



center of accreditation and quality assurance  
of the swiss universities

## **Workshop on Institutional Quality Audits Zurich, 1/2 December 2003**

Summary of readings, lectures and group work

### **Working Definition Quality Audit**

*Hämäläinen, Kauko et al., ENQA workshop reports No. 1, 2001:*

"Quality audit is concerned with an institution's processes for quality assurance and quality enhancement. The underlying theme in quality audits is the question: How does an institution know that the standards and objectives it has set for itself are being met? More specifically, on what evidence is the assessment on the quality of its work based and are the procedures in place to ensure that the significant processes are followed up and continuously improved? (...) The point of departure in quality audits is a sense of the concept of quality as a dynamic force."

Quality audits are used to measure the effectiveness of the internal quality procedures in place at higher education (HE) institutions; the assumption is that a quality assurance system is in place and working: the "innocent until proven guilty" model (results of group work).

Open questions:

Can the working definition as stated be applied to the quality audits that have been launched in various European countries (N, S, Fi, F, CH, etc.)? What are the similarities and the differences between "audits", "evaluations" and "accreditations"? What is the difference between an "institutional audit" and a "quality audit"? Which quality concept forms the basis for audit processes (e.g. fitness of purpose)? What kind of quality does the term "quality" cover (knowledge, teaching, etc.)?

### **Aims and purposes**

It is necessary to reflect on the purpose, aims and consequences of audit programmes:

- Who is given the mandate to carry out an audit? In what framework does an audit take place?
- What target groups are involved: government, HE institution, students, society?
- What are the aims: Establish accountability, promote changes in institutions, evaluate effectiveness and/or promote internal quality mechanisms, promote innovation, or promote a quality culture?
- What will be the consequences? Are there consequences on funding, licensing and recognition, other/no consequences?

Most audit programmes (N, CH, UK, S, F) have an accountability and a quality improvement function. Accountability is the main purpose in many countries. Institutions have to demonstrate the effectiveness of internal quality procedures and make improvements. Often there is a link between audits and national legislation and therefore audit results can have serious consequences (N, CH, UK). In most cases, there is more than one target group: government, HE institutions as well as students/society. To achieve improvement trust is required as is intense dialogue between QA agencies, auditors and HE institutions.

Open questions:

Can the two functions "accountability" and "improvement" be combined, and if yes, how? Can real improvement be achieved if HE institutions fear external assessment or fear being penalised because of an audit? Can quality audits satisfy all target groups? What are the

incentives for participation in audits? Who should initiate quality audits? Is the approach of QA agencies sufficiently dynamic and future oriented (EUA)?

## Scope

A difference is apparent between quality audits (N, CH, S) and institutional audits (UK, F). The focus of quality audits lies on mechanisms established by the institution itself to guarantee good quality teaching/learning and research. Governance, leadership and strategy of the institutions are all of importance as the responsibility for QA lies within the institutions. Institutional audits could include further domains linked to teaching and learning (such as R+D, infrastructure, student life, equity, internationalisation, employment studies, cooperation, services, etc.). It is difficult to cover all areas in one institutional audit, thus the scope of an audit may change in time so that all areas are covered eventually.

Open questions:

How can we be sure that teaching and learning quality is affected/improved by the HE institution's internal quality assurance mechanisms? Are quality audits alone sufficient? Do additional quality assessments have to take place at programme level? To what extent must these be outcome/competence oriented? How can a quality culture be established as opposed to a compliance culture? How can routine be avoided?

## Procedures

A comparison of the different audit programmes presented in Zurich reveals many procedural similarities (see also Annex 1):

- a) 3-step procedure (self-evaluation, external evaluation, publication).  
Sometimes the on-site visit is divided into two parts (e.g. UK, EUA). There is no self-evaluation in the current Norwegian system. This system relies on the HE institution's documentation and records (a good QA-system would provide sufficient data). EUA: 4-step instead of a 3-step model (self-evaluation, external evaluation, publication, follow up)
- b) Duration of visit: 2 to 5 days (CH, EUA, N, S, UK)
- c) Experts, their role and composition of teams:
  - Number of experts: 4 to 7
  - Role: experts should not be censors, trust and humility is necessary (results of group work)
  - Selection criteria: leadership expertise (CH, EUA, S), QA expertise (CH, N), change management expertise (group work)
  - Discipline-specific expertise is not required
  - Training: perceived to be useful (group work) but so far only introduced rarely (UK, EUA, N)
- d) Student participation: seen as particularly important. Separate self-evaluation already used in UK; members of expert group in S, N: heavily debated during the workshop.
- e) Dialogue with HEI about audit topics: F, EUA
- f) Interview partners: all relevant stakeholders (all countries)

- g) Reference points/criteria: used in most countries (CH, N, F, UK)
- h) Documentation is vital in quality audits (results of group work)
- i) Expert report: strengths / weaknesses / recommendations (in UK confidence level)
- j) Duration of audit: 9 to 15 months (CH ↔ UK, F)
- k) Validity of result: 3 ↔ 6 years (S, CH, UK, N)
- l) Follow up: essential and useful step (result of group work, ISO)
- m) Respect P-D-C-A-cycle (ISO, EFQM)

#### Open questions:

How and to what extent should students be involved in the audit procedures? What input can students provide at different stages of the procedure? Should students write an independent report? What is perceived as the optimal composition for an expert team? Should students, professionals be included in the team? Is disciplinary expertise necessary or even problematic? To what degree is training in the methodology and the objectives of an audit required, and what type of training should experts receive? Who has the responsibility / what are the necessary prerequisites to write the report?

#### Reference points / Indicators for QA systems

⇒ situation in N, CH, S and results of group work:

- Legal basis for quality audits
- Transparent, well structured organisation of the QA system
- Integration of the QA system into a university's overall strategy
- Link to leadership/governance/operational management
- QA system should be a "backbone" and cover all areas of an institution
- Mechanisms / measures of QA (e.g. internal evaluations in education & research, integration of education & research, research policy, teaching policies, staff recruitment/development, equal opportunities, internationalisation, resources & outcomes)
- Involvement of stakeholders (students, faculty and management at all levels) in development and execution of QA-processes
- Information about QA / about results (e.g. teaching assessments / internal evaluations)
- University reporting system (provision of basic statistical data)
- Effectiveness of the QA mechanisms? Success indicators (quality criteria for departments and institutions)? Self-evaluation should reveal improvement at programme level. Internal QA system should have mechanisms to detect bad quality but also to initiate innovation at programme level.

For examples of Norway and Switzerland, see Annex 2



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**Open questions:**

How open / detailed should reference points be? How to allow for flexibility; how are cultural differences taken into account? What are good indicators for QA processes at university, department, programme and project level? What leadership is meant (on all levels of an institution)?

**Transfer of concepts from ISO / EFQM (results from group work)**

Some concepts from both systems may be transferable. ISO 19011 is generally more suitable for repetitive processes (e.g. QA in management and logistics), EFQM is more dynamic, flexible, puts focus on improvement, can be applied to education. Both systems call for strong leadership, broad stakeholder involvement and the use of success indicators.

QA agencies active in higher education should build up their own systems taking account of the ISO 19011 and EFQM concepts to improve their processes (e.g. ethical awareness, etc.). Taking in ISO or EFQM as such is not useful since these are not adapted to the academic context (many constraints not present in industry, more flexibility needed).

## Annex 1

### Comparison of audit procedures

Step		F	S	N	UK	CH
1	Self-evaluation on the basis of:	x references or standards	x ?	basic requirements / frame of reference	x reference points / code of practice	x basic requirements / questions / points of reference
	Documentation: results of internal QA system	?	?	x	?	x
	Third-party information used additionally	x		x		
	Separate self-evaluation report by students				x	
	Students in self-assessment team required				x	
2	External on-site review	x	x	x	2 x	x
	Duration of visit	?	3-5 d	2-4 d	3 + 5 d	1 <sup>1/2</sup> -2 d
	Number of experts		5-6	4	4-7	3-4
	Selection criteria for experts			x	x	x
	Students interviewed	x	x	x	x	x
	Students in audit teams		x	x		
3	Publication of report	summary	x	x	x	x
	Decision (basis) Consequences	? state recognition	? ?	frame of reference licence to open new programmes	standards funding	points of reference funding
	Interval between audits	?	3 years	6 years annual internal quality reports	6 years (3 years brief visit)	4 years annual internal quality reports
	Links to accreditation / programme evaluation			accreditation	discipline / programme review	accreditation

## **Annex 2**

### **Basic requirements for quality assurance systems: examples Norway and Switzerland**

#### Norway (NOKUT)

- QA system is well integrated and firmly linked to steering and management
- QA system provides the necessary information
- The information is analysed and disseminated to the appropriate levels of responsibility and management
- Routines exist for the utilisation of knowledge in measures that are directed at improvement and development
- The quality assurance system is evaluated internally and developed in compliance with specific needs of the HE-Institution

#### Switzerland (OAQ)

- The quality assurance system at a university / academic institution should cover both quality control and quality development.
- Quality assurance must be an integral part of the university / academic institution's overall strategy, cover all subunits and be applied systematically
- The results of internal and external evaluations and of other QA measures must be used continuously to improve the quality of teaching and research
- The efficacy of quality assurance measures must be evaluated periodically by external experts (This is covered by the summary quality evaluations carried out by the OAQ).