



# Success Factors in the Implementation of Quality Assurance Systems: Institutions and Agencies

Quality Assessment Conference, Tehran  
27 April 2011

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## Abstract

Success in implementing a national quality system depends on actions by the external quality agency (EQA) and actions by the institutions themselves (in addition to the government).

In order to plan and create an EQA, there should be focused group workshops and broad national level consultations. Consultation with stakeholders can lead to Consensus-building about the system and the processes involved in its creation and operation, and Confidence within and without academia in the total QA system. Creating a credible and trusted QA system is a process that can last quite some time, not an action that is over quickly. Stages in the process can be tagged as Apprehension, Approval, Appreciation, and Appetite.

The institutions themselves should develop an institutional philosophy, and must define quality, quality assurance, and quality system in a way that resonates with the institution and its staff. The institution must provide leadership and development, eg through a quality unit, but must ensure that attention to quality is integrated, not added nor 'stand-alone'.

Overall, what is needed is 'the seven Cs':

- Clarity of purpose
- Consistency of purpose between the internal and external quality processes
- Integration of the quality concept and processes into the normal activities of the institution (Concept)
- Training ('Coaching')
- Rewards ('Compliments')
- Seek Comments and take steps to improve in response to these
- Constant Communication

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### Agency actions

1. A major purpose for EQA is to strengthen internal QA (IQA).

AUQA, which was created in 2001, developed its audit process in a way that has strengthened the institutions

AUQA made it clear that it would be a supportive EQA. AUQA wrote not only a Mission Statement, Objectives and Vision, but also committed itself to the following Values:

- Thorough: AUQA carries out all its audits as thoroughly as possible.
- Supportive: recognising institutional autonomy in setting objectives and implementing processes to achieve them, AUQA acts to facilitate and support this.
- Flexible: AUQA operates flexibly, in order to acknowledge and reinforce institutional diversity.
- Cooperative: recognising that the achievement of quality in any organisation depends on a commitment to quality within the organisation itself, AUQA operates as unobtrusively as is consistent with effectiveness and rigour.
- Collaborative: as a quality assurance agency, AUQA works collaboratively with the accrediting agencies (in addition to its audit role with respect to these agencies).
- Transparent: AUQA's audit procedures, and its own quality assurance system are open to public scrutiny.
- Economical: AUQA operates cost-effectively and keeps as low as possible the demands it places on institutions and agencies.
- Open: AUQA reports publicly and clearly on its findings in relation to institutions, agencies and the sector.

AUQA aimed to reinforce the good things already in place in institutions. For example, it emphasised systematic self-review (in advance of external audit), as this strengthens internal mechanisms

AUQA's focus on the internal institutional quality systems helped to embed them

2. AUQA engaged the institutions in the development of the EQA system.

The ED visited all institutions over the first 18 months of AUQA's existence. Other extensive consultations took place. Transparency in all the activities enhanced the acceptability of the final strategy and approach. Academics were involved in decisions about and the work of the Agency, giving them a stake in its success and a level of comfort that it would be compatible with the academic enterprise.

It is not only academics and academic institutions that must be satisfied with the QA process for it to be a success. AUQA also involved other people from various backgrounds in discussing quality issues to enhance the insights of the group process. A multi-pronged approach is more likely to garner the support of both academia and the external stakeholders



i. At the creation of an EQA, there are many institutions that question the need for it. 'Is our own internal QA not enough? We have quality mechanisms – are they not good enough? We have always been concerned about quality. Of course we are a quality institution.'

Questions are raised about the whole philosophy of EQA. There is apprehension and resistance. An external system is seen as encroaching on institutional autonomy.

There is also concern about the effects a negative quality assessment might have on an institution's image and financial position, and on employers' opinions of the institution's graduates

ii. When the inevitability of the EQA has been accepted and approved, the second type of question is whether the system will work. Operational details are questioned. 'Will it add value?' At this stage, it is necessary for the EQA (and its owners, proponents, supporters) to demonstrate the value of an EQA system.

iii. Even if an EQA system is deemed to be necessary, and it is acknowledged that it could work, it may be seen as an intrusion.

AUQA's way of working overcame these barriers.

iv. AUQA has adopted an 'extended peer review' approach. By this we mean that judgements about academia are being made by academics (so there is confidence that the judgements are valid) and people from industry and overseas (so there is confidence that the judgements are not biased). Institutions are consulted in AUQA's selection of the peer groups, and institutions are also invited to provide comments on them after the audit.

Peer evaluation means that an independent group says how good (or otherwise) the institution is, so the institution does not need to 'blow its own trumpet'.

AUQA stressed the autonomy of institutions in relation to what they must do to achieve high quality. AUQA involved the institutions, so as to develop ownership of the process. Note that the actual ownership of the EQA and the way the owner(s) behave affects this. The EQA may be owned by a government that is known to be antagonistic to universities. It is more difficult for institutions to feel part of such a process than if the government is seen to be positive about and supportive of the HE institutions.

AUQA instilled confidence in the institutions. If possible, give institutions the security of a lack (or minimisation) of adverse consequences.

AUQA also stressed diversity. The quality audit approach means that all institutions can be different from the others, each institution can be evaluated in its own terms, with benchmark comparisons, yet without homogenising.

3. AUQA held trial audits to help eliminate any initial errors and consequent adverse effects, and made some fine-tuning changes to the audit process as a result. This reinforced the image of AUQA as an agency that listens to its clients.



4. AUQA produced manuals and guidelines, for auditors and HEIs, and in all cases drew on an extended network of stakeholders, including from the institutions. Interaction with and input from international stakeholders ensured AUQA's international credibility and contributes to a robust system, enabling it to operate satisfactorily in the new global environment.

The contributors within the institutions became a nucleus of change agents for more robust internal QA systems.

5. AUQA's auditors are drawn from academia and industry, in Australia and overseas. Before appointment to AUQA's Register of auditors, they must attend a two-day training. The auditors are very senior people (deputy vice-chancellors, company directors) yet all report that the training is valuable.

The trainees, and the VCs of their universities in the case of academic auditors, recognise the great value of this training for internal university purposes. VCs who have no trained auditors on their staff often ask AUQA if they may nominate a staff member as an auditor. Any spare places on AUQA's auditor training courses are quickly snapped up, including by participants from overseas. Not only are trained auditors an invaluable QA resource for their universities, they are also ambassadors for AUQA and for the benefits of EQA.

Serving on an audit panel is valuable professional development for the auditors.

AUQA maintains the objectivity of the peer evaluation through its procedures, including extensive feedback and self-monitoring (both during and after the audit process), through attention to objectivity of peers, inter-team consistency, taking account of the nature of the institution, and rigorous implementation of procedures.

6. AUQA's success has mobilised more institutions.

Institutions have shared the benefits of the system, conferring with each other on the nature of their self-review reports, and using AUQA auditors to conduct internal reviews.

7. Incentive of globalisation

Increasing numbers of institutions are realising the value of having some sort of external review that is internationally recognised. For some institutions it is because they are located in a country whose national QA system is rudimentary or not well known outside the country. For other institutions it is simply to add a further dimension of international recognition.

The approach adopted can be accreditation by a national body in another country (very often the USA), review under the management audit system of EUA, the 'internationalisation quality process review' of IMHE (also implemented by EUA), ISO9000, AACSB / EQUIS, and so on. None of these can be effectively embarked on without the existence of an internal QA system that includes systematic internal self-review processes.

This consideration also provides an incentive for institutions to support the creation and maintenance of a credible and widely-respected national QA system.



8. AUQA has demonstrably changed in response to feedback - this has given confidence to the institutions, who appreciate the value and support of AUQA.

Examples of change points include

- trial audit results
- introduction of affirmations
- communication strategy
- removal of request for Action Plans
- revision of auditor training
- public register of auditors

9. Other agency actions

Self-monitoring of EQA itself – AUQA methods

Consistency – AUQA methods

Data interpretation

Agency attitude to institutions

Achievement / improvement

Role of agency in institutional QI – workshops, publications, capacity-building, sharing good practice, benchmarking, etc

10. Independence

Independence and autonomy of the agency is important for its judgements to be acceptable and widely accepted.

11. Further expectations

Success does not lead to a conclusion, but generates in the institutions an appetite for further assistance. QA can come to be seen as the solution for everything. This poses a challenge for EQAs to recognise their own limitations, and resist the temptation to expand their scope of operation inappropriately.

12. AUQA Feedback

Positive comments from Australian VCs

Positive comments from NSAI's – cf nature of external review

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### **Institutional actions**

1. Need for awareness raising among the institutions. Need to encourage them to see the value of the EQA.  
Commitment by VCs/CEOs – note four TQM principles

2. Workshops on how to do self-review - OADRI  
Advice on the data needed for self-monitoring  
Advice on selection of a ‘dashboard’ of the major KPIs. Balanced scorecard.  
Workshops on IQA systems  
IQA systems that can act as EQAs for the constituent and affiliated colleges?

3. Develop an institutional QA philosophy.

In doing so, have an eye to the external political and educational environment, both national and international

Define quality, QA, and QA system in a way that resonates with the institution and its staff

Ensure that the QA system applies both to academic areas and functions and to support areas and functions.

4. Be specific

Enable staff to understand the relation of ‘quality’ to what they do

Engage academic staff in discipline-related discussion, as that is what they find most relevant, even if the external process is more focused at institutional level

Invite staff to describe what is meant by ‘quality’ in their discipline or area of activity. Then have them describe how they achieve it, how they know they achieve it, and how they improve what they do.

5. Integration

Make explicit that attention to quality does not necessarily imply another layer of work on top of the current academic and administrative responsibilities – that it is likely that a lot of what is already done is high quality and it is being done systematically: ‘been speaking prose all my life’

Of course, cannot gloss over that there will be faults, errors, failures that need attention

6. Quality unit, network etc

Set up a quality office/quality unit, but make it clear that this is NOT ‘where quality is done’. Analogy is with the staff development unit or a teaching and learning unit: that unit does not do all the teaching, but assists academics



with their teaching. Analogously, the quality office is not responsible for the whole quality of the institution, but can advise on quality systems and how to use them.

Establish a 'quality contact' in each department or area. At one level, these people will be channels for information on the quality achieved, and the means for improvement. It is important that they be two-way channels, and that the centre listens to them, and that they are not merely used to disseminate the information that the management or quality office wants the staff to know, or they will be seen simply as propagandists – and many will object to this role.

Those who are agreeable can be designated as 'quality champions', but this should not (initially) be a required part of the role, as it can be hard work to defend quality concepts against sceptic.

Together, the quality contacts form a 'quality network' for the institution. This network can meet from time to time to discuss new ideas, mechanisms, sources, problems, etc. This is a major way in which the institution can visibly consult its staff and be seen to involve them in quality matters.

Network meetings should not be too frequent – all the people in the networks have much else to do. It may be useful to have an institutional 'quality committee' that is a subset of the network – especially if the network is big.

However, remember that the quality committee or network are not the only people or group responsible for quality. Quality should be an item on the agenda of most existing committees, so that the necessary quality procedures are considered in the right context, and the quality of all activities is explicitly addressed.

The quality unit, and the committees with quality on the agenda, are responsible for translating the quality considerations into the 'normal activities' of staff and the institution, so quality is not an added extra burden (that will soon be neglected or forgotten),

The quality unit is responsible for QA training, awareness-raising and capacity-building, eg

- The ADRI concept and how it can be used in different settings, both to plan and review.
- Other quality frameworks
- Selecting and using indicators
- Benchmarking – why and how?

## 7. Tactics

With any innovation, there will be early adopters: they should be supported and rewarded, and incentives given to increase the number of such people, and hence the overall acceptance of the processes.

Perhaps introduce 'quality awards', or better, have awards for good quality in specific areas, such as teaching, community engagement, etc.

Celebrate and reward quality events and outcomes.



What is celebrated, ie what is the subject of quality procedures must be widely seen as important academically (avoid the table-setting problem)

8. The internal / external boundary

AUQA's GPDB is such a celebration on a wide canvas: institutions gain kudos from inclusion.

Consistency between internal and external quality requirements and processes is essential.

### **Conclusion – the Seven Cs**

- Clarity of purpose
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Acknowledgement: This presentation has benefited from valuable contributions by my colleague, Dr Antony Stella.