External quality assurance in higher education: making choices

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Fundamentals of Educational Planning – 85

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Fundamentals of educational planning

The booklets in this series are written primarily for two types of clientele: those engaged in educational planning and administration, in developing as well as developed countries; and others, less specialized, such as senior government officials and policy-makers who seek a more general understanding of educational planning and of how it is related to overall national development. They are intended to be of use either for private study or in formal training programmes.

Since this series was launched in 1967 practices and concepts of educational planning have undergone substantial change. Many of the assumptions which underlay earlier attempts to rationalize the process of educational development have been criticized or abandoned. Even if rigid mandatory centralized planning has now clearly proven to be inappropriate, this does not mean that all forms of planning have been dispensed with. On the contrary, the need for collecting data, evaluating the efficiency of existing programmes, undertaking a wide range of studies, exploring the future and fostering broad debate on these bases to guide educational policy and decision-making has become even more acute than before. One cannot make sensible policy choices without assessing the present situation, specifying the goals to be reached, marshalling the means to attain them and monitoring what has been accomplished. Hence planning is also a way to organize learning: by mapping, targeting, acting and correcting.

The scope of educational planning has been broadened. In addition to the formal system of education, it is now applied to all other important educational efforts in non-formal settings. Attention to the growth and expansion of education systems is being complemented and sometimes even replaced by a growing concern for the quality of the entire educational process and for the control of its results. Finally, planners and administrators have become more and more aware of the importance of implementation strategies and of the role of different regulatory mechanisms in this respect: the choice

of financing methods, the examination and certification procedures or various other regulation and incentive structures. The concern of planners is twofold: to reach a better understanding of the validity of education in its own empirically observed specific dimensions and to help in defining appropriate strategies for change.

The purpose of these booklets includes monitoring the evolution and change in educational policies and their effect upon educational planning requirements; highlighting current issues of educational planning and analyzing them in the context of their historical and societal setting; and disseminating methodologies of planning which can be applied in the context of both the developed and the developing countries.

For policy-making and planning, vicarious experience is a potent source of learning: the problems others face, the objectives they seek, the routes they try, the results they arrive at and the unintended results they produce are worth analysis.

In order to help the Institute identify the real up-to-date issues in educational planning and policy-making in different parts of the world, an Editorial Board has been appointed, composed of two general editors and associate editors from different regions, all professionals of high repute in their own field. At the first meeting of this new Editorial Board in January 1990, its members identified key topics to be covered in the coming issues under the following headings:

1. Education and development.
2. Equity considerations.
3. Quality of education.
4. Structure, administration and management of education.
5. Curriculum.
6. Cost and financing of education.
7. Planning techniques and approaches.
8. Information systems, monitoring and evaluation.

Each heading is covered by one or two associate editors.

The series has been carefully planned but no attempt has been made to avoid differences or even contradictions in the views expressed by the authors. The Institute itself does not wish to impose

any official doctrine. Thus, while the views are the responsibility of the authors and may not always be shared by UNESCO or the IIEP, they warrant attention in the international forum of ideas. Indeed, one of the purposes of this series is to reflect a diversity of experience and opinions by giving different authors from a wide range of backgrounds and disciplines the opportunity of expressing their views on changing theories and practices in educational planning.

The time when higher education was delivered in a few renowned state universities is long gone. The globalized economy has brought strong demand for higher studies among students and employers, which has led to expansion, diversification and increased privatization of higher education. Quality control mechanisms are needed to regulate this new international market of higher education institutions. Furthermore, the users of the system – students, employers and governments – want validation systems, meaningful qualifications, and transparent information on what the different institutions deliver.

This booklet summarizes the results of one of IIEP's projects. It lays out in a comprehensive manner the options that governments may consider when organizing a system of accreditation of higher education institutions. It should be of great interest for policy-makers and planners concerned with the organization of the higher education sector. IIEP is grateful to the authors Michaela Martin and Antony Stella for contributing their knowledge and insight to produce this new edition in the Fundamentals of Educational Planning series.

Mark Bray
Director, IIEP

Preface

Globalization has profoundly transformed the functioning of the world economy. Producing new knowledge and investing in the production of high level manpower has become one of the main objectives of any country wanting to compete in the globalized market. At the same time the explosion of new information and communication technologies has made possible the emergence of knowledge societies, where higher education institutions play a key role. Development of the higher education sector has thus become a priority in the most advanced as well as in emergent economies.

Higher education systems are expanding fast in the majority of countries. At the same time as new universities have been created, the higher education sector has been diversified: Different establishments such as community colleges, teacher training colleges, polytechnics, open universities and distance education centres have mushroomed outside traditional universities. Constraints on government spending have also pushed governments to consider other modes of financing than the public sector: Hence the number of private universities and management schools has exploded, indicating a very large demand for higher studies.

In this globalized world, more and more students travel abroad to study. Foreign universities invest in developing countries and use their good reputation to create branch campuses abroad or to franchise their higher education programmes, with the hope of attracting the best students and to generate income. Hence marketization of higher education has become a reality. Families and students tend to become customers trying to optimize their investment without always having the necessary information on which to base their decision. Employers find themselves confronted with a plethora of new credentials whose value they cannot assess. In such a diversified context, the role of the state is to regulate the market, to create transparency, to ensure quality and to inform the different stakeholders. One way to do so is to set up quality assurance mechanisms in the education system.

However, setting up such a system is not easy. All over the world there is a great deal of variation in the approaches and models adopted. The situation is quite different in very large countries with large numbers of institutions to that in small ones. But how does one define the quality of higher education to start with? And who should do this? The ministry or a specialized public agency? Should it assess individual institutions or programmes? How is it possible to impose such a system on institutions who are traditionally very autonomous and resist any interferences from the government? These and many other questions are raised in this booklet.

Many of these models are too new to be able to conclude in a firm way what is functioning best in different countries. It is however important in such a new field to inform the educational policy-makers and planners on what exists and what the options are. This booklet has been prepared by Michaela Martin from the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) and Stella Antony from the Australian Quality Assurance Agency. It summarizes the results of a research project carried out at IIEP on methodological and organizational options in quality assurance systems. It lays out the options in a comprehensive manner, highlighting their characteristics and mechanisms. IIEP is grateful to the authors for their valuable contribution on this complex subject.

Françoise Caillods
Co-General Editor

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AACCUP	Accrediting Agency of Chartered Colleges and Universities in the Philippines
AICTE	All India Council of Technical Education
APENS	Association of Professional Engineers of Nova Scotia (Canada)
AUQA	Australian Universities Quality Agency
CEPES	European Centre for Higher Education (located in Bucharest, Romania)
CESU	National Council for Higher Education (Columbia)
CHEA	Council for Higher Education Accreditation (United States)
CICA	Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants
COPA	Council of Postsecondary Accreditation
CNA	National Council for Accreditation (Colombia)
CNE	*Comité national d'évaluation* [National Evaluation Committee] (France)
CONEAU	National Evaluation and Accreditation Council (Argentina)
COU	Council of Ontario Universities
ENQA	European Network for Quality Assurance
EQA	External quality assurance
GATS	General Agreement on Trade in Services
HAC	Hungarian Accreditation Committee
HEI	Higher education institution
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee (South Africa)
IAUP	International Association of University Presidents
IIEP	International Institute for Educational Planning
INQAAHE	International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

MERCOSUR	Common Market of South America
MOE	Ministry of Education
NAAC	National Assessment and Accreditation Council (India)
NAC	National Accreditation Committee (Hungary)
NBA	National Board of Accreditation (India)
NCA	North Central Association (United States)
NCAC	National Council of Accreditation in Colombia
NWA	Northwest Association (United States)
OCGS	Ontario Council on Graduate Studies
PAASCU	Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities
PACU-COA	Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities – Commission on Accreditation and the Association of Christian Schools, Colleges and Universities
QA	Quality assurance
TNAC	Temporary National Accreditation Committee (Hungary)
UGC	University Grants Commission
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WASC	Western Association of Schools and Colleges (United States)
WTO	World Trade Organization

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Introduction

Policy-making and management of higher education have traditionally been concerned with the maintenance and enhancement of academic standards and processes. The expansion, diversification and privatization of higher education systems worldwide have brought with them an increased concern with the quality of higher education, in both developed and developing countries. In addition, globalization is widely affecting higher education and is creating new challenges for its regulation. An increasing number of students travel abroad to study in foreign countries. In addition, institutions and programmes move across borders in the form of e-learning, franchising or branch campuses, and add considerably to the traditional offerings of local public higher education institutions.

While the provision of higher education is becoming ever more diversified, increased mobility among professionals requires greater standardization among qualifications so that they can be assessed by national authorities for decisions relating to recognition. New instruments to assess qualifications are also needed to combat the academic fraud that accompanies diversification of higher education. Within this context of change, new methods of quality assurance such as accreditation systems have become a concern in higher education policy agendas.

Quality assurance mechanisms used to be highly dependent on national administrative traditions, but nowadays there is a convergence of mechanisms. Higher education systems located in centralized administrative systems used to emphasize bureaucratic input steering, while decentralized systems left much of the authority to higher education institutions to put in place their own quality assurance system. Current manifestations of external quality assurance (EQA) seem to address the shortcomings of the traditional mechanisms for quality assurance found in both administrative realities: While national authorities may lack the competence to make judgements about the quality of academic programmes and institutions, there is little comparability of standards when academic institutions are both providers and judges of their own services. For

this reason, external quality assurance is most commonly organized through the creation of independent administrative structures, i.e. agencies that commonly function as professional buffer organizations between public authorities and higher education institutions.

EQA mechanisms commonly focus on the perceived shortcomings of traditional quality assurance mechanisms. One of their main concerns is the quality of *teaching and/or academic programmes*, whereas earlier instruments tended to concentrate on the quality of research. Another growing concern is with *outputs*, linked to an overall change in the state's steering policy. Governments tend to delegate more autonomy to these institutions and request 'accountability', i.e. a demonstration of valuable outcomes. Finally, there is also a new emphasis on *periodic assessment of teaching*, based on the premise that quality is not a static condition and that it needs to be assessed and enhanced regularly.

Although EQA systems tend to share similar interests and goals, they can take different forms. Given that a considerable number of countries dispose of an EQA mechanism, much experimentation has already taken place. A comparative analysis of systems demonstrates the many options in organizing EQA. These options depend largely on the overall purpose of the system in the regulation of higher education, and its particular role in the overall national system of quality assurance.

This booklet aims to provide policy advice and support to decision-makers and managers in the area of quality assurance in higher education. In order to do so, the authors describe and discuss major issues that decision-makers in charge of quality assurance need to consider for the creation or development of an EQA mechanism. Under each issue, different options are identified that have been derived from a comparative analysis of quality assurance systems in a multitude of countries across continents. The implementation of such options in a given national context is illustrated through examples of various countries' experiences.

The authors begin by presenting the international trends that drive countries to adopt an EQA system. They then go on to discuss the overall purposes of an EQA system and how they relate to basic

organizational and methodological approaches. The authors also discuss variations in the definition of higher education quality and how it can be measured. Finally, the issue of the support structure for EQA is tackled in terms of administrative affiliation, management and needed resources. The authors conclude by exploring ways to control the quality of the EQA systems themselves.

I.   Placing external quality assurance (EQA) in overall quality assurance systems

General trends in higher education systems that heighten the need for EQA

Higher education systems worldwide are currently heavily affected by a number of common trends, frequently interrelated, which request 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 on the increase over the past decades. This has resulted in increased enrolments, although the financial capacity has often been inadequate. During the period 1990/1991 to 2001/2002, the overall number of students worldwide increased from 68.6 million to 110.7 million (Sanyal and Martin, 2006). In order to enrol increasing numbers of students, systems have become more diversified through the development of a non-university post-secondary sector, and through the growing provision of distance education offerings.

Privatization of higher education

Given a frequently insufficient financial capacity to respond to the social demand for higher education, many countries worldwide that were formerly committed to exclusive public systems of education have adopted legislation that allows for the development of private higher education. This has led to tremendous growth in the private provision of higher education. In addition, public higher education institutions have also undergone a major privatization process through a growing reliance on cost-sharing arrangements and income-generation measures.

Privatization of higher education is supported by a growing common understanding that the benefits of higher education largely accrue to the individual, especially at the professional degree level. In particular, higher education for working adults (lifelong

learning) has been targeted by both public and private higher education institutions as both a national and an international market. Consequently, specific segments of higher education (professional higher education for adults) are considered in many countries as market goods, and certain governments actively encourage their public higher education institutions to become active players in this domain.

The 'new public management' concept

In many countries, governments have redefined their roles as public authorities under the 'new public management' concept, which suggests – as one of its pillar ideas – greater reliance on the deregulation and decentralization of power from the government or its agencies to institutions. In many countries, deregulation has become part of a broader reform of public organizations, where the decentralization of decision-making, incentives for units and individual staff, negotiation of objectives and targets, as well as output control and a funding system based on output measures are the predominant tools.

In the area of higher education, the new public management concept suggests the so-called 'indirect steering' of higher education, that authorities increasingly limit their role to setting guidelines and providing resources and incentives, and that institutions and the state negotiate more detailed objectives in terms of activities and outputs. However, the demand for accountability and trust is also raised on political agendas, together with greater freedom for higher education institutions to take decisions at their own discretion. Governments expect institutions to be accountable to their students and the public at large for the quality of their services and the utilization of resources. Consequently, institutions in many countries worldwide have been urged to provide information on their results as well as on their expenditure.

The new public management concept also suggests greater reliance on market mechanisms; a strategy that some countries have been implementing for a long time, and that others have adopted more recently. In highly diversified and market-oriented systems (such as in the United States), the provision of information to the public through accreditation is a long-standing practice. Consumers

and the public at large, in addition to governments, are requesting market transparency, hence public information on institutional performance. Requests by students and parents for information regarding institutional performance have also become apparent in other regions that are becoming steered by market forces more than ever before.

Globalization and international trade agreements

Higher education systems are also increasingly affected by globalization, but institutions are themselves becoming actors of globalization. Growing potential for the international movement of goods, capital and persons – facilitated by recent advances in regional integration processes and trade agreements, as well as information and communication technology – have in many respects widely affected the structure, content and delivery systems of higher education worldwide. Regional trade agreements have certainly led to an unprecedented level of mobility in some professions, and in others, their globalization has significantly enhanced professional mobility. This has put greater pressure on governments to compare their national educational standards with those of other countries, and on institutions to confer recognized qualifications on an international labour market.

In addition to professionals, students have also become more mobile. The demand for higher education in many countries is generating unprecedented growth in the number of foreign students. The *Global Student Mobility Report 2025* (Böhm, Davies, Meares and Pearce, 2002), prepared by IDP Education Australia, predicted that the number of students seeking an education in a foreign country would increase from 1.8 million in 2000 to 7.2 million in 2005, the majority of which would be Asian students.

International student mobility has also intensified because of regional integration processes which have an ever-increasing impact on education systems. The Bologna Process in the European region, for instance, aims at establishing by 2010 a common qualification structure in the so-called European Higher Education Area (Bachelor's, Master's and PhD), a credit transfer system, and a national accreditation mechanism, all of which would jointly aim at facilitating the mobility of students and professionals. It is expected

that the establishment of national accreditation systems will facilitate the mutual recognition of credentials. An experimental common accreditation mechanism has been created within the framework of Mercosur in South America, where professional experts from member states (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay) and associate states (Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela) were brought together to establish common standards in medicine, engineering and agronomy, to be applied throughout the region.

GATS and borderless markets for higher education

A direct manifestation of higher education globalization is the continuous expansion of 'transnational higher education', as institutions, study programmes, courses and other provisions of education (including distance education and e-learning) offer their services to learners from different countries. Transnational education is increasingly conducted with a commercial aim that is rapidly changing. Indeed, the topic of educational services is being discussed in the framework of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and has raised awareness about the fact that higher education has become a global market commodity for which there is currently no regulatory regime at the international level.

International market for quality assurance services

Globalization of education services also calls for globalization of quality assurance and accreditation services. Indeed, many of the private accreditation agencies operating at the national level, particularly those in professional areas of study such as management or engineering, offer their services to organizations located in countries other than their own. There have been attempts to build new organizations (for instance the Global Alliance for Transnational Education) specifically for this purpose, which offer their services at an international level. Some of the United States-based regional and professional accreditation agencies have accredited programmes in as many as 40 countries. The United States Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) has released an updated database of all institutions/programmes accredited by its members. This database provides examples of United States accreditation obtained

by higher education institutions in 31 countries/territories outside the United States, including Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom (see www.obhe.ac.uk/cgi-bin/news/article.pl?id=377).

Alternative policy instruments for regulating academic quality

The above trends demonstrate why concern with the *quality* of higher education, and subsequently *how to assure it,* has gained considerable importance on the policy agenda of national authorities of higher education. However, it must be acknowledged that quality assurance of higher education is by no means a new practice or request. Traditionally, all systems of higher education have an established mechanism for controlling academic activities. However, the nature and extent of these mechanisms vary widely according to different higher education systems. Those strongly influenced by the state (e.g. in continental European countries as opposed to the United Kingdom) have traditionally operated through an *ex ante* control of inputs – such as yearly item-line budgets, civil-servant status of academic staff with control over entry qualifications, and state-regulated admission systems. Educational processes used to be controlled through approval procedures of new curricula, detailed prescriptions of workload and minimum content, as well as types of examinations to be conducted.

At the institutional level, evaluations of the academic performance of individual scholars – in particular their research performance – is conducted mainly by heads of departments or departmental committees, or by disciplinary committees at the national level. Performance is measured generally by the number and quality of publications. Such staff appraisal is conducted in relation to decisions on either promotion or recruitment. The assessment of research outcomes within the community of scholars, usually done informally through peer assessment, is a rather well established practice in most higher education systems.

The newly emerging concern and pressure for EQA, notably from governments or international funding agencies, have brought

with them three innovative procedural changes in the assessment process of academic quality.

- First, it refers to areas of academic life that previously involved little intervention from governments or funding agencies. In particular, a special interest in the quality of teaching/learning has strongly emerged in countries where governments either create mechanisms to investigate teaching/learning conditions or encourage institutions to set up their own mechanisms for assuring that the established standards are met.
- Second, national authorities or institutions request that assessments be conducted on a regular basis (no longer on an *ad hoc* basis for certain types of decisions).
- Third, the current movement in quality assurance is that it is becoming more concerned with outcomes than with inputs and throughputs. In some Latin American countries (such as Brazil, Colombia and Mexico), public tests have been created to assess 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 numerous public and private higher education institutions.

Governments have a broad range of policy approaches to influence academic standards. Based on a theoretical notion phrased by Clark (1983), the three co-ordinating powers in higher education – the academic oligarchy, the state and the market – broadly speaking cover the following three important functions:

- Direct monitoring of the quality of institutions and programmes by the state.
- Provision of incentives to professional organizations for their self-regulation.
- Reliance on market mechanisms for the improvements of academic quality.

Table 1.1 suggests a matrix, developed by David D. Dill, of alternative instruments for the regulation of academic quality.

Table 1.1   Alternative policy instruments for assuring academic standards

Focus	Locus of influence		
	Professional self-regulation	State (direct) regulation	Market regulation
Research	Professional peer judgement	Research assessment	Competitive allocation of research funds by the state
Teaching/ learning	Professional disciplines/ organizations Professional certification/licensure External examining 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: 5.

As can be seen from *Table 1.1*, the various approaches to regulating academic quality depend on the players in the higher education system: the state, the academic oligarchy and professionals, and the market. The approaches are usually determined by a governmental authority so that they are in harmony with a prevailing philosophy for managing higher education. The change from one approach to another is also indicative of systems that wish to strengthen one of the three players, usually to the detriment of another.

Place of EQA in the overall quality assurance system

Quality assurance systems consist of a continuum of mechanisms that build on each other. Consequently, they evolve as a system, and a change in any one of them naturally has repercussions on the others. When new processes for the assessment of quality in higher education are developed, they usually form part of the processes that are already in place in a system, some of which may be proven to be weak or problematic.

Quality assurance systems relate to institutions and programmes (both undergraduate and graduate). They also address different functions, such as: (a) assessments related to the initiation of programmes and institutions (in this case commonly called 'licensing', which, when successful, declares the programme or institution a publicly recognized entity); (b) supervision of their current functioning (usually with regard to minimum standards, including supervision of administration and finance); (c) accreditation (frequently for high levels of quality); (d) professional certification of graduates; and finally (e) the provision of information regarding recognition and accreditation of institutions and programmes. These functions are not necessarily present in all systems, but if they are not, the quality assurance will not be as effective as it could be.

Different entities (governmental or non-governmental) may be in charge of carrying out these different functions. The main actors are typically ministries of education (whose prime responsibility is quality assurance); bodies with delegated authority, such as an inspectorate (less frequent in higher education than in other levels of education); more recently para-statal or private entities, such as quality assurance agencies; and finally professional bodies, when a system requires professional certification.

Commonly, the quality assurance continuum can be presented in a matrix, as in *Table 1.2*, with the following distribution of responsibilities among the different actors.

Defining quality: a complex and multi-dimensional concept

The concept of quality is much disputed in higher education and often used by stakeholders in order to legitimize their specific vision or interests. Two reasons can be given for the difficulties encountered when defining quality in higher education:

- There is no consensus on the exact objectives of higher education – although some objectives can be named, such as to produce a qualified work force, to train people for a career in research, to provide efficient management of the teaching profession, and to enhance life prospects.

- Higher education, like any type of education, is a multi-dimensional and complex process, which is based on the relationships between and among teachers and learners. It is difficult to grasp the interaction of inputs and throughputs and the exact determinants of outputs.

Table 1.2   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	Buffer or agency	Outcome assessment among graduates
		Professional organization	Professional organization	
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: Lemaître, in World Bank, 2003: 106.

As higher education becomes more inclusive and the student population becomes more heterogeneous, the demand on higher education institutions (HEIs), and for the provision of courses, grows increasingly more diverse. Thus, what might seem to be an adequate definition of quality for one type of course or institution may be quite inadequate for others.

Standards versus fitness for purpose

A basic distinction can be made between two conceptions of higher education quality. The first establishes that it is possible to identify and to quantify certain aspects of higher education, and that

the same standards or criteria can be applied to all courses or all institutions. This conception is generally based on the view that higher education institutions have very specific objectives and that there are *golden standards* to be maintained. The second conception of quality is based on the assumption that institutions of higher learning have different missions and objectives. Even though they may aim predominantly for high-level academic research, some are oriented towards high-level teaching, and others offer higher education to ethnic minorities, etc. Such a concept of quality relates to *fitness for purpose*. Consequently, the measurement of quality does not allow for common, quantifiable criteria, but must then rely heavily on specific contextual analysis. Quality, according to this conception, will mean, above all, that set objectives have been achieved. This conception implies that higher education institutions all have their own traditions; they are located in different environments and may be responsive to the needs of different communities.

Nevertheless, the fitness for purpose approach requires some measure of fitness *of* purpose – that is, the recognition that not every purpose is acceptable, but that the purpose has to be set within what is understood as being at the higher education level.

More recently, and as part of a growing concern with the international competitiveness of higher education systems, there seems to be a shift from the earlier predominance of the fitness for purpose approach towards a more balanced view which favours a *standards-based approach* as a basic requirement, but leaves ample room for institutions to fulfil those standards in the way that is most appropriate to their own objectives and priorities.

The standards-based approach may imply two objectives: It may aim at ensuring that (a) minimum quality standards are met in all institutions; and (b) programmes and institutions performing below those predefined standards are closed down. This approach may also indicate ideal standards towards which institutions should strive. With this latter objective, the standards-based approach becomes predominantly a vehicle for quality improvement. While most systems of quality piloting try to reflect the particular mission of a higher education institution, they do offer a corps of standards that form the basis of a quality model.

Who defines quality and with what interest?

When discussing quality, it is not merely a question of setting standards; it is also very much an issue of who defines it on the basis of what interest – academics themselves, students, government and its agencies, or professional bodies or employers? Academics will judge the quality of a higher education course or institution according to 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 environment. Professional bodies tend to focus on professional standards and skills related to the professions that students are trained for, etc. This means, therefore, that any methodology for EQA has to balance the different interests of stakeholders in order to reach a consensus on the meaning of educational quality.

One of the main tasks of a quality assurance agency is precisely to determine its understanding of what quality is and how to define it, the stakeholders it will consult, the way in which it will take into account international standards and definitions, and how to legitimize and make this definition acceptable throughout the system.

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

The understanding of the term 'quality', its conceptualization and operationalization, have obvious implications in any attempt to *assure* it, but it is also important to understand the other terms used in EQA. These terms are frequently used very loosely; therefore, the following pages will be dedicated to explaining some of the most common. There is no general consensus on the exact meaning of each of the terms – some are generic for the whole field, such as quality assurance (internal and external) and quality assessment, whereas others relate to more specific approaches (quality audit and accreditation). They relate also to the responsibility of different actors in the system and to different foci of attention.[1] Quality

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1 The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) has been working on a glossary, which can be consulted at www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/

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

At the institutional level, quality assurance in general is defined as that aspect 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 accountability and compliance purposes), or the institutional or departmental management might set them up internally. They might 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 students' ratings of the teaching staff. They may be geared towards research activities, courses, academic staff, and support functions (e.g. administrative audit). These procedures may also analyze, in an aggregated manner, these functions either in individual departments or in an entire institution.

Internal quality assurance refers to the policies and mechanisms implemented in an institution or programme to ensure that it is fulfilling its own purposes and meeting the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular.

External quality assurance refers to the actions of an external body, which may be a quality assurance agency or any body other than the institution that assesses its operation or that of its programmes, in order to determine whether it is meeting the agreed or predetermined standards.

According to Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea (2004) quality assurance has the following meaning:

"**Quality assurance:** An all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, 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 judgements (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" (Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2004: 48-49).

A related, equally broad concept is *quality assessment*, which in many instances is a synonym of 'evaluation' or 'review'. Many governments have started putting in place quality assessment mechanisms, which, rather than producing any type of grading or ranking of institutions, apply a set of recommendations to improve the quality of a given institution or programme.

"**Quality assessment/quality review** [also called 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 filed), managerial values (focusing on staff and their teaching skills and classroom

practice), employment values (emphasizing graduate output characteristics and e-learning outcomes)" (Vlãsceanu, *et al.*, 2004: 48).

A rather particular approach to quality assurance is *quality audit*, which does not assess quality or performance per se, but the quality of quality assurance mechanisms. It is a method to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the quality assurance mechanism adopted by an institution in order to monitor and improve the activities and services of a subject, programme, or whole institution.

"**Quality audit:** 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 [or assuring] 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 (audit report)" (Vlãsceanu, *et al.*, 2004: 50).

Accreditation is the most widely used method of EQA to be introduced recently in many higher education systems, either as a transformation of previously used methods of EQA or as an entirely new method. It is based on assessment and evaluation methods, but it makes an explicit judgement on whether a programme or an institution meets particular quality standards, which may be either a set of minimum standards, standards of high quality or excellence, or based on the institution's own purposes. Accreditation, therefore, inevitably involves some kind of benchmarking (of what is acceptable and what is not) and a set of existing quality criteria. Accreditation is thus the only method within the quality assurance spectrum which makes an explicit judgement about the degree to which an institution or programme actually meets the pre-determined standards or requirements.

Accreditation against minimum (also called 'threshold') standards assures that the quality of programmes or institutions is

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

> "**Accreditation** is the process by which a (non-)governmental 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 with a time-limited validity. The process can imply initial and periodic *self-study* and *evaluation* [italics mine] 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 judgement and the communication of the formal decision to the institution and other constituencies, if appropriate" (Vlãsceanu, *et al.*, 2004: 19.)

According to the glossary compiled by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) (see www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/) it is very difficult to define accreditation, because the concept is very volatile and practices are constantly changing. While the terminology was developed in

the United States, it has since also been adopted in Latin America and Europe, with however an altered meaning and role. According to Chernay, accreditation assures the educational community, the general public and other agencies or organizations that an institution or programme (a) has clearly-defined and educationally appropriate objectives; (b) maintains conditions under which the achievement of these can reasonably be expected; (c) is in fact accomplishing them substantially; and (d) can be expected to do so in the future.

Instead of a definition, some characteristics of accreditation are given:

- Accreditation is a *formal* decision.
- Accreditation is based on an *overall assessment* of the HEI or its core activities.
- Accreditation is based on the assessment of at least *minimum requirements* (threshold quality).
- Accreditation concerns a *yes/no/conditional* decision.
- Accreditation will have consequences, for example in the professional field, concerning recognition, funding and student aid.

Accreditation might be seen as providing a formal quality certificate to an HEI or a programme showing that the HEI or the programme meets at least expected minimum requirements (Chernay, 1990).

The information provided by accreditation systems on the quality of both programmes and institutions may be used by a variety of stakeholders in society, among which the following are the most important: (a) government; (b) students; (c) employers; (d) funding organizations; (e) institutions of higher education.

Marjorie Peace Lenn (2004) distinguishes the ways in which EQA systems are used, all of which apply to accreditation systems in particular (see *Table 1.3*).

Table 1.3 demonstrates clearly that while accreditation systems are put in place to assure governmental authorities and other societal stakeholders that higher education is performing – and will continue to perform adequately – they also accomplish broader purposes,

including those related to the management and planning of higher education institutions.

Table 1.3 Uses of accreditation systems for different stakeholders

Users	Uses
Government	To define national higher education
	To assure quality higher education
	To assure a quality labour force
	To determine which institutions and programmes receive public funding
	To accept into civil service only those who have 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 at a different institution from that of the undergraduate degree
	To assist in finding employment
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.

II. Major organizational and methodological choices in EQA systems

The above definitions of the concepts related to EQA may give the impression that the methodology and organizational options are relatively homogeneous in practice. In spite of this apparent similarity, quality assurance agencies use the term 'external quality assurance' to denote different practices to serve various purposes and they exercise the responsibility of carrying out quality assurance in various ways. However, these different approaches are not clear-cut and, in practice, quality assurance agencies tend to combine different approaches in order to adapt their quality assurance system to the particular requirements of the local context. Many important differences become evident in a comparative analysis of methodological options. They quickly bring to the fore the fact that a set of basic process elements form a common structure, but that EQA systems vary in their underlying objectives as well as their basic approaches.

Overall purposes of EQA

EQA in higher education refers to a wide range of purposes and related methodological frameworks. Some of these reflect governmental interest and demand, whereas others more directly address the internal needs of institutions. Consequently, the purposes of EQA are closely related to the use that will be made of information outcomes. Accreditation in institutions of higher education usually serves the following purposes: quality control; accountability/public assurance; and improvement in teaching/learning, each of which will be elaborated upon in the following paragraphs.

Quality control refers to the traditional function whereby governments make sure that higher education provision is in line with the minimum requirements for quality. When the majority of higher education systems were public, this function used to be less prominent because it was assumed that sufficient input steering would

produce acceptable levels of quality. This is now questioned and, in addition, the ongoing process of privatization (and in particular the proliferation of private national and international providers) has enhanced the need for national governments to check on minimum levels of quality, even if only to protect national consumers and make sure that the higher education provision relates to national development objectives in one way or another.

Secondly, EQA geared towards *accountability* is commonly also commissioned by public authorities as part of their higher education policy agenda. It is frequently linked to value-for-money concerns, transparency and public assurance. Accountability and compliance concerns reflect the need to provide public information and make judgements about the fitness for purpose (including the fitness of purpose) concern, soundness, or level of satisfaction achieved. EQA conducted with a predominant accountability objective is commonly used to provide assurance to external stakeholders on levels of quality, acceptable or high-level standards, as well as the international comparability of both public and private providers (Harvey, 1999: 24).

Through the quality model it uses and the setting of criteria and standards to be measured, accreditation is one of the standards-based approaches among the EQA models. It can be used by the government to make higher education institutions more *coherent* with policy preferences in general and recent reform initiatives in particular. It is certain that accreditation standards communicate a detailed framework of preferences against which institutions know they will be judged. Together with legal frameworks and funding methodologies, EQA has become a strong instrument for steering academia. This is particularly the case with regard to systems of reporting between institutions and governmental authorities, which can be highly enriched through regular provision of data and reports from quality assurance agencies.

Thirdly, EQA may also be explicitly geared towards the *improvement* of existing practices. In order to achieve this purpose, it will have to rely largely on an involvement of the people responsible for teaching and research activities, the academic staff, be it individually or collectively. It seems logical to expect that EQA will

lead to improvement, partially through the compliance objective, and partially through the setting of so-called 'high-level standards', which institutions and their departments should strive to reach. However, the main reasons for the improvement brought about by EQA are the formal and systematic self-assessment procedures it helps establish within HEIs. It is argued that 'transformative' quality improvement occurs more easily when academics openly assess their true teaching. Otherwise, an EQA system may simply produce what has now become known as a 'compliance culture'.

There has been lengthy discussion over 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, they are usually geared more towards one than the other.

Compulsory versus voluntary quality assurance

One of the most important things to consider in an EQA system that is particularly related to its overall purpose is whether it is of a *compulsory* or a *voluntary* nature. A compulsory system requires that all institutions or programmes that fall under EQA mechanisms periodically undergo accreditation at specified intervals, but is not generally exclusively concerned with checking on minimum standards. Compulsory systems are thus frequently set up because there is a deficient or non-existent licensing scheme, or they apply to types of programmes in which the state has a special responsibility. Such programmes might include teacher training or courses that prepare students for professions that are vital for national development and security – such as medical professions, architecture and civil engineering.

The more current EQA systems, however, are of a *voluntary* nature. This means that institutions and departments are under no obligation to undergo EQA. Their motivation to apply for EQA could be to obtain special status (be accredited), which would give them an advantage in an environment where there is competition for students, funding or access to specific funding (for instance student funding or special incentive schemes). When EQA systems are voluntary, it is often expected that the advantages related to EQA will create

an impetus, causing all, or at least a majority, of institutions to join the system. Voluntary EQA systems are more commonly related to a policy agenda of quality improvement, because institutions and departments can decide themselves whether or not they wish to join the process, depending on whether or not they wish to adhere to the proposed quality model. Voluntary EQA systems are also more easily acceptable to the higher education community because they generate less opposition from a usually well-organized societal force.

Box 1.   Compulsory accreditation in Hungary

Hungary developed its procedure and organization of accreditation during the 1990s and made it official through government bills that were modified on three different occasions: the Temporary National Accreditation Committee (TNAC) 1993-1994, the National Accreditation Committee (NAC) 1994-1996 and the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC) 1997. HAC is a 'remote control' organization and is responsible for content and quality, both of which are implemented by way of accreditation of programmes and institutions.

HAC is responsible for different functions. It performs institutional accreditation of universities and colleges every eight years (with special regulations for church- and privately-run institutions applying for state recognition), whereby, in addition to the management and infrastructure of the institution, all degree programmes are assessed (through self-evaluation, the peer visit, and subsequently the published report). The HAC is also in charge of assessing new degree programmes and doctoral schools, specialized postgraduate programmes and 2-year post-secondary vocational programmes at HEIs. It licenses new universities, colleges and foreign higher education institutions. In addition to these functions that are directly related to quality management, it issues statements on national qualification requirements and on credit system regulations, and it evaluates drafts of international agreements on diploma recognition and equivalence. More recently, accreditation of transnational higher education and evaluation of academia have been added to its portfolio of functions.

One of the particularities of the Hungarian accreditation system is that institutional accreditation is based on both programme assessment and on its already offering a minimal number of programmes that have been accredited with the grade of either 'exceptional' or 'strong'.

In order to fulfil these above-mentioned functions, HAC issues recommendations (or decisions) at three different levels. The first of these levels consists of disciplinary programme committees, the second (medium) concerns college, institutional and interdisciplinary committees and the third level is the plenum of HAC. Final decisions are considered to be corporate actions that concern programmes, faculties and institutions. Thus HAC recommends that the Ministry of Education pronounce a decision for accreditation for undergraduate programmes and different faculties and institutions. It is the responsibility of HAC, however, to advise accreditation of postgraduate programmes.

The objectives of the Hungarian accreditation system were initially geared to the principle assurance of minimum quality standards, in particular at the programme level where disciplinary committees have established minimum requirements for the accreditation of programmes. Consequently, accreditation is compulsory in Hungary. Institutional accreditation possesses, however, a component that aims in particular at the improvement of quality. Faculties and institutions must prepare a self-study report, which is followed up by a visiting team that examines the whole institution, as well as the self-evaluation studies conducted at other specific levels. There is apparent tension due to performing both objectives simultaneously, and critics of the system believe that the quality improvement function should have precedence. The current intention is to help institutions develop and assess their own quality management procedures as part of the accreditation process.

Source: Kozma, 2003: 9-11.

Fitness for purpose versus standards-based approach

The above-mentioned dichotomy of objectives and fundamental nature (compulsory/voluntary systems) is also directly related to the fundamental approach used to assess quality, which is either fitness for purpose or standards-based. The fitness for purpose approach begins its analysis from the stated purpose of a higher education institution or a programme (mission statement), while also asking whether or not this purpose is an acceptable purpose of higher education (fitness of purpose). This approach has been heavily supported with the argument that institutions and programmes cannot all be judged against the same standards since they may serve specific clienteles and service groups in a diversified system of higher education. For instance, a traditional university located

in a major urban environment and that heavily emphasizes the excellence of its research, may not necessarily be judged against the same set of standards as a teaching-only institution whose aim is to train non-traditional student groups. However, it has also been argued that certain standards (in particular minimum norms) must be demanded from all higher education institutions, and that they must be held accountable for them. This is increasingly becoming the more common opinion, in particular within the context of a growing demand for international comparability and, consequently, more and more systems of quality assurance are moving towards a standards-based approach of accreditation. The fitness for purpose approach is usually understood as being the more appropriate approach for quality improvement, whereas the standards-based approach is more easily associated with accountability and compliance.

Box 2.   Standards-based approach used by the regional accreditation agencies in the United States

Accrediting agencies have a long history of requiring institutions to provide evidence about what they do. When USA accrediting agencies got under way 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

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lists of accredited institutions, it became increasingly evident that most institutions offered programmes of good quality and deserved 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 the 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: 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: 60-62.

When the aim of EQA is to judge whether an institution or a programme should be accredited or not, it is necessary to use a standards-based approach, as is the case in the regional accreditation agencies in the United States.

For almost 20 years, the French system of quality assessment has been anchored in a rather open system of review, whose aim is to assess the particular strengths and weaknesses of higher education institutions, and to provide information to improve the internal processes at a given institution while making information available to the broader public. In 2003, it was decided to adopt a series of standards that would serve both evaluators and higher education institutions in their internal management (see *Box 3*).

Box 3.   Standard-setting at the *Comité national d'évaluation (CNE)* in France

At the same time, we saw that the work of the CNE had to become more professional to establish its reputation. We sought to strengthen our methodology and explain it more clearly in the international arena. The most successful achievement in this field came in 2003 with the publication of the Livre des références [Book of standards], which is now the framework for internal evaluation. The reasoning of this document is based on demonstration, leaving the university to choose which lessons it should draw. It addresses three areas: educational policy, research policy and the extent to which the university's management serves its objectives. The book is divided into ten reference frameworks, each of which defines a major area of university life on which the expectations of users and partners are based; 63 references constituting an implementation system; and a non-exhaustive list of 302 criteria, each of which formalizes a mechanism that contributes to achievement of the objective. The Livre des références has not only been used in all CNE evaluations since its publications, but has also proved to be an effective communication tool.

Source: Levasseur, 2005.

Minimum standards versus high-level standards in accreditation

Accreditation, the standards-based approach of EQA, may apply either *minimum* or *high-level standards*. When minimum standards are used, which is more common, it tends to resemble a licensing scheme for institutions or programmes, and thus functions as a periodic licensing mechanism. Minimum standards usually address input factors relating to students, staff, buildings, facilities and finances, as well as process elements such as governance and management systems, and also research activities, which are perceived to form the minimum conditions under which a meaningful higher education institution can function. The main objective of such an accreditation system based on minimum standards is to enforce conformity with standards and accountability.

Box 4.   Accreditation of high quality in Colombia

Higher education in Columbia 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 the proliferation of numerous 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 of Accreditation (CNA), which had been specifically set up by this Law. CNA functions under the National Council of 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 on-going accreditation processes.

... [CNA is in charge of] voluntary accreditation for high levels of quality. *Accreditation of Excellence* is both a voluntary and temporary process and its methodology stresses quality enhancement rather

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than quality control. As a consequence, *Accreditation of Excellence* adopted a system whereby ideal characteristics of quality are compared in the light of reality, thus creating strong incentives for quality improvement.

The methodology for the *Accreditation of Excellence* of academic programmes and institutions is founded on a four-stage process. 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 which then 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 Excellence*, 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, 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: 9-11.

Accreditation based on high standards assumes either that the minimum standards are already checked through a different mechanism or that the system shows relatively even levels of quality. Accreditation based on high standards is also the more predominant form in countries where universities enjoy a traditionally high level of autonomy. It is usually of a voluntary nature, because its main objective is to provide a model and a set of references for institutions to incite them to strive to achieve quality improvement. The shortcoming of this mechanism is that it is not very effective in weeding out unacceptable levels of quality, because it focuses on those institutions and programmes that are already of more than acceptable quality. It is thus not an effective mechanism to deal with programmes of uneven and sometimes unacceptable quality offered by a multitude of (commercial) providers.

Accreditation versus assessment versus quality audit

In the earlier discussion on basic definitions of terms used in quality assurance, it was pointed out that EQA systems may focus on the quality of activities and services themselves or on internal quality assurance systems. If they focus on the quality of activities and services, these will be judged from the point of view of institutional goals or based on a set of standards, which is usually the function of *accreditation* and *assessment*. Quality audit as defined above, on the other hand, is a method that judges the extent to which an institution has a monitoring system in place that clearly conveys its strengths and weaknesses. This means that an institution needs strong internal reporting mechanisms, as well as mechanisms for collecting data on teaching performance, and must collect systematic data on student, graduate and employer satisfaction. It also means that an institution has mechanisms in place to deal with low-quality programmes and continuously improve quality that is already good. Since it focuses on processes, quality audit is thus very much in line with the objective of improvement in EQA, but it does not lead to certification of or compliance with an expected level of quality, neither to comparability of such levels of quality, which is the case of standards-based quality assessment. If a quality assurance agency conducts quality audits, it assesses whether higher education institutions have a reliable and adequate internal quality assurance system in place.

Box 5.   Quality audit in Norway

In order to comply with a national concern for quality, identified in several national and international reports, Norway created in 2002 a new agency for accreditation, called NOKUT. It was decided to adopt an audit approach through which it would be assessed how the institutions handle their responsibility for educational quality.

After conducting a pilot study, the following recommendations were made for the development of the audit approach:

1. *Quantitative documentation at the institutional level* in the form of key figures in the categories: access, resource input and results. The report listed data requirements under each category, and expressed the question of common reporting and data formats across institutions.

2. *Institutional guidelines for its quality work*. The following elements should at least be included in these guidelines:
    •   Quality plan and governance including objectives, standard procedures, responsibilities and administrative resources, leadership and governance, priority areas and action plan.
    •   Registers and reports (as mentioned in point 1).
    •   Evaluations done within the institution (both self-evaluations and external evaluations).
    •   The publishing of an institutional yearly report on quality work.

3. *The yearly report on educational quality*. This report is to replace the need for a yearly self-evaluation. The report should be part of the internal quality system (see point 2).

4. *External audit evaluation*. This is the actual audit exercise. The report stresses the importance of looking beyond the system, and into the actual functioning and effects it may have. The report proposes a mandate for the external audit evaluation team (NNR, August 2002).

It was expected that the audit approach have the following strengths in the system:
    •   The audit system takes into proper account the existence of large, autonomous and professionally run institutions of higher education, being able to conduct internal systems of

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quality assurance. The institutions will themselves have the required insight to make systems suited for them.

- Even if they are able to conduct such systems, there may be opposition within the institution in doing so. The audit system may in those cases put pressure on the institution in developing good internal systems of quality assurance.

- Within general guidelines and standards, it gives the institutions freedom to develop their own internal systems and mechanisms. There will be few specific instructions and templates and no procedure manuals governing what the institutions must or should do in the way of monitoring and evaluating their programmes. Rather, the standards will be predominantly such as can be deduced from one simple question: what does it mean to have a reliable *system* of quality assurance? This open approach, it is hoped, will cater for flexibility, creativity, pluralism and a sense of institutional ownership inside a common framework.

- The audit system can be more economical, which in turn may leave more resources for other types of evaluations.

- With national audit focusing on the institution's quality system and the documentation it produces, it can be more economical and more development-oriented. In principle, audits will make use of the same corpus of evaluation data as the institution itself does, while also 'checking' these data and the institution's own assessment against other information obtained through site visit interviews and from other sources. Audits will be concerned with individual courses mainly in so far as the evaluation data show indications of failing quality, when they may trigger a closer inspection at subject/programme level.

- Preserving a certain space for the established tradition of development-oriented evaluations has been an important factor. An 'open' audit system may be looked upon as development-oriented in itself – in addition to providing accountability. Being more economical than a system of cyclic evaluations at programme level, it may also leave more resources for other type of evaluations.

Source: Levy, 2005.

Public institutions and/or the private higher education sector

When creating a new EQA system, public authorities have to make an important decision regarding coverage of the system with regard to both public and private institutions. This is, in many instances, both a legal and a political choice. In many systems, most public institutions are resourced by the state and may therefore be of more even quality than private providers. In addition, public institutions, in particularly universities, are often a powerful pressure group that may oppose the implementation of EQA in their own sphere. Consequently, EQA systems have been set up in some countries specifically to quickly develop a private sector of higher education institutions. In other country contexts, both 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, in some other countries, the underlying philosophy is that both public and private higher education institutions are expected to contribute to the fulfilment of national policy objectives (i.e. human resource development, social cohesion and scientific and cultural development), and that a quality assurance system must be applied in both subsectors.

In addition, with a forward-looking perspective, countries may wish to receive foreign providers of higher education in their country, and given the current negotiation within GATS, a decision might be made in the future to give private providers equal (i.e. non-preferential) treatment to public institutions. This would then mean that the basic requirements for the functioning of both public and private providers, with the exception of providing public funding, would have to be similar. This would also apply to EQA procedures and standards. For these reasons, there is a general trend to set up EQA systems that can be applied to both public and private providers alike.

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, because this is the segment of

higher education that used to have the highest degree of academic autonomy, in particular in the development of study programmes. Since non-university tertiary institutions, such as polytechnics, institutes or community colleges, were set up more recently, they were frequently put under the direct supervision of a governmental authority, which generally has power to create and supervise new study programmes.

In some countries, however, EQA mechanisms address institutions from both the university and non-university sectors. The question then arises, however, whether the same methodology and set of criteria can apply to both types of institutions. Universities generally request that their study programmes be, when possible, at least informed by research. This is not necessarily the case in other tertiary level institutions, which are often of an applied nature and should offer training that is employment-oriented and convey practical competences. Some of the regional accreditation agencies in the United States have a specific commission that accredits universities and another that assesses community colleges (see *Box 6*).

Box 6.   Flexibility in the United States 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

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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, present accreditation practice continues to look both to strengths and weaknesses of the institution. This approach gives flexibility because, even as evidence is assembled, there is room for applying discretionary judgement in the weighing 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 universities. A very prestigious university, in turn, would expect that its visiting team were made up of persons from similar institutional backgrounds. So, too, judgements about each institution are made in light of what can be expected for its size and relative resources.

Source: El-Khawas, 2001: 49-51.

Institutions and/or programmatic EQA

Another basic option that all EQA systems have to address is the *unit of analysis* – that is, whether EQA should be institutional

or programmatic. EQA systems in institutions are naturally much broader than EQA programmes, and focus most frequently on the following domains of analysis: (a) mission; (b) governance; (c) effective management; (d) academic programmes; (e) teaching staff; (f) learning resources; (g) students and related services; (h) physical facilities; and (i) financial resources (Peace Lenn, 2004: 8).

Institutional EQA investigates whether the mission and objectives of an HEI are appropriate, whether its resources and processes are appropriate 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. Therefore, it needs to be relatively generic and pay less attention to the differences in objectives and performance among the different institutional subunits. Institutional EQA may be the preferred option in a system where quality varies widely between institutions, and when institutional management is rather weak. It may thus be a good means to strengthen the management capacity of an HEI.

Programmatic EQA focuses on individual study programmes, many of which prepare students for a specific profession. Since each study programme may have its own policy on student recruitment, standards and criteria for curriculum, and also be subject to requirements arising from national qualification frameworks, it makes sense to assure the quality of individual programmes. Programmatic EQA may in particular assess whether an education programme is related to the professional expectations for entry into a specific profession. Over and above, institutions may offer programmes of varying quality in different disciplines that institutional EQA cannot recognize. Programmatic EQA is thus a strong tool by which to address issues of deficient quality at the level where improvement decisions have to be made – i.e. the department.

However, it is also true that programmatic EQA must address many of the dimensions that relate to the broader institutional environment, such as the management of the institution, the department and the facilities that have a direct impact (either constraining or enabling) on the quality of the study programme. Therefore, any programmatic EQA necessarily also has an institutional dimension.

Both types of EQA are thus interwoven. Institutional EQA cannot be conducted without looking at programmes, but programmatic EQA needs to look into the broader institutional environment. Countries usually start with a focus on either the institution or its programmes. However, it is eventually understood that both are complementary and nurture each other. Many systems that formerly had a clear focus on one specific aspect have decided with time to incorporate the other. Some countries conduct both and attempt to link them up in one single process. In some systems of EQA, such as that of the United States, both are carried out by different actors, but there is an attempt to co-ordinate the two so that they can enlighten each other.

**Box 7.   Request for compulsory accreditation
of state-approved programmes in Argentina**

In addition, the Law on Higher Education stipulates that state-regulated programmes have to be accredited by CONEAU in order to be offered; put differently, if an institution wishes to offer a state-regulated programme, it has to apply to CONEAU so that this agency assesses the programme to be offered. Like in the case of institutional accreditation, CONEAU's assessment report is binding. Only courses with a favourable decision are entitled to issue official and qualifying degrees. The non state-regulated programmes need not have CONEAU's accreditation; it is sufficient that they are authorized by the Ministry and fulfil the minimum requirements regarding the workload set by the aforementioned agreements for each case.

The compulsory character of the accreditation of state-regulated programmes works retroactively since the programmes that were already offered also had to be submitted to CONEAU for assessment and accreditation. If they do not meet the standards and they obtain an unfavourable report from CONEAU, the Ministry is empowered to disqualify the programmes under consideration and waive the public recognition of the qualification.

The accreditation processes for state-regulated programmes performed by CONEAU are carried out based on technical-academic standards set by the Ministry of Culture and Education and previous consultation with the University Council. They mainly aim at supplying an academic quality assessment, which should complement

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an institutional one. Even though the assessment's goals are mainly academic, CONEAU's decisions are binding for the Ministry of Education so that official recognition is granted to the new programme.

The process of undergraduate programme accreditation comprises two steps: firstly, the implementation of a self-assessment on the part of the applying department, 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 programmes are issuing their results. This document may also include an improvements plan, which in the future allows compliance with the minimum standards set.

Afterwards, the peer's committee analyzes this self-assessment report together with other relevant information, pays a visit to the department, and makes a final decision, including the committee's evaluative opinion and the recommendation for temporary accreditation or for rejection of the application.

Both the self-assessment and the peer's 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 programme'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.

All programmes? Or only certain types of programmes (for instance state-approved)?

When EQA is programmatic, some countries chose to focus on certain types of programmes, for instance teacher education, medicine or engineering, which prepare for professions that are perceived to be vital for a country. In Argentina, for instance, it is the function of the national accreditation agency, the National

Evaluation and Accreditation Council (CONEAU), to accredit programmes that require state approval. This is related to the fact that traditionally it is the institutions that created and managed their study programmes. However, over time, the state considered that those study programmes that lead to professions of public interest were in need of tighter public regulation.

Use of quantitative versus qualitative data for accreditation

EQA systems, standards-based or not, most commonly use quantitative data combined with qualitative judgement. Most quality assurance agencies have developed instruments that may either consist of open questions to focus on qualitative analysis, or request the collection of a set of statistics. Peer review is, however, typically a phase where qualitative judgement is the prevailing mode.

A request for quantitative data refers to input factors (such as final secondary school grades of incoming students, teachers' qualifications, financial resources), throughputs (e.g. student:staff ratios) or outputs (e.g. number of graduates and their average grades, number of publications or patents). EQA puts data in an evaluative framework, which is either available at the institution by means of statistics collected periodically or for the special purpose of quality steering (such as tracer studies, alumni's and employers' opinions).

Quantitative data allows comparison of performance either among departments or institutions. However, many problems exist with regard to the interpretation of these indicators, such as how to judge data on unit cost per student, and whether high unit cost means good quality or rather wastage of resources. In addition, it has been argued that the use of indicators, if for comparison purposes, may lead to standardizing behaviour, in particular when public funding is linked with specific expected outcomes measured through indicators. This could impinge, it is argued, on the creativity of academic activities and their outcomes.

In addition, many standard statements are of a qualitative nature and cannot easily be assessed through quantitative data. A statement such as "the institution has a clear and comprehensible statement that

guides it, is approved by the governing board, and communicated to the institution's constituencies" (SACS Commission on Colleges, 1998) cannot easily be assessed through quantitative data, and requires qualitative analysis and judgement made by a peer with an appropriate set of references based on a series of internal interviews.

Box 8.   Assessing a criteria-based quality model in India

During the on-site visit, keeping in mind the philosophy of NAAC [National Assessment and Accreditation Council], the peer team does an objective assessment of the quality of education offered in the institution through three major activities – visiting departments and facilities, interacting with various constituencies of the institution and checking documentary evidence. The interaction with the faculty normally happens when the team goes to departments and facilities. Separate sessions are arranged for interaction with management, administrative staff, and representative groups of students, parents and past pupils. It has been found that interactions enhance the team's 'feel' of the institution. For each interaction NAAC has evolved a guiding agenda ...

The interaction with the representative group of students has proved to be a very fruitful part of the visit. To manage the interaction effectively, it is generally restricted to around 50 students. However, the questionnaire evolved by NAAC on the campus life of students is distributed to a cross-section of students at random, managed directly by the NAAC officer, and this input is also made available to the peer team before it meets the representative group. The confidential feedback from students often helps the team identify areas that need more attention.

The application of weightages

Validation and subsequent assessment lead to an overall institutional score and a detailed report, which begin with the team agreeing on criterion-wise scores. Taking cognizance of the variance in types of institutions, different criteria have been allotted differential weightages ... The institutional score is further used by NAAC to obtain the overall grade. Nevertheless, the role of the peers is only to give the institutional score to NAAC with the detailed report.

Source: Stella, 2003: 83-85.

Whatever the combination of quantitative and qualitative data used in the quality assurance process, human judgement is always applied to both quantitative and qualitative information. However, EQA systems may opt to provide a quantitative framework for qualitative judgement by applying quantitative indicators to qualitative dimensions and attaching scores to them. This option is frequently adopted in newly established accreditation systems where there is a particular need for transparency and perceived 'objectivity'. In systems with a tradition of accreditation and/or where there is a corps of professional assessors, one finds more reliance on human judgement. Such methodological options in accreditation are very important for the credibility of the process.

Table 2.1 presents a schematic relationship of the overall purposes of EQA systems and major organizational choices. While a combination of the three major purposes is possible, it is generally understood that any system will be predominantly geared towards one purpose or another.

Table 2.1   Classification of basic options used in EQA systems

Purpose	Quality control	Accountability/ public assurance	Improvement/ guidance
Preferred mechanism	Licensing	Accreditation/ assessment	
Framework for QA	Standards-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

III. Common core elements and approaches

The basic three-stage process

While there are various approaches to quality assurance which correspond to unique national contexts, quality assurance agencies generally follow a three-stage process, which will be discussed in this chapter. First, however, some common features are given below:

- They base assessment on predetermined and transparent criteria.
- They use a combination of self-assessment and external review.
- The extent of the evaluative nature of the self-assessment may vary. Many of the specialized or professional accreditors merely ask for information without requiring analysis or evaluative judgements on the part of the programmes being assessed.
- They emphasize public disclosure of the outcome (although the extent of public disclosure varies from disclosure of only the final outcome to disclosure of the full assessment report).
- They ensure validity of the assessment outcome for a specific period.

Preparation of a self-assessment report by the institution/ programme

The first stage of the three-stage process consists of provision by the institution (or programme) of the relevant information related to predetermined, well-publicized criteria. In most cases, this is also accompanied by a self-assessment, which provides a critical analysis of the information. Self-assessment is the central element in most EQA procedures. All quality assurance agencies emphasize and recognize the value of an analytical and self-critical process, but many also recognize that it is not always practical or realistic to expect higher education institutions to carry them out for the following two reasons:

- In the absence of a 'culture of evaluation', self-assessment may be uncritical; in particular when the stakes are high (e.g. when

quality assurance procedures may lead to sanctions, or approval is essential for continuing operation of the programme or the institution), it is unrealistic to expect institutions to carry out a truly critical analysis.

- When agencies operate internationally, they tend to prefer the provision of data and take care of the evaluation themselves.

A set of standards and criteria determined by the quality assurance agency forms the basis for the self-assessment. The agencies generally carry out national consultations and ensure wide participation of the stakeholders in developing the standards and criteria. There may be variations in the method adopted: For example, some agencies might apply only the predetermined criteria to all of the institutions and programmes (the standards-based approach), whereas others might carry out the review against an institution's own goals and objectives (the fitness-for-purpose approach), and the rest might take an intermediate approach. However, the place given to an institution's own goals and the standards set by the quality assurance agency are made clear to the stakeholders prior to applying the quality assurance procedures. The institution (or programme) undergoing the process is asked to do a self-assessment and report on how it meets the standards set, or criteria identified, by the quality assurance agency.

In the self-assessment process, academics (together with administrators within the department/institution, based on a catalogue of either open questions or indicators to be collected) discuss the strengths and weaknesses in their respective units, and identify the causes of possible shortcomings. They usually decide for themselves on the strategies to be used to attempt to improve quality. This latter methodology has the advantage of directly involving competent professionals in the improvement process: those who will be in charge of implementing reform action. Also, it helps set up a culture concerned with quality in the long term, and it might strengthen community spirit, which is often lacking in academia.

Despite the difficulties mentioned earlier, the underlying assumption in insisting on self-assessment is that an institution that really understands itself – its strengths and weaknesses, its potential and limitations – is likely to be more successful in carrying

out its educational mandate than one without such self-awareness. Self-assessment is thus envisaged as the backbone of the process of quality assurance. It is through the self-assessment report that the external review team tries to understand and tentatively evaluate the institution or programme prior to the site visit.

External review

The second stage is a site visit of an external review team to validate the self-assessment or the institutional report that results in the report/recommendation to the quality assurance agency on the quality of the institution/programme. Like self-assessment, this stage has evolved as an internationally accepted component of quality assurance. The expert taking part in the quality assurance process is referred to as the external reviewer, who is knowledgeable in the language, categories, rationale and codes that belong to the discipline or the profession of the programme or institution being assessed, and therefore is a peer to the people being reviewed. At the same time, the external reviewer comes from outside the programme or institution, and therefore provides an outsider's perspective. When the institution submits the self-assessment report, a team of external reviewers constituted by the quality assurance agency analyzes the report of the institution and validates the claims made, generally by visiting the institution. The visit by the review team gives the institution an opportunity to discuss and find ways of consolidating and improving the academic environment.

The external review is expected to provide an outside perspective and often to validate the conclusions drawn from the self-study; it uses professional judgement (national or international subject matter experts or professionals, etc.); it collects information by means of site visits and personal interviews with internal, and sometimes external, stakeholders of the higher education institution. It is thus able to take account of the conditions under which certain results could be attained.

Decision-making and reporting the outcome

Based on the report of the institution or programme and the recommendations of the review team, the agency, in the third and last stage of the quality-assurance process, either makes the final

decision or gives advice to a public authority (such as the ministry of education) who will make the final decision. In all quality assurance mechanisms, there is an element of public disclosure of the outcome, although the extent of public disclosure varies. It may vary from disclosure of only the final outcome, as in the case of a typical accreditation, to disclosure of the full assessment report as in the case of a typical audit. In general, in systems where the report is the only outcome, it is made public. In systems where a formal decision on accreditation status is made and a report written, the extent of public disclosure also varies. The outcome is generally valid for 5 to 10 years.

Decision-making may either warrant a simple 'yes' or 'no' decision, or it might require elaboration, for example 'based on certain conditions ...' Frequently, accreditation also involves a supplementary grading system that is an add-on to a simple 'yes' or 'no' decision. It is common practice then to publish the decision made, with or without the expert report prepared by the peer team.

Box 9.   Adoption of the three-stage model of EQA in India

In India, the explicit focus on external quality assurance in higher education is of recent origin. In the 1980s, it was felt that the unprecedented expansion of higher education in India during the previous fifty years had rendered the built-in regulatory mechanisms inadequate. There were criticisms that the country had permitted the mushrooming of institutions of higher education with fancy programmes and substandard facilities, and consequent dilution of standards. To address the issues of deterioration in quality, the National Policy on Education (1986) advocated the establishment of an independent national accreditation body. Consequently, the University Grants Commission (UGC) established the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) as an autonomous body in September 1994.

Although the quality assurance experience of India seems to be just ten years old, it should be seen against the backdrop of the quality controls that the Indian higher education system has had for the past 150 years. With regulatory and recognition mechanisms already in place, the objective of national accreditation is to lead institutions of higher education towards maximizing their potential for

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quality education, contrary to the minimum standards ensured by the regulatory mechanisms. This makes the Indian system of accreditation unique in many ways.

The limited resources available for improvement in quality of higher education, and the size and complexity of the higher education system in India, are other factors contributing to India's unique scenario of accreditation. With the third largest higher education system in the world – 322 university level institutions and more than 16,000 colleges catering for 9 million direct and full-time students – developing a national quality assurance mechanism and making the process operational have been formidable tasks.

Since its inception in September 1994, the NAAC spent the first three to four years evolving its policies, principles and instruments. An analysis of the current practices of accrediting agencies of various countries reveals that most quality assurance systems have certain common elements – self-evaluation and peer review – and NAAC adopted these core elements. To address the contextual considerations, the NAAC took a clear line in addressing aspects such as: its role in assessment (NAAC does not take a direct role in assessment), the nature of the assessment process (it is a voluntary process), the focus of assessment (improvement is the focus, contrary to accountability concerns observed in many countries), the linking of the assessment outcome to funding (not linked to basic funding), the unit of assessment (the institution is the unit of assessment), the policy on disclosure of the assessment report (a full assessment report and the institutional grade are made public), and the period of validity (five years). The way the NAAC firmed up its rationale and stand on these issues would be very useful to emerging quality assurance agencies. With this assessment model, a lot more emerged at the practical level when the assessment efforts proceeded.

Source: Stella, 2004: 9.

The three-stage model as a basic choice in EQA has now reached wide consensus in the quality assurance community, but it is a cumbersome and costly approach. When quality assurance focuses on higher education programmes in relatively big systems, it becomes increasingly important to look for alternative, lighter and cheaper models of EQA. Such alternative models may reduce the emphasis on any one of the phases: either self-study (which could

simply be based on the provision of statistics), peer review (which could be conducted perhaps at a distance), or simply drop one of the stages altogether. Creative thinking in this respect will become increasingly important if EQA systems are expected to cover all higher education programmes in systems of a certain size.

Areas of quality assessment

In addition to the three-stage model of EQA, the areas or aspects considered by quality assurance agencies have much in common. In fact, while they may have different names, or follow different organizational structures, most quality assurance agencies look at the same things, albeit with different emphases. For example, in the Philippines there are four quality assurance agencies that do programme accreditation. The table in *Box 10* highlights how similar they are in the scope of their quality assurance. The areas that are considered by the quality assurance agencies that do institutional accreditation are also similar.

Box 10.   Standards for quality assurance in the Philippines

Programme accreditation by the four accrediting associations of the Philippines

The (accreditation or quality assurance) agencies engage qualified faculty members and professionals to develop detailed criteria specific to each programme or course of study. The criteria may differ from one agency to another, as might their application, but the scope of the review based on the areas covered by the standards of each agency is almost identical.

S. No.	ACSC-AA	PAASCU	PACU-COA	AACCUP
1	Purposes and objectives	Purposes and objectives	Purposes and objectives	Mission, goals and objectives
2	Faculty	Faculty	Faculty	Faculty
3	Instruction	Instruction	Instruction	Curriculum and programme studies
4	Library	Library	Library	Library

5	Laboratories	Laboratories	Laboratories	Physical facilities and laboratories
6	Physical plant and facilities	Physical plant and facilities	Physical plant and facilities	
7	Student personnel services	Student services	Student personnel services	Students
8	Social orientation and community involvement	Social orientation and community involvement	Social orientation and community involvement	Extension and community
9	Organization and research administration	Administration	Organization and administration	Administration

Legend: ACSC-AA = Association of Christian Schools and Colleges Accreditation Agency
PAASCU = Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities
PACU-COA = Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities Commission on Accreditation
AACCUP = Accrediting Association of Chartered Colleges and Universities in the Philippines

Source: Phelps in Arcelo, 2003: 72-73.

Even among agencies that differ in terms of the country context in which they operate, the unit of quality assurance etc., there is agreement on the areas that are key to assessing quality.

The above-mentioned areas are only indicative of how a group of quality assurance agencies has identified key areas that have a bearing on the quality of institutions. Some of them are expressed in terms of quantity, and some would require a qualitative assessment. The case of the Philippines given in *Box 10* highlights programme quality, showing that areas of assessment overlap for both institutional and programme accreditation, although there may be differences in terms of focus and scope. While the curricular aspects under institutional accreditation may concern mainly the overall policies and practices of the institution, the programme accreditation would look more closely into the quality of the curriculum of the programme under

review. The institutional accreditation might also look at the quality of one or more programmes to seek evidence for the evaluations; but the purpose is not to pass judgement on the quality of the curriculum of that programme.

Approaches to quality assessment

Based on a specific definition of quality, quality assurance agencies build their frameworks for translating it into 'quality assurance decisions'. A critical element in quality assurance is the use of evaluative guidelines or frameworks against which the agency can make decisions. The quality assurance process may examine many academic and administrative aspects of the institution or programme being reviewed and collect data on those aspects. However, the information gathered does not speak for itself; an evaluative judgement must be made, and the evidence that is gathered must be interpreted in the light of some prior questions. This may often be done in a rather explicit fashion, where both quantitative and qualitative benchmarks are set for desirable achievements and the assessor simply establishes the evidence. However, there are also systems where the assessment is based on the professional judgement of the assessor. This use of evidence, judged against a quality assurance framework, leads to decisions that have important consequences. Agencies do it in many ways – some develop standards, some agree on a set of indicators, and some define benchmarks. While some agencies develop specific indicators, there are agencies that develop broad standard statements against which quality is assessed by means of expert judgement.

The agencies develop and use standards in different ways. The standards prescribed by the All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE), and given in *Box 14*, are mostly about inputs required in the institution to offer a programme of quality. Increasingly, however, agencies tend to shift their focus to outcomes. In most programme accreditation systems in professional areas of studies, standards relate to good institutional procedures and practices with a professional perspective. These agencies have interpreted quality in terms of how effectively new entrants to a certain profession have been prepared for their responsibilities. In recent years, this has resulted in many professional bodies paying attention to competency-based standards

in order to evaluate quality. Competency-based standards focus on the appropriate and effective application of knowledge, skills and attitudes. They emphasize the relationship between formal education and work skills – the ability to apply relevant knowledge appropriately and effectively in the profession. The agencies that adopt this understanding of quality generally require institutions and programmes to demonstrate the output of the programme rather than the input; i.e. on developing expertise among students to become competent professionals rather than on the number of hours of tutorials or hands-on experience provided. *Box 11* shows how competency-based standards were developed in the United States.

Box 11.   Move towards competency-based standards of professional bodies (United States)

The evolution of standards for programmes in architecture provides an illustration (National Architecture Accrediting Board, *Conditions and Procedures*, 1991, pp. 4-5). As early as 1902, following the precedents established in law and medicine, practitioner groups had developed an examination system in Illinois for graduates of fourth-year programmes in architecture. By 1914, minimum standards for architecture programmes were established. In 1940, a national board was created in order to oversee accreditation of schools of architecture on a national basis. While numerous revisions of this basic approach occurred over the next several decades, a significant new approach was adopted in 1982. The board's new mandate was to apply "achievement-oriented performance criteria" in its evaluation of architecture programmes. Under this approach, each school "... is responsible for seeing that each graduate completes a liberal studies requirement and attains the necessary achievement for each of the ... major areas" of the programme. Criteria are grouped under four major headings: fundamental knowledge; design; communication; and practice. Levels of accomplishment are stipulated for 54 different areas of practice.

Source: El-Khawas, 2001: 63-64.

The bodies that regulate the practice of the profession develop their methodologies based on the competency-based standards in many ways. For example, the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants (CICA) has developed the 'The CA

candidate's competency map' for its qualification (recognition or registration) process of chartered accountants. CICA, together with the chartered accountant institutes, represents approximately 68,000 chartered accountants and 8,000 students in Canada and Bermuda. It has identified two types of competencies – pervasive qualities and skills (that all chartered accountants are expected to demonstrate in all tasks), and specific competencies. The specific competencies are grouped into six categories. To cite an example, the competencies listed by CICA for one of the categories, namely 'Taxation' (competencies related to taxation planning, compliance and reporting for various entities), are given in *Box 12*.

Box 12.   The competency map (Canada)

The specific competencies

Taxation
1.   Analyzes the entity's tax profile and identifies overall tax issues
    1.1   Seeks to improve the entity's tax profile
    1.2   Evaluates and advises management on applicable new tax legislation on an ongoing basis
    1.3   Identifies, analyzes, and advises on compliance and filing requirements
    1.4   Analyzes the range of professional expertise required to advise on potential tax issues
2.   Prepares and files necessary returns in accordance with legal requirements
    2.1   Advises on tax compliance
    2.2   Meets filing requirements
3.   Practices effective tax planning to maximise after-tax returns
    3.1   Identifies, analyzes, and advises on specific tax planning opportunities
    3.2   Analyzes tax consequences of transactions and business opportunities
4.   Supports, defends, and negotiates tax positions
    4.1   Analyzes and responds to assessments
    4.2   Prepares information to support objections, appeals, and court litigation

Source: www.cica.ca

The examples above indicate that quality assurance agencies tend to choose their broad approach considering many contextual factors from among the various options available. The approaches allow for varying levels of professional judgement. Most quality assurance agencies have some level of specifications and reliance on quantifications. In some quality assurance frameworks, the peers have more freedom to make judgements against a broad framework; in most other systems there are specifics that guide peer judgement, such as quantitative specifications and indicators.

Reliance on quantitative assessment

Quality assurance agencies may rely on quantification at various levels by requiring that institutions demonstrate that they comply with certain quantitative norms; that peers assess whether the norms are met; that the peer assessment be recorded on a quantitative scale; and that the final outcome be expressed on a quantitative scale. This raises the frequently asked question of whether quality should be assessed against quantitative measures.

When quality relates to consistency, compliance or agreement with expected levels of performance, quality assurance agencies tend to develop quantitative norms and use them as the frame of reference for quality assurance, such as the AICTE standards mentioned earlier. Agencies that do rely on quantification tend to look into the excellence of institutions. For example, the National Council of Accreditation in Colombia (NCAC) focuses on excellence and defines quality as the integration of 66 characteristics. For each characteristic, a series of qualitative and quantitative variables are spelt out. *Box 13* highlights how the variables and indicators have been spelt out for one of the characteristics.

Irrespective of whether the agency seeks to ensure minimum standards or standards of high quality, reliance on quantification can be found. The Colombian example demonstrates how quality in one specific aspect can be affected by a number of indicators. It also shows how assessing quality is a complex task that needs to be balanced with peer assessment. However, there are agencies that base their decisions mostly on quantitative data.

**Box 13. Variables and indicators of a characteristic
(Colombia)**

Characteristic 16: In compliance with institutional objectives and relevant programme specificities, faculty size is adequate and teachers have both the commitment and training the programme requires.

Description: It points to the fact that, to achieve the institution and programme objectives, the required number of teachers should be available, their level of qualification appropriate and their commitment to the institution and to the programme in question adequate. Likewise, efforts are made to find out whether the number of teachers attached to the programme and their training and commitment come close to the ideal situation sought after for the specific programme and institution. The above examines the quality of education in one of its core aspects.

Variables:

Adequacy to programme requirements of faculty commitment and of their specific training and level of qualification.

Academic quality of faculty attached to the programme.

Indicators:

1) Training (graduate, postgraduate, Master's, Doctoral), rating on the promotion ladder and commitment of teachers to institution and programme.
2) Other educational experiences of teachers relevant to their performance in the programme.
3) Period of time teachers have worked in the institution and programme, as well as any other academic and professional experiences of faculty involved.
4) Relationship between the number of students enrolled in a programme and the number of teachers involved. A comparison should be established with regard to full-time commitment.
5) Assessment by outstanding members of academic communities of faculty committed to programme.
6) Assessment of programme students with regard to both the quality and sufficiency of the number of students enrolled, and of the commitment of teachers involved in the programme.

Source: Revelo and Hernandez, 2003: 47-48.

Quantification to guide peer assessment

Reviewers may be required to follow certain guidelines related to quantitative measures, within which the qualitative judgement has to be made. For example, although oriented towards peer assessment, the accreditation methodology of the National board of Accreditation (NBA) in India, as depicted in *Box 14*, requires the reviewers to score each indicator, the maximum for each indicator being pre-determined by NBA.

Box 14. Quantification to guide peer assessment: NBA (India)

Each of the eight criteria has been broken down into parameters, and weightages have been assigned to these parameters by the NBA. The parameters and the weightages assigned to them, which are different for diploma, undergraduate (UG) degree and postgraduate (PG) degree programmes are given below:

Parameters	Marks		
	Diploma	Undergraduate	Postgraduate
I. Organization and governance	**(30)**	**(80)**	**(50)**
A Planning and monitoring			
B Recruitment procedure and its effectiveness			
C Promotional policies /procedure			
D Leadership			
E Motivational initiatives			
F Transparency			
G Decentralization and delegation and participation of faculty			
H Constitution of governing council/governing board			

(Note: The indicators will be weighted.)
Source: www.nba-aicte.ernet.in/parameter.doc

Quantification in reporting outcome

To cite an example of how reporting outcomes may be quantified, in the case of NAAC, the scores given by the reviewers are further used to calculate the institutional scores in percentage. The institutional score determines the institutional grade on a nine-point scale: Grade C denotes the score range 55-60, C+ denotes 60-65, C++ denotes 65-70, B is 70-75, B+ is 75-80, B++ is 80-85, A is 85-90, A+ is 90-95, and A++ is 95-100. Institutions that do not achieve the minimum 55 per cent are not accredited.

Some more recent systems follow this approach to establish credibility (especially in the absence of a well-established corps of assessors or in big systems with a lot of inter-team variance) and ensure objectivity in their accreditation decisions. However, the relationship between numbers and objectivity is questionable. Numbers help only when certain assumptions can be made; that is, when you can be sure that the difference between 50 per cent and 60 per cent is the same as the difference between 75 per cent and 85 per cent, for example. In practice, this is not usually the case, and quantitative measures give a misleading sense of objectivity, hiding the real subjectivity involved in setting the scores.

Reliance on quantification has been debated by different stakeholders for various reasons. For example, it may help an agency to ensure consistency in its approach, and minimize inter-team variance among the review panels. It might also be very useful in emerging systems to assure transparency. However, it may encourage higher education institutions to report simple quantitative measures that benefit them instead of truthful qualitative assessments. Fears have also been expressed regarding the relevance, accuracy and efficacy of many measures that have been, or are likely to be, employed by the quality assurance agencies. Reliance on quantification and quantitative indicators becomes most controversial when the emphasis shifts from their use as one of several inputs of effective decision-making by the review team to using them as a ranking device. Much depends on how reliance on quantifications is balanced with peer assessment.

Reliance on professional judgement

Many quality assurance agencies therefore do not provide explicit norms and quantitative targets because once they are made explicit they might become counterproductive to institutional diversity and the fitness for purpose approach. It does not mean that compliance to standards is not important, but there may be other mechanisms that ensure compliance. Once a threshold level is already ensured, the agency checks how well the HEIs are performing in their own way to achieve their goals and objectives. Here, considering diversity is important and reliance on quantitative assessment may not be of help. Professional judgement that adheres to the agency's quality assurance framework is central.

Box 15. Indicative scope of AUQA (Australia)

AUQA pays particular attention to the academic activities carried out in the institution's name. Indicative scope of an institutional audit includes:

- Organizational leadership and governance, planning.
- Teaching and learning (all modes); processes for programme approval and monitoring; comparability of academic standards in on-shore and offshore programs.
- Research activities and outputs, including commercialization.
- Community service activities.
- Internationalization, including contracts with overseas partners.
- Support mechanisms for staff and students.
- Communication with internal and external stakeholders.
- Systematic internally-initiated reviews (e.g. of departments, themes), including the rigour and effectiveness of the review mechanisms employed.
- Administrative support and infrastructure.

Source: Audit Manual: www.auqa.edu.au

Agencies that do not want to be very prescriptive do not set specific quantitative targets for institutions to comply with. However, they may provide detailed guidelines (or standards) on issues such as demonstrating adequacy and efficiency. For example, an agency may not insist that for every 10 students there should be a teacher. It

might not insist that the postgraduate programmes be handled only by the doctoral degree holders; however, it might say in general language that it should have adequate and competent faculty to run the programme under review.

For example, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) gives only the indicative areas to be covered and underlines professional judgement of the peers.

Obviously, such a broad definition of quality concern widens the scope of subjectivity since agencies rely largely on professional judgement. The quality assurance agencies handle this concern by developing manuals and guidelines to guide peer assessment. A rigorous training strategy is the key to ensuring reliable peer assessment. An interesting strategy that helps enhance the objectivity of a peer review team's judgements is the requirement that they reach their conclusions by consensus, not by vote. Thus, objectivity is ensured through a measure of inter-subjectivity, as extreme views are dismissed and what prevails is what all members of the team agree on. The composition of teams and the way they cover different views and disciplinary approaches are also essential to making sound decisions.

In general, as the discussions above have revealed, quality assurance agencies are found to rely on both quantification and peer assessment. They have to choose an appropriate stand to suit the context and their mandate. The approaches discussed in this chapter are not necessarily to be taken as measures to be implemented in isolation, but rather as approaches that can be used in combination, as they each have different strengths and weaknesses. This is particularly true for the quantitative/qualitative debate.

IV.   The structure for quality assurance: the agency

In most countries there is an agency that is responsible for defining the scope of quality assurance, elaborating the methodology – usually in consultation with academia and stakeholders – and conducting the process involving the external reviewers. It also prepares guidelines and handbooks for all those involved in the process, and offers workshops for HEIs and training for reviewers. It carries out these functions with a small core staff and relies on external reviewers generally drawn from the academic community. Depending on factors such as the size of the higher education system to be covered by the quality assurance agency, and the level of involvement in the quality assurance process, the agency requires human and financial resources to support its functions.

Quality assurance agencies may be established by the government, HEIs, or private groups. Except for a few agencies owned by the HEIs themselves, or which have significant support from the HEIs, most of the recent quality assurance agencies have been governmental initiatives and clearly serve governmental functions. In some countries, professional accreditation has developed as a mechanism independent of the government and HEIs. Irrespective of the affiliation of the agency, even for government initiatives, its autonomous/independent nature with respect to quality assurance decisions is seen as desirable. Careful consideration of the national context in terms of size of the system to be covered, scope of the quality assurance and level of involvement of the quality assurance agency is necessary.

Various safeguards and protocols are followed to establish the objectivity and reliability of the quality assurance process and its outcome and thereby assure the credibility of the agency to the stakeholders. In general, quality assurance agencies are accountable to one or more major higher education stakeholders – governments, HEIs, the academic community and the public at large. Depending on the institutional affiliation, there are built-in mechanisms that make the quality assurance agency accountable to its governing body. There are also various measures that ensure the accountability of the

agency, such as joining regional or international quality assurance networks and undergoing meta-evaluations.

Administrative affiliation of the quality assurance agency

The administrative affiliation of the quality assurance agency has certain implications for its autonomy. Although most of the quality assurance agencies – including those established and funded by their governments – claim some level of autonomy from government, obviously the non-governmental bodies can claim the greatest independence in decision-making. It often happens, however, that a government official, such as a representative from the education ministry, either sits in on or chairs the agency's governing body. When owned by the HEIs, quality assurance depends on the voluntary acceptance of the procedures by the member institutions, and the HEIs shape the nature and the framework of the quality assurance process. This 'bottom-up' orientation is found in the United States where accreditation agencies are non-governmental agencies of HEIs. In this case, the issue is: What level of independence can the agency claim with regard to the HEI itself?

The affiliation of the quality assurance agency is a much-debated issue in relation to the purpose of quality assurance. The issue is highly political and ideological. For some groups, government affiliation is seen as an external and bureaucratic approach where quality is controlled, while ownership by an HEI is seen as an internal, non-bureaucratic approach with a focus on quality improvement rather than control. However, there is no simple or direct relationship between ownership of the quality assurance agency and the balance between quality improvement and control. Many government-owned systems emphasize quality improvement, and some institution-owned agencies tend to act as gatekeepers, preventing the entrance of newcomers to the higher education market. The objective and focus tend to be independent of ownership.

Getting the government to support the quality assurance process without losing any of the agency's autonomy or affecting its functioning is certainly an option to be considered. In countries where the higher education system itself is undergoing reform,

quality assurance initiatives with considerable autonomy are being developed by the government as a part of the reform strategy. In more mature systems, the HEIs may take a leading role by providing external reviewers, or by taking part in different stages of the process. They may thus be in a position to shape the important developments of the quality assurance system. In the United States, and later in the Philippines, institutional accreditation has evolved as a process shaped by the HEIs themselves, but in most other systems the initiative has been taken by the government. In any case, government support in using the quality assurance outcome for vital decision-making, such as funding incentives, strengthens the quality assurance processes.

There are also organizations that are established and managed by groups other than HEIs and governments. This is how accreditation of programmes in professional areas of study evolved and is still practised. Known as 'specialized accreditation', this type of accreditation was born out of the concern of a profession about the quality and relevance of the educational programmes that were preparing its practitioners, and the quality of the practitioners trained. Specialty councils or professional bodies carry out this type of quality assurance through licensing or registration procedures. The main assessment criterion of these agencies is the quality of the graduates – future practitioners of a profession – and the procedures are developed and monitored by current practitioners of standing. Protecting public interest and safeguarding the standards of professional practice are central to these agencies. The quality assurance decisions of these agencies have implications for practitioners at national and international levels.

Some professions, like medicine, are highly protected, and they have tightly regulated practices. Consequently, most countries have some amount of well-regulated quality assurance practices for professional areas of studies. In some countries, a degree in a certain discipline qualifies the graduates to practise as professionals in that field, and in such cases those programme offerings are mostly regulated by professional bodies.

Thus, a quality assurance agency can be established with greater or lesser affiliation to the government. There are four levels of affiliation possible:

- It can be established as a governmental agency, perhaps as a unit in the ministry;
- It can be a body fully independent of the government, without any governmental intervention in its establishment or functioning. An example of this type of structure is a quality assurance agency established by HEIs;
- It may be a buffer body or established under a local buffer organization where the government plays a role in its initiation. In this instance, it will serve governmental functions, but will not necessarily be under government control;
- It can be a body established without any intervention of government or the HEIs in its establishment or functioning. Professional accreditation is a typical example (professional councils).

Box 16. Association of Professional Engineers of Nova Scotia (Canada)

The Association of Professional Engineers of Nova Scotia (APENS) is the licensing and regulatory body for the more than 4,500 professional engineers and engineers-in-training practising in Nova Scotia or on Nova Scotia Projects.

APENS mission

- To serve and protect the public interest.
- To advance and promote the value and proficiency of the Engineering Profession.
- To support the members in their professional practice.

To practise as an engineer in Nova Scotia or to offer professional engineering services to the public in Nova Scotia, licensing by this body is a requirement. It also has implications for national and international mobility of engineering professionals. It is a member of the national body – Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (CCPE). CCPE in turn is a signatory to the Washington Accord that regulates the mutual recognition of professional qualifications in engineering among its signatories.

Source: www.apens.ns.ca

Governance and organizational structure

Depending on the way the quality assurance agency is established and its administrative affiliation, its governance and organizational

structure may vary. Commonly, the governance structure consists of an executive or governing body at the policy-making level that steers the policies and objectives of the quality assurance agency. The governing bodies may have members appointed, nominated or elected according to the rules of the organization.

An important concern is the representation of the various higher education stakeholders in the governing body. The composition of the governing body is generally indicative of the relative power that the different stakeholders try to maintain over the agency. In agencies that are established by government, the government representative either sits in on or chairs the governing body. Some quality assurance agencies consider it important to have students, members of the public or end-users represented in the governing body.

The composition also depends on other factors, such as the importance given to regional co-operation and the political will that supports such co-operation. International presence in the governing bodies of quality assurance agencies in Europe has been accelerated by the move towards the European Higher Education Area. In the Austrian Accreditation Committee (AAC), half of the members of the council are Austrians and the other half are experts from other European countries. International presence in review teams is more common than previously and the governing bodies of quality assurance agencies tend to have a favourable attitude towards it. This is due to the growing importance of regional dialogue among the quality assurance agencies and the internationalization of HEIs. In Europe, foreign experts are appointed to the accreditation committee/council, as in the case of AAC (Austria), *Akkreditierungsrat* (Germany), AQAS (Ireland), AUQA (Australia), AAU (New Zealand) in Asia-Pacific, ACQUIN (Germany) and the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA).

The governing body may assume a variety of administrative, supervisory and decision-making functions. It also has the overall responsibility for the policies and functioning of the quality assurance agency. This means that the governing body may devolve authority to the head or director of the agency (appointed by the governing body itself), but will still be responsible for decision-making. The head of the agency can decide on the day-to-day administration, adhering

to the rules and regulations that govern the agency and reporting to the governing body. Any substantive changes or decisions would require the approval of the governing body.

The governing body is in charge of the agency's quality assurance decisions and monitors the credibility of the process. It also ensures that the quality assurance process results in thorough, informed and independent judgements. It may pay attention to the performance of the agency and guide its development. From time to time, members of the governing body may: (a) serve as members of a subcommittee or *ad hoc* working group; (b) attend events related to quality assurance matters on behalf of the agency; (c) speak to groups or in conferences about the work of the agency; (d) advise the staff of the agency based on the member's specialist knowledge or experience; or (e) work with staff in areas of importance, such as papers and monographs on cross-border education.

Box 17. Governance structure of a quality assurance agency (Ireland)

Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), Ireland

The appointment of the members of the council is set out in legislation. There are 15 members of the Council. The Chairman and the Chief Executive Officer are members of the Council. Other members are representative members appointed by the Minister for Education and Science (2), the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (1), and the Recognized Institutions (3). With the agreement of the Minister for Education and Science, one person is appointed as representative of learners and another person as representative of the employees of Recognized Institutions. Other members are nominated by the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (1) and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (1). The Council once established may then nominate two additional members who have a special knowledge and experience related to the functions of the Council, one of which shall have international experience. The members of the Council operate on a part-time voluntary basis. The only full-time member of the Council is the Chief Executive Officer. The term of appointment is five years.

Source: Vroeijenstijn, 2003.

Box 18. Governance structure of a quality assurance agency (Chile)

National Commission for Accreditation, Chile

In 1998, the Ministry of Education established a National Commission for Accreditation (CNAP), charged with designing an accreditation process and carrying it out. The commission has fourteen members, appointed by the Minister of Education, and a technical staff in charge of co-ordinating and managing accreditation procedures. This commission had as one of its main duties to design a permanent system for quality assurance, on the basis of their experience.

The Commission prepared a proposal, which was then turned into a law project. Congress has already approved the proposed structure for the quality assurance agency, along the following lines:

• The President of the country appoints the chair of the commission.
• There are seven members, appointed by the main types of higher education institutions (public and private universities, professional institutes, technical training centres).
• Two members are appointed by the national science and technology commission.
• The Head of the HE Department of the Ministry of Education is also a member.
• These members together decide on the appointment of two other persons, one representing employers, and one representing professional associations.
• Two students are appointed by student organizations following specific guidelines set in the law.
• The commission appoints a Secretary General, who heads the technical staff and has voice but no voting rights.

All members of the commission act in a personal capacity, for a fixed period of four years, regardless of any changes in their institutional affiliation or current position.

This governing body makes all policy decisions, and all accrediting decisions, which include institutional accreditation, the approval, registration and supervision of quality assurance agencies for programme accreditation and the accreditation of doctoral programmes.

Source: Lemaître, 2005.

Box 19.   Responsibilities of the governing body (Australia)

- The aim of the Board of AUQA is to implement the Objects of the company.
- The Board sets the context for AUQA's QA [quality assurance] activities, within which the activities are carried out by audit panels, guided by the staff.
- In respect of audits, the Board is responsible for policies, procedures, people, and publishing.
- The Board of AUQA acts with due diligence in relation to its task of corporate governance.

Summary responsibilities of the Board

- The Board determines policies consistent with the constitution.
- The Board appoints auditors to the Register.
- The Board Chair and the Executive Director set up audit panels from the Register, with the Chair acting on behalf of the Board.
- In setting up an audit panel, the Board delegates to that panel the responsibility and authority for carrying out an audit according to the policies and procedures.
- The Board approves the release of an audit report if it is substantial in content, convincing (in terms of the evidence presented), responsibly expressed, and consistent in tone and scope with AUQA's responsibilities.

Fuller expression of functions of the Board

The functions of the Board are to:
- Take responsibility for the performance of the organization, with respect to meeting the objects of the company;
- Plan the strategic direction for AUQA, having in mind the national and international context, and within the Objects defined by the constitution;
- Determine the policies of AUQA, within the parameters set by the constitution;
- Monitor the implementation of the policies by the Executive Director and other staff;
- Confirm that the operating procedures of AUQA are carried out;
- Appoint auditors to the Register;
- Approve the release of audit reports;
- Approve the budget of AUQA;
- Appoint the Executive Director of AUQA;

- Accept responsibility for the financial performance and reports of AUQA;
- Submit to the Members an annual report of AUQA, including the audited accounts;
- Advise the members on the constitution of AUQA.

Source: http://www.auqa.edu.au/aboutauqa/policies/003/index.shtml

With regard to the organizational structure, some quality assurance agencies divide responsibilities up internally, into areas such as general administration, training reviewers, orienting HEIs, external relations, conducting assessment visits, documentation, information systems and web-related activities. The specializations may be related to major functions of the quality assurance process or be a mixture of quality assurance processes. These functions may be handled by a staff member or a unit dedicated to these responsibilities.

Other quality assurance agencies have units that perform certain functions or units that are responsible for certain regions or (types of) institutions. For example, all responsibilities related to institution X (e.g. National University of Mexico), a group of institutions of a certain region (e.g. all universities and community colleges of Illinois), or type of institution (e.g. all teacher education colleges of the country) might be allocated to a specific staff or unit. If the agency exercises more than one type of assessment process, division of responsibility may be based on the type of assessment (e.g. programme assessment is to be handled by X and institutional assessment is to be handled by Y). Frequently, agencies combine these approaches. They need to find out how best to divide responsibilities in their specific context, and which support structure will work best.

Resources of quality assurance agencies

Funding a quality assurance agency is both a political and an operational issue. When the quality assurance agency has been set up by a governmental initiative to serve governmental functions, significant funding is usually derived from the government itself. In a

quasi-governmental structure where the agency has a close relationship with the government, but is administered by autonomous governing structures, the initial funding may come from the government. The cost of the actual quality assurance activity, however, is frequently borne by the HEIs concerned, although governments often meet the accreditation costs of publicly-funded HEIs, in some cases by providing this funding directly to the agency.

If the agency is owned by the HEIs themselves, the funding for the accrediting body and process may be derived from the institution itself. The quality assurance bodies that are dissociated from governmental initiatives and HEIs, for instance those that function as NGOs and professional accreditation bodies, have to depend on the fees they charge for the assessment services.

Considering these different cases, and the expenditures involved in running an agency, there are different funding schemes that involve either one or a combination of the following:

- *Governmental funding*. In government-initiated systems, government provides at least the initial funding, and will normally cover at least part of the expenses related to the running of the agency.
- *Fees from HEIs*. In many systems, institutions pay for the services received. This payment would normally cover all expenses related to the external review, plus the cost of training activities.
- *Income received by the agency* for services rendered to institutions or organizations other than those applying for accreditation, such as conferences, workshops, consultancy, etc.

The size of the agency, the budget, the volume of the activity and coverage differ greatly, varying from eight universities and two full-time staff to 16,000 HEIs and 20 full-time staff. For example in the Philippines, where each accrediting agency has a secretariat headed by an executive director, the secretariat of the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities (PAASCU) has the most staff. PAASCU serves the largest number of educational institutions, with 289 member institutions in 1997 implementing 12 academic accreditation programmes. The

Accrediting Agency of Chartered Colleges and Universities in the Philippines (AACCUP) has only 48 member institutions and the least number of academic accreditation programmes. Accordingly, it has fewer staff in the secretariat. Funding requirements vary from a few thousand US dollars to more than 1 million per annum. This depends not only on the size of the agency but also on the salary structure and volume of activities, which themselves are dependent on the level of involvement of the agency in the quality assurance process.

In addition to the number of staff, their competencies have to match the role they are expected to play in the quality assurance process. In some quality assurance agencies, members of staff take an active role in assessment, such as in report-writing, and they participate as experts in training programmes for reviewers and orientation courses for HEIs. Such agencies require competent and experienced staff who would be regarded by the academic community as peers. In other words, at least senior staff members of the agency need to have the profile of peers or reviewers as mentioned earlier. If the agency carries out programme accreditation, it might wish to choose members of staff who have those specializations. In the case of the agency staff who carry out administrative support functions only, their profile and competencies would vary accordingly.

Box 20. Resources needed for the quality assurance agency (United States)

Regional accrediting agencies typically have a limited number of staff, perhaps 12 to 20 in all, and an annual operating budget of $2 million to $3 million, mainly covering salaries, office expenses and the holding of two or three meetings each year. Professional staff have varied backgrounds but generally have doctoral-level education, have worked at academic institutions, have good organizational skills, and are circumspect and professional in demeanour. With programme accrediting, staff often possess degrees and training specific to the professional area of interest, for example, in engineering or nursing.

Source: El-Khawas, 2001.

Along with institutional affiliation and funding, the quality assurance agency inherits certain expectations and terms of reference for its functioning from its providers or authorities. Consequently, the agency has to project its resource requirements – financial and human – depending on the range and quantity of activities it is expected to take on, and the role the agency staff are to play in those activities.

Information system

One of the main features of external quality assurance is the periodicity of the quality assurance process. Quality assurance agencies maintain records related to quality assurance outcomes – self-assessment reports that form the basis upon which to make decisions; recommendations of the review team; institutional responses, if any; decisions of the agency; appeals, if any; and their outcomes during this period. When making its final decisions, the agency must have at its disposal: information provided by HEIs; information considered by reviewers; evidence to justify decisions; and data concerning the process. All this information has to be well organized, especially when decisions can be challenged and if the outcome could have serious implications. Such handling of data is necessary to support the assessment process.

There is another type of information system used by some agencies – a public information system related to quality assurance outcomes. To ensure that the information provided by HEIs is reliable, that the information considered by the reviewers is appropriate, that the data used to make judgements are valid, and that meaningful use is made of the data collected, some agencies extend their services beyond supporting the assessment functions and make as much data as possible available to the public and other national databases. Critical data given in the institutional reports may feed into other national databases, and some institutional data may be derived from other national databases for further consideration or for cross validation of data provided by the HEIs. However, it should be noted that much of the information gathered through self-assessment by the HEIs will only be made available for assessment purposes. In many cases, however, HEIs will provide sensitive and strategic information only when they are sure that it will not be published, but used only for evaluation.

For this reason, most quality assurance agencies generally separate these two aspects – information handling to support assessment functions, and information handling for public disclosure. The provision of accurate, valid and reliable information to public information systems may be one of the requirements for accreditation, but this information will be different from what is required to make decisions about the quality of the institution (even if at least part of the two sets of information overlap).

Credibility and accountability of the agency

As the higher education institutions whose work they assess, quality assurance agencies have to be accountable for the quality of their work and they are obliged to demonstrate publicly that the quality assurance process implemented achieves the desired objectives effectively. To this end, they become accountable to many stakeholders to prove the credibility of the process and to ensure the objectivity and transparency of their decisions or recommendations.

The credibility of the quality assurance process is a combination of many different factors and includes: clarity in policies; appropriateness of the quality assurance framework; transparency of the procedures; integrity of the people involved; and the desired impact on the system.

To guarantee the credibility of the quality assurance process, the agency will have to ensure that its strategies include elements such as: (a) broad involvement of HEIs in evolving the norms and criteria; (b) consensus-building to ensure widespread support; (c) careful development of the methods and instruments of assessment; (d) transparency in all policies and practices; (e) rigorous implementation of procedures; and (f) safeguards to enhance the professionalism of assessment. In systems that focus on quality control, the agency may have to choose a different set of elements to eliminate low-quality provisions. In this case, holding consultations with the higher education community on criteria will not be appropriate if the outcome of the quality assurance could be used to close down poor quality institutions. However, the agency can ensure credibility through clear and transparent procedures, rigorously

applied, with a good appeal system. Lots of training and working with the institutions can contribute to the agency's reputation in the academic community. In such a situation, the agency may not be able to ensure consensus among the HEIs, but it can take into account any worthwhile comments to finetune its quality assurance procedures.

Quality assurance agencies strive to develop a framework that is responsive to change but consistent in its approach. In particular, the framework needs to be sensitive to the local context as well as on a par with international developments in its core elements. Once the framework is well in place, quality assurance agencies use various methods to select experts who are known for their integrity and competence. The qualifications and skills of the people who constitute the assessment teams are critical to the credibility of the whole process. Nonetheless, the professionalism with which the accreditation process is planned and implemented by the accreditation agency is of equal importance to the success of the review team. Even the most highly qualified team can be thwarted in its work if the accreditation agency is not clear in its expectations of the team.

Team composition is another area that needs attention. It is not possible for a single reviewer to be familiar with all the aspects of the functioning of an HEI or programme. Every individual's perception of quality is influenced by factors that are beyond the control of the quality assurance agency. It is not possible for an agency to banish all the individual perceptions concerning a training programme, however rigorous it might be. An important concern is thus to ensure that the team will produce a good collective team assessment. A mixture of skills and experience lends greater fairness to the assessment.

Reflection on the conflict-of-interest policy needs to be mentioned here. Although the reviewers are experts known for their integrity, in order to ensure objectivity most agencies require the reviewers to certify that they have no involvement with the proposed institution, directly or indirectly through any close relatives, in the past or at present, as either an employee or a member of any official body as a consultant or graduate. The conflicts of interest that the agency staff are likely to encounter should also be addressed appropriately.

These measures strengthen the credibility of the quality assurance agency.

Involving HEIs in implementing the quality assurance procedures will also help establish much-needed credibility. In some countries, the institutions do not have any say in the constitution of the review team. Consulting the institutions when constituting the team is considered good practice to uphold the spirit of quality assurance as an exercise in partnership. Besides, it is of little use to send in a team whose judgement will not be accepted by the institution. It would only strengthen compliance without promoting improvement. Collecting feedback from the HEIs and those involved in the quality assurance process, and using it to further improve quality, also contributes to steering the agencies' progress in the right direction. Having a sound appeal mechanism in place is another step that the quality assurance agencies frequently use to ensure their credibility and accountability.

In other words, clarity in objectives, a framework for the evaluation, adherence to the framework, appropriate safeguards to ensure objectivity, consideration of the HEIs as equal partners and winning the confidence of the stakeholders can all greatly contribute to the credibility and acceptance of the quality assurance process.

There are also mechanisms to ensure that the quality assurance agency explicitly demonstrates its accountability. A few ways in which agencies demonstrate their accountability are illustrated in the following pages.

Accountability measures

There is a strong relationship between ownership of the agency and the way accountability is ensured. It has been mentioned already that in the case of agencies established by governments, governmental officials (such as a representative from the ministry of education) tend to sit in on, or even chair the governing body. In addition, the government may have various mechanisms, such as calling for annual reports, to monitor the agency's performance. When owned by the HEIs, the agency becomes accountable to the HEIs. There are wide variations in the ways the accountability measures are implemented, some of which are discussed below.

Built-in checks in the functioning of the quality assurance agency create an element of accountability

There are many built-in checks that ensure that stakeholders are involved in shaping and monitoring the quality assurance processes. Representation of the various stakeholders, especially the cross-section of academia in the governing bodies, is one way of ensuring that the agency remains accountable. As mentioned in previous sections, some agencies have a representative from the public or user end in the governing board. Some quality assurance agencies have elaborate procedures to nominate the public representative to serve on the governing board. In general, quality assurance agencies submit their plans and annual reports to the governing bodies, which may even be made public to ensure transparency and strengthen accountability. Having an international presence in the governing bodies is another way of ensuring that the policies and procedures are compatible with practices in other countries and adds an element of comparability.

BAN-PT, the accreditation agency of Indonesia, due to its affiliation to the government, submits annual reports to the government, which also allocates an annual budget that guides the activities of the agency to a certain extent. The Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS), established by the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), has the mandate to report in writing to COU at least once a year on its activities of the past year.

An umbrella organization may look into the accountability of the quality assurance agencies

Private quality assurance agencies, since they fulfil a public service function, frequently need to obtain recognition from an umbrella body as an accountability measure. This is the case in countries as diverse as the United States, the Philippines and Germany. In the United States, the regional accrediting bodies, as well as the professional accreditation agencies established by the HEIs, seek recognition either from the CHEA or from the United States Department of Education. Although seeking recognition by these bodies is voluntary, federal funds such as student support will flow only to institutions that are accredited by an agency that is recognized by CHEA. Accrediting bodies that seek recognition by the CHEA

must demonstrate that they meet the CHEA recognition standards. Accrediting organizations are expected to advance academic quality, demonstrate accountability, encourage improvement, employ appropriate procedures, continually reassess accreditation practices, and possess sufficient resources. The recognition review has an evaluation procedure similar to the accreditation exercise of the HEIs, with self-study and external review. During the process (which lasts six years), there are even sessions that are open to the public.

AUQA, for instance, is responsible for conducting quality audits of state and territory government accreditation authorities on a five-year cycle. Action taken in response to audit reports are then the responsibility of the relevant department and minister. Audit by the AUQA serves as an accountability check for the state and territory government accreditation authorities.

In Germany, an umbrella body, the *Akkreditierungsrat*, was created in 1998 to provide recognition to those private non-profit accreditation agencies that offer their services to German higher education institutions. These agencies are recognized, or not, on the basis of the criteria laid out in *Box 21*.

Box 21. Basic standards for accrediting accreditation agencies by the German *Akkreditierungsrat*

Accreditation agencies can be accredited by the Akkreditierungsrat if they meet principles and basic standards as follows:

Accreditation agencies must be institutionally independent of higher education institutions as well as of business, industry and professional associations, and must perform accreditation procedures accordingly. The agencies must ensure that higher education institutions and representatives of professional practice are given appropriate opportunities to participate in the accreditation decision-making process.

Accreditation agencies require an adequate staffing facility and funding infrastructure reliably ascertained for a medium-term perspective. They operate on the basis of the principles of efficiency and economy, and will not be profit-oriented.

Accreditation agencies perform accreditation for all types of higher education institutions, since pursuant to § 19 German Framework Law on Higher Education and in accordance with KMK (Conference of Ministers of Education) and HRK (German Rectors' Conference) resolutions, both universities and universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*) are entitled to establish degree programmes leading to *Bakkalaureus*/Bachelor's and Master's degrees.

Accreditation agencies must bring together national and international competence from all kinds of higher education institutions and should perform accreditation with respect to all types of programmes and disciplines. As an essential factor to evaluate the professional qualification of accreditation agencies, such approaches should be reflected, inter alia, in the recruitment of experts and in the design of evaluation procedures. The competence of accreditation agencies will also be validated by the documentation of evaluation criteria and standards, as well as staff qualifications.

Accreditation agencies must prove by appropriate evidence that procedures followed in processes of programme accreditation are comprehensible and characterized by transparency. They must provide for internal measures of quality control and suitable practices of documentation and information (cf. the *Akkreditierungsrat Principles and Criteria for the Accreditation of Degree Programmes*).

Accreditation agencies are accountable to the *Akkreditierungsrat* also after they have been accredited. In particular, they are obliged to inform the *Akkreditierungsrat* without delay of any degree programme for which accreditation status has been extended by them, and to submit an annual activity report.

Source: www.accreditation-council.de/

Voluntary co-ordination through regional networks and adherence to their standards and criteria

It has become common practice that quality assurance agencies voluntarily join together to form networks and follow commonly agreed principles or practices. Although accountability may not be their motivation for joining networks, adherence to common standards and criteria simultaneously enhances their credibility and serves to demonstrate the agency's accountability. Good practices developed by the INQAAHE and the European Network for Quality

Assurance (ENQA) are examples of this. *Box 22* presents some of the good practices listed by the INQAAHE, with reference to accountability to the public.

Box 22.   Guidelines for good practices: INQAAHE

In its work, the EQA Agency informs and responds to the public in accordance with the legislation or cultural context relating to the agency. This includes making public and explicit its documentation e.g. policies, procedures and criteria.

The agency also demonstrates public accountability by reporting openly on its review decisions and making the outcomes of the evaluation public in a way appropriate to the relevant country legislation and the type of review undertaken. The content of the public report may differ depending on the cultural context and will also depend on the requirements set for accountability.

Source: INQAAHE (www.inqaahe.org).

Periodic assessment of agencies is a way to demonstrate accountability

There is a growing awareness of the benefits of meta-evaluation or 'evaluating the evaluation itself' as a critical measure to ensure accountability, continuous improvement and development of good practices of quality assurance agencies. European quality assurance agencies are expected to submit themselves to a cyclic review every five years. Some agencies conduct impact studies and mid-term reviews that contribute to understanding the progress towards realization of the objectives. Some agencies have invited international experts to observe assessment visits, held training programmes, and organized consultations to provide feedback. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of South Africa has an International Reference Group that consists of three international members that act as a sounding board for its development. The AUQA and national commission for evaluation in Chile are in the process of undergoing external reviews.

Registering of agencies to ensure accountability

Although this measure is yet to become functional, there is ongoing discussion about how to do so. The quality assurance agencies of the European region have agreed to register external quality assurance agencies operating in Europe. *Box 23* illustrates how this register is likely to take shape.

**Box 23. Standards and guidelines for quality assurance
in the European higher education area: ENQA**

ENQA committed itself before the Berlin Ministerial meeting of 2003 to develop, in co-operation with the relevant stakeholders, a European register of quality assurance agencies, covering public, private, and thematic agencies, operating or planning to operate in Europe.

The register would meet the interest of higher education institutions and governments in being able to identify professional and credible quality assurance agencies operating in Europe. The interest has firstly its basis in the complicated area of recognition of non-national degrees. Recognition procedures would be strengthened if it were transparent to what extent providers were themselves quality assured by recognized agencies. Secondly, it is increasingly possible for higher education institutions to seek quality assurance from agencies across national borders. Higher education institutions would of course be helped in this process by being able to identify professional agencies from a reliable register ...

... A European Register Committee will decide on admissions to the European register. The committee will use agency compliance with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies as identified in the cyclical review as one criterion for placement in the register. Other criteria should be developed, which will take account of the diversity of the higher education systems.

Source: Standard and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (see: www.enqa.net).

The International Association of University Presidents (IAUP)'s and INQAAHE's proposal in 1999 to create a quality label similar to the quality register in order to identify credible external quality assurance agencies met with opposition. INQAAHE consequently

dropped the idea of a quality label, but instead developed a set of good practices, which were discussed earlier.

The above discussions show very clearly that to carry out quality assurance, its implementation needs to be adapted to the local context, at the same time as it also requires international/ regional compatibility. All quality assurance has to respond to both imperatives, and tries to do so through the available options, many of which have been discussed in this booklet.

Conclusion

New contextual factors arising from both globalization and the internal transformation of higher education systems make quality assurance an ever more important function for public authorities. The development of quality assurance systems appears to be one of the major trends in higher education policy and finds itself reinforced through the creation of regional networks of quality assurance agencies. Such networks help agencies to exchange experiences and develop codes of practice.

Within this overall similarity between EQA systems, the above discussions have shown the various options in setting them up. Options cannot be discussed without taking into account the particular national policy context of a higher education system, its traditions and culture.

First, we can conclude that EQA systems tend to fill gaps in the broader quality assurance system, and that they focus on functions that are not yet carried out by other agencies. This explains many of the differences found in a comparative analysis of EQA systems. Another source of divergence lies in the specific academic traditions and culture of a country. Specific procedures have to be seen as legitimate within a given system, and what is legitimate varies from one context to the other. Variations in the understanding of what constitutes institutional autonomy, for instance, lead to differing understandings of how an effective quality assurance system should operate.

Second, other structural factors equally condition the option chosen. The *size of the higher education* system is one of the contextual issues that may impact heavily on the choices that are made regarding structure. Massive systems with numerous institutions will naturally develop a different mechanism for quality assurance than small developing states. Obviously, running a quality assurance system in India is not the same as running one in the Seychelles. The *size* of the system to be covered by the process might vary from a few thousand programmes to only a few institutions. However, the size of the system does not necessarily influence the choice of

unit for quality assurance since most systems have both institutional and programme level quality assurance arrangements. In this case, agencies tend to specialize in one mechanism: While one agency may concentrate on institutional quality assurance, another may look at the programmes. Some agencies do both. However, what is certain is that the size of the education system to be covered influences other aspects of quality assurance: Policies and practices related to the participation of agency staff in site visits, the selection of reviewers and constitution of the review team, and the place given to the training of reviewers are shaped partly by the size of the system. For example, in large systems there is a heavy reliance on external reviewers with limited support from the quality assurance body. Consequently, the external visit requires external reviewers who are competent enough to adhere to the quality assurance framework but with minimum direct guidance from the staff. Identifying external reviewers may not be a big challenge in large systems, but training them to adhere to the quality assurance framework in a consistent manner, putting in place appropriate safeguards to minimize inter-team variances, and ensuring professionalism in such large operations may become very challenging.

The *level of private provision*, the stage of development they have reached in the country, and the public perception of that provision all influence the quality assurance arrangement in a country. For example, whether the same agency covers both private and public provisions and whether the same standards are applied to both depends on the way quality assurance is developed in the national context. As mentioned already, quality assurance systems are established to fill the gaps in the existing framework of the country. As private provision grows in a country, national quality assurance arrangements are strengthened, depending on the challenges that emerge, sometimes by expanding the scope of the existing arrangements, and sometimes by establishing new structures. For example, there are economies where the emergence of private sector institutions has resulted in the need for an explicit quality assurance mechanism to address specifically private provisions. While the ministries had control (often funding-related) over the publicly-funded institutions and programmes, the need for a parallel mechanism to assure quality in the private sector that did not

demand or have access to public funds resulted in the establishment of quality assurance structures that focused only on the private sector. Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong are typical examples. More recently in Malaysia, it was decided that quality assurance should cover both public and private provisions of higher education.

The maturity of the system is another factor that conditions the role that the various stakeholders can play in the quality assurance arrangement. In mature systems, HEIs play a major role by contributing to the development or strengthening of the framework. They shape the quality assurance developments in the country. Getting competent reviewers from the national higher education sector may not be a problem. However, in developing systems, where there may only be a small core group of competent people to begin with, a lot of steering and decision-making has to be shouldered by the agency itself, until capacity is developed in the system. Accordingly, there may be reliance on international expertise to take on responsibility for quality assurance, or the staff may have a substantial role in the process. In mature systems, with appropriate training, the reviewers (who come from the higher education system) will be able to act on behalf of the agency and fulfil their responsibility with minimum direction from the agency.

A *third* major conclusion of this booklet is that the overall purpose of an EQA system corresponds to a specific approach. This approach conditions whether the system should be compulsory or voluntary, whether standards or the 'fitness for purpose' concept is used, and whether accreditation or audit mechanisms predominate. However, it is also quite common for EQA agencies to emerge as multi-functional systems, and embrace new functions such as licensing, institutional audit and programme accreditation, often including recognition of foreign credentials.

The structure of EQA usually corresponds to the overall philosophy of the system (accountability or conformity versus quality improvement and development of the system). When quality improvement is the aim, then a voluntary mechanism is a better option than a compulsory one. The assumption is that only when higher education institutions 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 in all cases. However, it may also be necessary to put in place a system of quality assurance oriented towards controlling minimum standards when it is known that there are many low-quality providers in the system.

In accordance with the basic underlying purpose of EQA systems, it needs to be decided whether quality assurance will be organized as quality assessment, quality audit or accreditation. Quality assessment is the more improvement-oriented, developmental approach through which the strengths and weaknesses of a higher education institution or programme are assessed. Quality audit, which focuses on the system for internal quality control, is more development-oriented and thus more appropriate when institutions and their programmes are of relatively even quality and have matured. Accreditation, which in fact imposes a cut-off point as to what is acceptable and what is not, is more appropriate for quality control purposes. The need to practise quality control in an emerging and rapidly growing private sector of higher education and ensure comparability of credentials has created pressure to develop standards-based approaches to EQA, and accreditation has thus become the favoured approach to EQA.

This booklet has also discussed the role and functioning of the support structure for quality assurance: the agency. The issue of autonomy, from both state bureaucracy and the academic community, has been outlined as one of the most crucial concerns when setting up a quality assurance system. In addition, the need to develop trust in the quality assurance mechanism has been pointed out throughout the booklet. Trust can be gained through transparency and enhanced through many different devices, such as active dissemination of information to the public, both of quality assurance instruments and reports. The agency plays a crucial role in developing trust in the system through the way it puts in place and runs the quality assurance process.

Quality assurance has become a somewhat fashionable item on national policy agendas for higher education. This booklet should conclude by emphasizing three points of caution:

• First, *quality assurance is not an aim in itself*. It is an instrument through which the state, directly or through delegation, may both

enact its role to protect students and families from low-quality or fraudulent providers and serve the purpose of quality improvement in academic departments and institutions. Quality assurance should thus be conceived as a support mechanism for the enhancement of higher education.

- Second, *quality assurance has a cost:* both financial and human. In addition to the financial resources necessary to implement the different process elements it entails, it requires much academic staff time, which could possibly also be used for core academic activities, such as teaching and research. Thus, quality assurance will only survive in the end if it proves to be an effective tool to regulate higher education and improve its functioning.
- Third, *the existence of a quality assurance mechanism does not automatically mean that national higher education provision is of good quality*. If higher education systems are grossly lacking in human resources, infrastructure and equipment, as is the case in many poor countries, quality assurance as such is not the solution. It can help point out existing problems and resource needs, but it is not the answer to the shortage of resources experienced in many countries.

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Association of Professional Engineers of Nova Scotia (APENS), Canada: www.accmon.mn

Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA): www.auqa.edu.au

Badan Akreditasi Nasional Perguruan Tinggi (BAN), Indonesia: www.ban-pt.net

Council on Higher Education (CHE), South Africa: www.che.ac.za,

Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), United States: www.chea.org

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education: www.enqa.org

Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE), United Kingdom: www.hefce.ac.uk

Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA): www.hkcaa.edu.hk

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

INQAAHE glossary: www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/

Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (LAN), Malaysia: www.lan.gov.my

Middle States Commission on Higher Education, United States: www.msche.org

National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India: www.naac-india.com

National Council for Higher Education Accreditation (NCHEA), Canada: www.apens.ns.ca

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA-HLC), the Higher Learning Commission, United States: www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), United States: www.nwccu.org

Observatory on Borderless Higher Education: www.obhe.ac.uk/cgi-bin/news/article.pl?id=377

Ontario Council for Graduate Studies (OCGS), Canada: http://ocgs.cou.on.ca

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), United Kingdom: www.qaa.ac.uk

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