

**Achievement  
and Progress:**

**Individual &  
Collective**

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**Dr David Woodhouse  
Executive Director, AUQA  
Past President, INQAAHE**



**Australian Universities Quality Agency**

# 1. Accountability and Improvement

EQAs have many different purposes, including

- assessing standards,
- maintaining a qualifications framework,
- audit,
- accreditation,
- ranking,
- gatekeeping,
- funding,
- information provision and
- capacity building.



# Accountability and improvement.

## EQA view:

<b>Improvement</b>	<b>Accountability</b>
Audit	Accreditation

## Institution view:

<b>Improvement</b>	<b>Accountability</b>
	Audit    Accreditation

The inclusion of QI as one of the EQA's purposes is likely to be either

1. a sop; and/or
2. a by-product; and/or
3. an expectation.

The majority of the core purposes of an EQA are in the accountability / checking / accreditation vein.

Few are about QI.

## Assisting institutions with QI needs

- advising,
- training,
- disseminating good practices,
- publications,
- etc.

‘It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place’!

(the Red Queen in ‘Through the Looking-Glass’)



## Accountability v. Achievement

The EQA should ask: what have you done? How well? Is it good enough? Here a sense of fitness for purpose (FFP) emerges.

While governments would like institutions to improve, their main goals are for them to:

- do what the government wants,
- provide more value for money,
- do what the institutions say they will, and
- not get worse.

Improvement comes no better than fifth.



## 2. The need for EQAs?

Many people are becoming dissatisfied with EQAs.

- Australia is absorbing AUQA into a regulator;
- USA thinks accreditation has failed;
- UK complains that QAA does not measure standards;
- India is opening up NAAC to competition;
- Sweden is moving to checking student performance);
- students (eg ESU) think they are not ensuring mobility and recognition;
- institutions think they are expensive, time-consuming and intrusive;
- and so on.



So, what is the position and the future of the EQA?

There are currently many EQAs world-wide and governments are constantly creating more. These EQAs are being given many different tasks that have extended enormously the spectrum of their responsibilities.

But since they are quality assurance agencies, it has led to this whole spectrum of EQA activities being included in the meaning of the word 'quality'. This has devalued the word.

Cf

Q: 'What is intelligence?'

A: 'It is what intelligence tests measure'.

Q: 'What is quality?'

A: 'It is what EQAs measure'.

Fortunately, the word is saved by the core definition, 'Q=FFP'.

There are many purposes in education.

Then 'quality' is organising to achieve, and actually achieving, those purposes.

This gives a single, significant meaning to the word 'quality'.

A key principle that guides many recent tertiary education reforms is “autonomy with accountability”. Hersh (2011) believes that ‘accreditation is the answer to quality only if we take it seriously’.

His explanation of that is for institutions to define clear outcomes and then report on them equally clearly – again, a fitness-for-purpose approach, implemented through an EQA of the audit type.

Institution responsible for autonomy  
and  
EQA responsible for accountability

Or

Both parties have some responsibility for both  
characteristics.

The role of the EQA in autonomy is to exercise its authority in such a way that the institutions' autonomy is not unreasonably curtailed.

The role of the institution in accountability is to behave so conscientiously and with integrity in pursuit of its purposes that the EQA's validation of the institution's performance requires only a very simple and inexpensive evaluation.

The greater the adverse impact of failure, the more oversight, checking and recording is necessary

## Examples of ways in which HEIs devalue their currency of qualifications:

- Lower admission including low language requirements
- Easy pass requirements
- Increased credit (eg combined degree in 4 years, not 5)
- Increased credit (eg a masters in one year in a discipline different to the bachelor)

- Not following – even not knowing - the national qualifications framework
- Giving double credit for a single qualification
- Tempering criticism of donors / sponsors (eg drug companies)

Hence, external checking is necessary and appropriate, not superfluous, nor insulting.



I have often begun presentations on the work of AUQA or other EQAs by observing that  
'quality is not what EQAs do – quality is what HEIs do'.

This is still true, but the conclusion of the above argument is that

'accountability for quality' is what both institutions and EQAs do.

# 3. Institutional Perspectives

## *Relevance*

QA systems should support and enhance the academic work, including supporting and being relevant to academics themselves – and this must be true not only of the EQA but of the INTERNAL quality system also.

They must also be relevant to students and other stakeholders.

It is inevitable that some of the consequences of an external quality agency affect the average HEI staff member in a top-down way.

Avoid superficial compliance

Take advantage of the QA context to achieve improvement.

Quality culture



EQA staff should constantly reflect on the likely impact of the EQA's actions and requirements on individual HE staff and their work.

EQAs should be firm yet relevant and supportive to the institution staff they affect.

## *Impact*

The reasonable requirement that EQAs not be too intrusive can be problematic for EQAs as they are expected to have some impact on institutional behaviour.

And furthermore, while the EQA can reasonably be judged on whether it has held institutions accountable, it is not solely – or even primarily – responsible for institutional improvement – that is the task of the institution itself.

Obviously, an EQA can perform better or worse, but there is an analogy here to teaching and learning.

Teachers should be judged **partly** on whether they do the generally accepted right things as teachers, and **partly** on subsequent student performance and achievement.

Similarly, EQAs should be judged **partly** on their adherence to good practice and **partly** on the achievement of the pre-set objectives.

Check that the institution has processes related to the PIs, so it can rectify matters if the PI targets are not achieved.

Need for records of actions taken

Trust must be balanced by checking.

Psychology says that 'trust begets trustworthiness' – but it does not beget infallibility.

The need for an audit trail.



## Self-Review

Therefore, to go with the above model of external checks of PIs, the institution itself should be monitoring the PIs annually (or more often); and every five years or so carry out the thorough sort of self-review, supported by external reviewers, that they usually do now in preparation for external audit.

## Separate self-review from external review

If the institution's system is good and performing well, the institution only needs to report to the EQA the results that prove this.

On this model, the self-review might more naturally follow the external check, rather than being part of the preparation for it.

The distinction between self-review (mainly improvement) and external review (mainly achievement) has developed organically at AUQA.

AUQA staff do the external review and the sector-wide capacity-building work, while institutions draw on AUQA-trained auditors as the external expertise and experience to assist with their self-reviews.



# 4. The Basic Questions

Questions such as

‘what is the effect of EQAs?’, or ‘how effective are EQAs?’  
open the door to blaming EQAs.

But what are EQAs for?

A better question is ‘how best do we ensure the  
achievement and improvement of quality in HEIs?’.

This shows that HEIs and EQAs both bear the responsibility  
– with the former bearing the greater.

The actual achievement of quality is the responsibility of the institutions, so is quality improvement – though external bodies, including the EQAs, can assist institutions to improve, because of their expertise in quality and quality systems.

Self-review should primarily be seen as an instrument for institutional self-knowledge and improvement rather than a preparation for external review.

The right preparation for external review is to have solid and incontrovertible evidence of institutional achievement.

In summary,

the role of the EQA is to measure achievement, in successive 'snapshots', and note the trends between snapshots (or, better, validate institutions' self-reports of achievement).

the role of the HEI is to ensure that the trends are in the right direction.

## *New Ideas*

Because HEIs and their activities are constantly changing, EQAs should constantly be alert for new ways of checking their achievements.

Is it time to move away from the standard 'self-review, report, visit, report' sequence? – despite its just having been built into requirements such as the EQAR!

The EQA is on a journey, with each institution and with the sector as a whole.

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A white rectangular sticky note is pinned to a yellow background. The note is slightly wrinkled and has a purple pushpin at the top left corner. The text "Thank you!" is written in a bold, dark blue font in the center of the note. The background is a solid yellow color with some faint, thin lines on the left side.

**Thank you!**