

INQAAHE CONFERENCE 2013

PAPER PROPOSAL

Sub theme 2 : Innovative Approaches to external QA in tertiary education : not a single approach towards excellence

“External Quality Assurance under a Self Accreditation System : Promoting and Assessing Internal Quality Assurance”

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Abstract

The paper examines the concept and practice of “Self-accreditation” in the external quality assurance of education. It starts with the definition of “Self-accreditation” and the features associated with the system. A Self-Accreditation (S-A) system has certain merits, and is suitable for the more mature institutions, but not all institutions or education systems are suited to this system. Under a Self-accreditation system, external Quality Assurance (QA) and internal QA play different roles. The external QA agency assesses and advises on the QA systems of institutions which enjoy self-accreditation status, and adds an external check on the internal QA systems, although institutions have ultimate responsibility for programme quality.

There are different configurations and models of internal quality assurance : different factors affect institutions’ choice of internal QA models. The external QA bodies, in carrying out different types of external quality assurance, such as review or audit, are also influencing the development of internal QA models of institutions.

Paper Outline

Self-accreditation (S-A) status refers to the status accorded to institutions which, by virtue of the maturity of their internal quality assurance systems, are exempted from the external accreditation of their programmes by an external agency. Self-accreditation status is practised in some jurisdictions where groups of institutions or selective individual institutions are awarded this status.

Self-accreditation does not fit all institutions, nor is it suitable for all systems or countries. For individual institutions, these have to be judged to be mature in their QA systems, usually with established track record, before they can be awarded the S-A status. For a country/ area to consider introducing this system, it also needs to have a mature QA system, where the concept and culture of self-regulation are accepted and well understood, and where there are effective external supports to reinforce the self-regulation of self-accrediting institutions.

Institutions which are awarded S-A status are expected to be able to maintain an effective internal QA system and also continue to improve upon this system. There is no fast and hard rule as to what constitutes an effective internal QA system, although there are good practice principles that are commonly acknowledged. Thus, while upholding general norms of good QA practice, institutions also devise their own modes of internal QA to suit their own needs, taking into account their mission and structure, their traditions and culture, programmes offered, and prevalent circumstances.

The external QA bodies, through their review of the S-A institutions, also influence the development of internal QA systems.

Internal QA : locus of responsibility

Institutions differ in their internal QA systems because often they have different concepts of where responsibility for QA should lie. As S-A status means that the institution's programmes are not subject to external accreditation, this often means the institution has to conduct its own validation or approval of programmes. However, there may be different views as to which authority inside the institution should be responsible. Programmes can be approved at the Faculty level, or the department level; or approval can be made by a central committee reporting to the highest academic authority of the institution. Which is the best arrangement in terms of effective QA responsibility and accountability? As the central academic authority (often the Senate) has ultimate responsibility, should the Senate take part in all the approval decisions, and is it possible? Or should authority and decisions be delegated?

The delegation of authority often has to do with the division of power within the institution. One has to understand the power structure of an institution to understand the decisions regarding delegation of decisions. This is especially important where there are relatively independent colleges, such as those which offer self-financed programmes, or sub-degree programmes, which often have greater autonomy than the other internal departments of the institution.

Internal QA : level of scrutiny

Other than the question of where the decision for programme approval should be made, a more important question is where the actual scrutiny of the proposed programme is undertaken. Very often, the highest authority, such as the Senate, may have ultimate responsibility for making an approval decision, but it may be an act of endorsement, rather than an in-depth examination of the programme proposal. The in-depth examination may be done at a lower level, such as a committee of the Senate, or the Faculty Board. As the quality of programmes is guaranteed through this internal process, rather than an external accreditation, it is important that where the programme is internally examined, or validated, the institution should ensure that a robust process is adopted – that all relevant aspects of the programme are examined; and that the responsible committee or board should have appropriate authority for enforcing quality.

The level where detailed scrutiny of the programme is conducted is also often determined by the nature or level of programmes concerned. Higher level programmes may need to be considered by more senior bodies.

Internal QA: involvement of external experts

While the external accreditation system has the merit of offering independent expert judgment, the internal QA system of self-accrediting institutions should ensure that it has an equally robust system of independent external advice. This can be done through the appointment of external advisors, and the use of external experts on internal validation panels. External experts may also be appointed as external examiners of programmes.

The role played by external people in the internal QA of institutions often affect both the substance of quality, as well as the image of quality of the institution and its programmes. Institutions which are self-accrediting should thus take care to appoint external people who are at arm's length from the institution, and should also define the roles and duties of external advisors clearly.

Internal QA : maturity of institutions

There is not one single model of internal QA which fits all Self-accrediting institutions. Other than internal culture, structure, nature and level of programmes, inter alia, the maturity of the institution is another factor influencing the choice of QA model. Institutions which are relatively young or have newly acquired the self-accrediting status, often duplicate the external accreditation model and put in place stringent internal programme validation procedures. There may also be a heavy use of external experts for all programme validations/approval, and for student assessment. As the institutions mature and the internal QA culture is well established, there may be less involvement of external experts – or these may function in a different capacity. The institution may also move away from frequent programme validation and re-validation, towards the more macro models of departmental or discipline evaluation. Thus the internal QA

model may change in focus, while maintaining the rigor and effectiveness of internal quality assurance.

Models of External QA in a Self-accrediting System

Institutions which enjoy S-A status are not totally free from external scrutiny. The concept of public accountability requires that even S-A institutions should be subject to some form of regular external review.

The models of external review may differ, but essentially these are forms of external scrutiny which are more macro in nature than programme validation, often focusing on the internal QA systems of institutions and validating their effectiveness. These may take the form of Institutional Review, or Audit, and differ in terms of areas of focus. Sometimes these macro forms of review may also delve down to the programme level, as audit trails or sample reviews of programmes to corroborate the macro-level reviews.

A self-accrediting system thus has double layers of quality assurance : at the internal institutional level, and at the external level, and these reinforce each other.

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