. However, they eventually understand that both are complementary and nurture each other. Many systems that in the past focused clearly on one specific aspect have decided to incorporate the other. Some countries conduct both and attempt to link them up in a single process. Some EQA systems, such as the US accreditation system, have both aspects performed by different actors. However, attempts are made to co-ordinate the two so that they can enlighten each other.

All programmes or some types of programmes only (for instance, state-approved only)

When EQA is programmatic, it may (or may not) be an option to focus on certain types of programmes. This could include, for example, teacher education programmes or other programmes that prepare for professions perceived to be of vital interest for a country. In Argentina, for instance, the national accreditation agency CONEAU accredits programmes in need of state approval. This is because although the capacity to create and manage study programmes lay traditionally with institutions, over time the state came to believe that there was a need for tighter regulation of those study programmes leading to professions.

Box 11. Request for compulsory accreditation of state-approved programmes in Argentina

In addition, the LHE sets that state-regulated courses have to be accredited by CONEAU in order to be offered; put differently, if an institution wishes to offer a State-regulated course, it has to apply to CONEAU so that this agency assesses the course to be given. Like in the case of institutional accreditation, CONEAU's assessment report is binding. Only courses with a favourable authorization decision are entitled to issue official and qualifying degrees. The non state-regulated courses need not have CONEAU's accreditation; it suffices with the fact that they are authorized by the Ministry and fulfill the minimum requirements regarding the time load set by the aforementioned agreements for each case.

Somehow, the compulsory character of state-regulated courses' accreditation works retroactively since the courses included in this measure, which were already underway by then, also have to be submitted to CONEAU for assessment and accreditation. If it does not meet the standards and it obtains an unfavourable report from CONEAU, the Ministry is empowered to disqualify the course under consideration and unacknowledge their degrees.

The accreditation processes for state-regulated courses performed by CONEAU are carried out following technical-academic standards set by the Ministry of Culture and Education and previous consultation with the University Council, and they mainly aim at supplying an academic quality assessment, which should complement an institutional one. Even though the assessment's goals are mainly academic, CONEAU's decisions regarding the appraisal of courses are binding on the Ministry of Education so that official recognition is granted to the new course.

The process of undergraduate course accreditation comprises two steps: firstly, the execution of a self-assessment on the part of the applying course of studies, and secondly, the appraisal by a peers committee.

According to each academic unit's features, the self-assessment can take between one and four months. At its conclusion, a self-assessment report is issued, which has to provide systematized and comparable information, as well as a detailed appraisal of the conditions under which the courses are unfolding and their results. This document may also include an improvements plan, which in the future allows compliance with the minimum standards set.

Afterwards, the peers committee analyzes this self-assessment report together with other relevant information, pays a visit to the course's seat, and comes up with a final decision. In it stands the committee's evaluative opinion and the recommendation for temporary accreditation or for rejection of the application.

Both the self-assessment and the peers committee appraisal stages are carried out following certain methodological instruments, designed for each purpose. The Self-Assessment Guide was designed to organize and co-ordinate the academic unit's self-assessment task. The Peers Guide outlines a logical appraisal sequence, laid out in sections and cores, which enables the assessment of the course's current state, to link from the outlook of undergraduate education its features to one another and to the practices that the academic community has adopted, and to check standard compliance.

Source: Villanueva, 2007.



Activity 6

What would you consider the desirable scope of a quality assurance system in your country? In particular, should it cover both the public and private provision of higher education under the same unified system? If so, for what reasons?

4. Conclusions

Within the overall similarity of EQA systems, the discussions above have shown that they can be set up in many ways. Options cannot be discussed without taking into account the particular national policy context of a higher education system, and in particular its tradition and culture. It has been argued, for instance, that EQA systems tend to fill existing gaps in the broader quality assurance system and that they focus on functions not yet occupied by another agency. This explains many of the differences found in a comparative analysis of EQA systems. Academic traditions and culture are another source of divergence. Detailed procedures must be seen as legitimate within a given system. Moreover, what is legitimate varies from one context to the other. In particular, variations in the understanding of what constitutes ‘institutional autonomy’ lead to differing options as to how a good quality assurance system should operate.

Another major conclusion is that the overall purpose of an EQA system should be identified clearly. This will then determine the specific approach to be taken to EQA, in particular whether EQA should focus on assessment, accreditation or audit; should be compulsory or voluntary; should use standards or the ‘fitness-for-purpose’ approach; and what specific scope it should take. However, over time EQA agencies also commonly become multifunctional systems and embrace new roles such as licensing, institutional audits and programme accreditation.

Within the context of globalization, international trade agreements and increased mobility of professionals and students, national higher education systems are diversifying to include distance education and private higher education. There is therefore an increasing need for standardization to enhance the readability of credentials. This has led to a growing number of EQA systems evolving towards or starting to embrace an accreditation function. This is why accreditation has become, to date, the most popular form of EQA.



Lessons learnt

Lesson 1: New contextual factors such as diversification and globalization of higher education system make quality assurance an increasingly important function for public authorities

The expansion of higher education systems and ongoing diversification and privatization processes require the use of new steering instruments. One of these is quality assurance. The development of quality assurance systems is one of the major trends in higher education policy and is reinforced through regional quality assurance agencies networks. Such networks help agencies to exchange experiences and develop 'codes of practices'.

Lesson 2: EQA systems must fit in with the pre-existing quality assurance mechanism

New quality assurance systems generally complement already-existing quality assurance devices. A diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of pre-existing mechanisms for quality assurance should precede the development of an EQA system, which should fill existing gaps and address any shortcomings. Often, new EQA systems correspond to particular weaknesses in the overall quality assurance system. They may also be set up as a new instrument for the regulation of a country's HEIs.

Lesson 3: It is necessary to identify the basic underlying purpose of a new quality assurance system and ensure that there is consistency between this purpose and the methodology to be developed

The structure of EQA must correspond to an overall philosophy (accountability or conformity versus quality improvement and development of the system). When quality improvement is the aim, a voluntary mechanism is a better option than a compulsory tool. Only when HEIs are motivated and committed to change can the EQA system operate as a development tool for higher education. Strong academic commitment is needed for EQA to become an instrument for quality enhancement. However, it may also be necessary to establish a system of quality assurance oriented towards control of minimum standards when it is known that there are many low quality providers in the system.

Lesson 4: EQA systems can focus on quality assessment, quality audit or accreditation, or use a combination of these

In accordance with the basic underlying purpose of the EQA system, a decision must be taken as to whether quality assurance will be organized as quality assessment, quality audit or accreditation. Quality audit focusing on the internal quality assurance system is certainly the most development-oriented approach. It is therefore the most appropriate for systems whose institutions and programmes are of relatively even quality and have matured. Quality assessment is also an improvement-oriented, developmental approach, since it commonly assesses the strengths and weaknesses of an HEI or programme in a non-threatening manner. Accreditation that imposes a cut-off point for what is acceptable and what it not is more appropriate for quality control purposes. However, it may force HEIs into a compliance culture.

Lesson 5: Developing an EQA system requires creating a model for desirable quality

Quality in higher education is a complex and multi-dimensional concept. Every EQA system needs to develop a quality model that will then be operationalized through the setting of standards and clear guidelines for assessment. Indeed, these are crucial for a well-operating and transparent EQA system. Increasingly, EQA systems are moving towards a 'standard-based' model. Standards once related to input concerns. However, they are also starting to embrace process and output/outcome standards. Assessing outputs and outcomes such as student learning is extremely relevant, but not easy from a methodological point of view.

Lesson 6: An increasing number of quality assurance systems use both quantitative and qualitative standards

A quality model is usually operationalized through a body of quantitative and qualitative standards. For both the self-assessment and peer review phases, these standards are generally communicated to institutions and assessors through operational handbooks. In some cases the handbooks are quite detailed; in others, institutions are more free to conduct their self-assessment. Standard-based models also vary in how much scope they leave to human judgment as to the degree to which standards are attained. More scope for human judgment is usually left to both institutions and experts in more mature EQA systems that no longer need to build their credibility and reputation of objective judgment.

Lesson 7: Institutional or programmatic EQA are interlinked

The division between programme and institutional EQA exists in all systems. Some systems focus on programme EQA, while others concentrate on institutional quality assurance. Yet others use a combination of both. A minimum number of accredited study programmes is a precondition for institutional accreditation. EQA systems tend to start with either of the two, but frequently decide to add the other one.



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Web resources

Austrian Accreditation Council (AAC): www.akkreditierungsrat.at

Central and Eastern European Quality Network: www.ceenetwork.hu/r_austria.html

Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education: www.azvo.hr

European Commission: www.ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc1290_en.htm

International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE):
www.inqaahe.org

INQAAHE glossary: www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary

Observatory on Higher Education: www.obhe.ac.uk



The modules on External quality assurance: options for higher education managers in CIS and South-East European countries

Quality assurance has become a topical issue on the higher education policy agenda. More and more countries are questioning their existing structures and are introducing new mechanisms and structures for external quality assurance. They seek to ensure minimum educational standards across diversified higher education systems and to provide a lever for continuous quality improvement.

The present material was developed by UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP). It targets decision-makers and managers in government departments such as ministries of education, buffer organizations of higher education and quality assurance agencies whose task it is to design or develop the national framework for quality assurance. These modules should provide support for their decisions on external quality assurance systems, while discussing options that have been tried out successfully in a variety of countries.

The modules are based on the outcomes of two IIEP case study research projects, one on "methodological and organizational options in accreditation systems" and another on "regulation and quality assurance of cross-border providers of higher education".

Accessible to all, the modules are designed to be used in various learning situations, from independent study to face-to-face training. They can be accessed on the IIEP web site www.iiep.unesco.org, and will be revised as needed. Users are encouraged to send their comments and suggestions.

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