



Putting the 'A' into Quality

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March 2009

Several words related to quality begin with the letter 'A'. In theory, they are distinct, but in practice they shade into one another. Also, different people and organisations use them slightly differently. The following is one set of definitions.

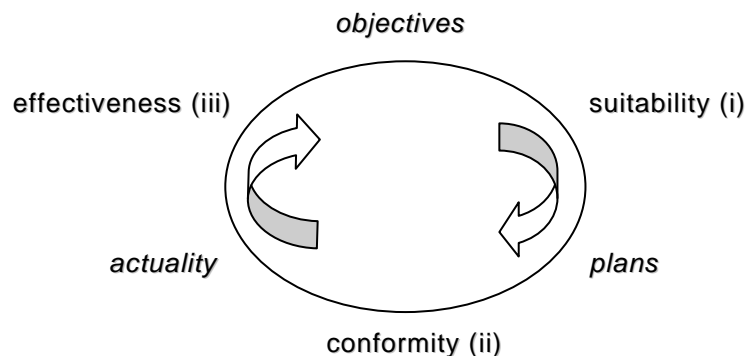
1. Audit

A check on an organisation's explicit or implicit claims about itself. When an institution states objectives, it is implicitly claiming that this is what it will do, and a **quality audit** checks the extent to which the institution is achieving its own objectives. When an organisation publishes its financial reports, it is making explicit claims about itself, and **financial audit** checks the veracity and credibility of these reports. When the claims are explicit (as in financial reporting or if the institution has done a self-quality-audit), audit becomes a **validation** (or otherwise) of those claims.

Audit asks "are your processes effective?" (ie in achieving your objectives)

The **output of an audit is a description** of the extent to which the claims are correct.

ISO defines **quality audit** as a three-part process, checking the **suitability** of the planned quality procedures in relation to the stated objectives; the **conformity** of the actual quality activities with the plans; and the **effectiveness** of the activities in achieving the stated objectives. That is, quality audit looks to find the followed loop closed:



This quality loop is often referred to using the initials OADRI, for Objectives, Approach (ie plans), Deployment (ie the actual activities), Results (the consequences of all this planning and activity) and Improvement. Improvement refers to what is done if the loop is not closed (ie adjust the objectives or plans or deployment) or if it is closed (perhaps set more ambitious objectives)

2. Assessment

An evaluation that results in a grade, whether numeric (eg. %, 1-4), literal (eg. A-F) or descriptive (excellent, good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory). There may or may not be a pass/fail boundary somewhere along the grade spectrum.

Assessment asks “how ‘good’ are your outputs?”

This requires a definition of ‘good’. Since there are many definitions, the more relevant matter may be ‘who has the responsibility and authority for defining ‘good’?’.

The **output of an assessment is the grade.**

An assessment is sometimes called an **evaluation**.

3. Audit and assessment

Thus, the core difference between audit and assessment is in their outputs: their processes may be the same, in the sense that both investigate the achievement of objectives. The **nature** of the investigation would depend on the nature of the objectives.

The public impact of assessment can also be affected by the number of dimensions used. Grading on a single dimension lends itself to the production of a ranking (of institutions, departments, etc.) with the associated results and problems.

4. Accreditation

An evaluation of whether an institution qualifies for a certain status. The status may have implications for the institution itself (eg. permission to operate) and/or its students (eg. eligibility for grants) and/or its graduates (eg. qualified for certain employment).

Accreditation asks ‘are you ‘good’ enough (in various ways) to be ‘approved?’’, that is, ‘are you fit to be approved?’’, where ‘approved’ implies admission to some category (eg. qualifying for Title IV funds, graduates accepted as qualified engineers, etc.)

In theory, the **output of an accreditation is a yes/no or pass/fail decision**, but gradations are possible, usually in the context of a transitional phase (towards or away from ‘pass’). Thus, assessment and accreditation can both result in one of several scores on a linear scale. Accreditation is also called **licensing** or **registration**

5. Relation between the terms

i. We can compare the three concepts at this level, as follows:

Activity	Output	Comment	
Audit	Description	same process,	
Assessment	grade (may inc. pass/fail)	different output	different foci, but
Accreditation	yes/no (or finer distinction)		similar output

ii. Another way of expressing the relationship between them is as follows, noting that audit does not normally comment on the **appropriateness** of the objectives, but accreditation does; audit does not **measure** the outcomes, but assessment does. Thus we have:

Objectives appropriate	Plans suitable	Actions conform	Actions effective	Outcomes measured
accreditation				
	audit			
		assessment		

iii. The three terms can also intersect as follows: following an **audit**, which has determined the extent to which the institution's claims are valid, this extent may be indicated by a percentage, which turns the audit into an **assessment** as defined above. Now, if qualifying for a certain status is defined in terms of achieving at least a certain percentage of one's claims, then the audit has also been an **accreditation**.

6. Quality assurance (QA)

There are many different interpretations of this phrase. They include the following:

- i. Comprehensive: The policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced. It may include any one or more of the above three 'A' words. (EG AUQA)
- ii. Constrained: Conversely, QA is sometimes used in a more restricted sense to denote the achievement of a minimum standard. In the USA, it is the core accreditation. This is probably the most logical meaning: ie what ASSURES quality. Quality improvement etc is then something different.
- iii. Accountability: akin to this, quality assurance means accountability, achievement of minimum standards, and does not include quality enhancement

- iv. Quality improvement: in this meaning, accreditation again denotes the achievement of a minimum standard, but QA is not accreditation but 'everything else', primarily quality improvement or quality audit (eg Australian states)
- v. Processes and results: QA = the processes (quality audit) plus the results (quality assessment) (eg UK's QAA)
- vi. Public relations: whatever is needed to assure the customer. This has a sense of window dressing – there is no need for substance in QA (eg a public glossary)

7. Augmentation

Accreditation is a gatekeeper role. It is no criticism of an accreditor to observe that it has nothing to say to an institution that is very far above the quality threshold.

Quality improvement (QI), whether from below or above the accreditation threshold, is a different issue, and in some systems they are carried out by different agencies. However, as accountability and QI are closely linked, it is probably more sensible to have the same EQA sensitively attempting both than to try to separate them firmly. Also, in checking for achievement of the threshold, an accreditor gains experience of what is good and effective, and can assist institutions to improve - whether up to or up from the threshold.

However, QI does not need the same investigative methods as accreditation or audit or assessment. Accreditation (like most of the external quality review processes) is based on a site visit, but it may not be the best approach to combine strategic and QI considerations with the accountability-oriented accreditation visit. Other possibilities include:

- use the visit for accountability, with separate consultation, training, and research activities for QI; or
- use data checking by correspondence for accountability, with a variety of visits for QI; or
- have temporal separation of the EQA's accountability and QI modes