

Note on the types of external evaluation

An important issue in quality assurance of higher education is the terminology, the meaning of the various terms used and their widely accepted interpretation. There have been several attempts at clarifying concepts, see e.g. the glossary initiated by INQAAHE and made by Lee Harvey. (<http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/>) This short note is to present the three major types of QA in HE, highlighting the differences between them.

First, a citation from the *European Standards and Guidelines*:

„The term 'quality assurance' in this report includes processes such as evaluation, accreditation and audit.“ (ESG, p. 6., http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_v03.pdf, underlining added)

It must be mentioned that there are also some other terms used for denoting QA activities. At another place the ESG says: External QA activities „may involve evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities and should be part of the core functions of the agency. (ESG, Guidelines to standard 2.6.3, p. 23.)

But since „review“ and „assessment“ are used rather in a general meaning, in this note I concentrate on „evaluation“, „accreditation“ and „audit“.

I. Evaluation

The major characteristics of evaluation are the following:

Focus of investigation:

the actual operation of the given HEI / faculty / study programme
(including management, teaching and learning, quality of staff and students,
attainment of learning outcomes, student services, infrastructure and resources etc.)
This is a **subject level investigation**.

Reference points:

- mission, goals of inst./program, and/or
- predefined aspects of investigation or criteria (the latter **defined not as minimum criteria**)

Report:

- description (context, methodology, HEI / programme)
- analysis + judgements
- conclusions, recommendations

Results, consequences:

- evaluative judgements
- not making any decision, only recommendations

Follow-up:

not necessarily built-in

Intentions:

- **quality enhancement**
- external view (publicity)

II. Accreditation

The major characteristics of accreditation are the following:

Focus of investigation:

the actual operation of the given HEI / faculty / study programme
(including management, teaching and learning, quality of staff and students,
attainment of learning outcomes, student services, infrastructure and resources etc.)

This is also a **subject level investigation**.

(There is no major difference in this respect between evaluation and accreditation!)

Reference points:

- predefined criteria (+ mission, goals of HEI / progr. in cases)
- **minimum, “threshold” requirements** (Here is one of the major differences between evaluation and accreditation.)

Report:

- description (context, methodology, HEI / programme)
- analysis + judgements
- conclusions, **proposal for accreditation decision** (+ recommendations as an option)

Results, consequences:

- **accreditation decision** (yes-no) (+ conditions to be met as an option)
 - + recommendations (as an option)
- Results are based on evaluation!

Follow-up:

usually built-in

Intentions:

focus on **accountability**.

III. Audit

„Auditing is independent external evaluation to ascertain whether a QA system conforms to its stated objectives, is effective and fits its purpose. Auditing does not address the objectives or the results of operations as such but evaluates the processes that the HEI uses to manage and improve the quality of its education and other activities.

(FINHEEC Audit Manual, p. 31., underlining added)

It must be noted that both “*evaluation*” and “*audit*” are sometimes used in a general sense, like „*review*“. The precise usage of the term „*audit*“ however, corresponds to the definition given above.

The major characteristics of an audit in HE are the following:

Focus of investigation:

the **QA system and QA mechanisms** of the given HEI / faculty / study programme

(no direct investigation of teaching and learning etc.)

This is a **meta level investigation**.

(This is the major difference between evaluation and accreditation on the one hand, and audit on the other.)

Reference points:

- (predefined) criteria and/or targets
- emphasis on QA procedures and documentation

Report:

- description (context, methodology, **QA of HEI / programme**)
- analysis + judgements
- conclusions, **proposal for audit decision** (+ recommendations as an option)

Results, consequences:

- **audit decision** (passed or re-audit), certificate
- + recommendations (as an option)

Follow-up:

in case of re-audit

Intentions:

focus on **internal QA system!**

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