



QUALITY ASSURANCE COUNCIL

Audit Manual



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FOREWORD

This manual describes the procedures followed in audits of Hong Kong higher education institutions by the Quality Assurance Council (QAC). The manual is intended to guide both institutions and audit panels, and covers all stages of the audit process from preparation for audit to follow-up of audit reports. A major aim of the manual is to enhance the transparency of the audit process.

QAC Audit – An International Practice and Part of a Global Trend

The external assurance of the quality of teaching and learning occurs, in some form, in every continent that offers higher education opportunities. There are longstanding accreditation procedures in the USA, and formal audit processes were initiated in the UK in the early 1990s with the establishment of the Academic Audit Unit, the pre-cursor to the current UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). Many countries now have independent agencies that regularly undertake external quality audits or other form of quality assurance reviews of their universities, e.g. in the USA, Australia (i.e. the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA)), New Zealand (i.e. the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU)), several European countries, and parts of Asia and the Middle East.

A common rationale for external quality assurance is to provide public accountability. The QAC, through its audit process, aims to give confidence, in general, to students and their parents, employers and sponsors, that our institutions provide a quality and internationally recognised student learning experience. The process helps assure that degrees awarded by our institutions are comparable to those offered in overseas jurisdictions. Our audits signal to our international peers that UGC-funded institutions are internationally competitive in higher education, and help attract students and faculty from outside Hong Kong to study and work at our institutions.

While it is important to be aware of and take into account the global trend, the key to our success is the challenge of not simply replicating what others do. Our audit process therefore emphasises the context within which higher education takes place in Hong Kong. Quality enhancement, which leads to continuous improvement, and working in partnership with our institutions, are primary objectives. To this end, the QAC developed its audit procedures in consultation with the higher education institutions in Hong Kong, and their input is reflected in the manual.

FOREWORD

Manual Structure and Acknowledgement

The manual is structured as follows:

- Section 1 gives some historical context to the audit process and defines some of the terms used in the manual.
- Sections 2-4 give an overview of the QAC, the QAC's approach to audit, and the audit process itself.
- Sections 5-9 describe the audit process in detail.
- The Annexes provide further elaboration of some of the operational details.

The procedures described in the manual will come into effect for the first institutional audits, to be conducted in 2008. The QAC has drawn on many sources, including the UGC's past quality-related exercises and the practices of other quality assurance agencies in other countries in drawing up this manual. The QAC gratefully acknowledges the assistance provided by these agencies, in particular the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the AUQA, and the NZUAAU. The QAC is particularly grateful to AUQA for permission to adapt some parts of its audit manual. Since the procedures are new, the QAC may amend them from time to time in the light of experience. Institutions will be advised of any such amendments in advance of affected audits. All changes to procedures will be incorporated in future versions of this manual.

INTRODUCTION

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The UGC is committed to safeguarding and promoting the quality of UGC-funded institutions and their activities. It has performed this role over the years through conducting, *inter alia*, the Management Review (1998-1999), the Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews (1995-1997 and 2001-2003), and the Performance and Role-related Funding Scheme (2004). These reviews/schemes have served to ensure that effective quality assurance (QA) mechanisms were in place in each of the institutions, and have assisted institutions in improving further in specific areas such as the quality of management, student teaching and learning, as well as performance against role.

With the expansion of the post-secondary education sector, the UGC-funded institutions are playing an increasingly active role in the provision of higher education opportunities generally, notably through providing articulation opportunities for sub-degree graduates and self-financed programmes at both undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels. There has also been growing public interest in quality issues. Furthermore, it has become increasingly common in overseas QA practices to include third-party oversight over higher education institutions. Against the above background, the UGC has reviewed its role in this respect and decided to set up a new body under its aegis to assist it in discharging its QA responsibilities. The new body is the Quality Assurance Council (QAC).

1.2 Design of QAC audits

In designing the approach, methodology and processes of quality audit that it will undertake, the QAC has taken cognizance of the past experience of UGC's quality-related exercises.

Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews (TLQPR) of the eight UGC-funded institutions were conducted between 1995-1997 and 2001-2003. The second round of TLQPR¹ confirmed that institutions had made significant progress in enhancing their systems of quality assurance in teaching and learning, increasing awareness of issues associated with the assurance and improvement of teaching practices, and raising the profile of teaching and learning in Hong Kong. QAC audits will take forward and build on the TLQPR exercises.

At the time of introducing QAC audits, the UGC-funded institutions are engaged in at least two major initiatives. The first is preparing for the extension of the normative length of undergraduate programmes, the standard duration of which will be four years from 2012. Institutions are working to enrich students' learning, improve teaching, and change curricula structures to fully benefit from the extended undergraduate study. The second, related, initiative is that of adoption of an outcome-based approach to student learning. These initiatives are being fully embraced by the

¹ See Annex A.5 for a reference to the results of this work.

INTRODUCTION

institutions and, in developing their new curricula using an outcome-based approach, greater emphasis will be given to promoting student learning and supporting the transition, for students, from a teaching to a learning environment.

Institutions, at the time of their first audit between 2008 and 2011, will be at different stages in their preparations for the four year undergraduate degree and in their development of an outcome-based approach to student learning. This will be fully recognised by audit panels. There will be no expectation or judgement of an institution's progress in taking forward these initiatives as part of the audit process.

1.3 Terminology

In this manual, the term **student learning outcomes** (or sometimes simply **learning outcomes**) is used to mean the effect on students of the educational process – that is, the knowledge, skills, behaviours and attitudes which are imparted to students through their learning experiences. This usage is consistent with the UGC's usage of the term, for example in its encouragement of an outcome-based approach to student learning.

The term **objective** is used to mean any goal, aim or desired effect. For the purposes of a QAC audit, an institution's most important objectives are its desired student learning outcomes. However, an institution may have other educational objectives. For example, an institution may have as an objective a particular balance of undergraduate and postgraduate students, or the intake of a certain proportion of international students, or an increase in the number of female students in traditionally male dominated disciplines. Objectives also extend to the various organisational units within an institution. For example, an objective of a staff development unit may be to ensure that all academic staff are familiar with on-line teaching resources, while an objective of a student help desk may be to respond to all queries within a specified time. QAC audits are concerned to know how such objectives contribute to the achievement of desired student learning outcomes.

The term **out-of-classroom** learning relates to any activity undertaken by students literally 'outside the classroom'. This could be co-curricular and undertaken as a formal (and assessed) part of a student's programme of study (e.g. projects, group-work, self-directed learning, work placements, study abroad) or extra-curricular and undertaken in a student's own time and not forming an integral part of a student's programme of study (e.g. voluntary work, organisation of a student society, student representative activities). The QAC recognises these activities are important aspects that contribute to the full student learning experience. Out-of-classroom activities that are co-curricular are quality assured through an institution's normal processes for programme development and review. The extent of extra-curricular activities will vary between individual students. The QAC is therefore interested in how institutions incorporate these varying out-of-classroom experiences into developing a holistic approach to intended student learning outcomes.

THE QAC

2 THE QAC

2.1 Role and activities

The QAC was formally established in April 2007 as a semi-autonomous non-statutory body under the aegis of the University Grants Committee.

The QAC's mission is:

- (a) To assure that the quality of educational experience in all first degree level programmes and above, however funded, offered in UGC-funded institutions is sustained and improved, and is at an internationally competitive level; and
- (b) To encourage institutions to excel in this area of activity.

The QAC has the following terms of reference:

- (a) To advise the University Grants Committee on quality assurance matters in the higher education sector in Hong Kong and other related matters as requested by the Committee;
- (b) To conduct audits and other reviews as requested by the UGC, and report on the quality assurance mechanisms and quality of the offerings of institutions;
- (c) To promote quality assurance in the higher education sector in Hong Kong; and
- (d) To facilitate the development and dissemination of good practices in quality assurance in higher education.

The QAC's core operational tasks, derived from its terms of reference, are:

- (a) the conduct of institutional audits; and
- (b) the promotion of quality assurance and enhancement and the spread of good practice.

The QAC's audit activities cover all first degree programmes and above, however funded, offered by UGC-funded institutions (including their continuing education arms and community colleges). This includes self-financing programmes, joint programmes leading to a Hong Kong award, and the teaching and learning aspects of research degree programmes. The QAC may also undertake quality-related reviews of other institutions as requested by the UGC. The parameters to be applied in such reviews are agreed with all relevant parties beforehand.

THE QAC

2.2 QAC structure

2.2.1 *The Council*

The Council may have up to 9 members, as follows.

- (a) A Chairman, who is a UGC member (or becomes a UGC member once appointed)
- (b) Overseas members (maximum 2)
- (c) Local academics (maximum 2)
- (d) Local lay members (maximum 2)
- (e) Cross-membership with the UGC (2): one is the QAC Chairman and the other may belong to one of the above categories
- (f) The Secretary-General, UGC (ex-officio).

Members are appointed by the Secretary for Education.

2.2.2 *The Secretariat*

The Council is supported by a full-time Secretariat, led by a Deputy Secretary-General, who serves as the Secretary of the Council, under the overall supervision of the Secretary-General, UGC. A member of the Secretariat, who has experience in quality assurance in higher education, assists audit panels as Audit Co-ordinator for each audit. The role of the Audit Co-ordinator is to guide the audit panel and the institution through all stages of the audit, ensuring that approved procedures are followed, and to draft the audit report. The Audit Co-ordinator liaises with the institution on arrangements for the audit, but while actively participating in the audit, is not a member of the panel. The appointment of the Audit Co-ordinator for a specific audit is made in consultation with the QAC Chairman and requires the Council's endorsement.

2.2.3 *Auditors*

The QAC maintains a Register of Auditors, comprising people of appropriate experience who are willing to serve on audit panels. Such auditors are typically

- (a) senior academic or administrative staff (current or recently retired) of Hong Kong higher education institutions (heads of institutions are invited to make nominations); or
- (b) persons from outside Hong Kong (usually from a university or quality assurance agency); or
- (c) lay persons from outside higher education.

THE QAC

Further details of the appointment of auditors to the Register, and of the composition and appointment of audit panels, are given in section 5.3 and Annex B.1.

2.2.4 Relations with other organisations

The QAC is a quality assurance body set up under the aegis of the Hong Kong University Grants Committee (UGC). Its policies and procedures are approved by the UGC, and it advises and reports to the UGC. Despite its formal subordinate status the QAC operates at arm's length from the UGC. In particular, audits of higher education institutions are conducted (within approved procedures) independently of the UGC, and the QAC is responsible for the fairness, balance and accuracy of audit reports. The QAC publishes audit reports and conveys them, with comments, to the UGC.

The UGC has an expert subcommittee called the Quality Group (QG) which predates formation of the QAC and which advises the UGC on the administration and funding of various quality enhancement programmes such as Language Enhancement Grants and Teaching Development Grants. It is envisaged that the QAC will gradually assume some of the QG's monitoring and advisory roles.

The QAC covers degree programmes offered by UGC-funded institutions which have obtained self-accreditation status. The Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ²) focuses on the accreditation of non-UGC-funded (self-financed) institutions which do not have self-accreditation status. There is no formal relationship between the QAC and the HKCAAVQ but both bodies share information and co-operate on matters of mutual interest. In due course, the QAC and the HKCAAVQ may need jointly to discuss quality assurance issues pertaining to the self-financing degree sector.

The Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC) was established by the Heads of the eight UGC-funded institutions to provide peer review of the quality assurance processes of the self-financed sub-degree programmes of those institutions. Its work, concentrating on sub-degree programmes, complements that of the QAC, which is concerned only with programmes at first degree level and above.

² Formerly (prior to 1 October 2007) The Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA).

OVERVIEW OF QAC AUDITS

3 OVERVIEW OF QAC AUDITS

3.1 The QAC's approach to audit

The QAC's approach to quality audit stems from recognition that the higher education institutions in Hong Kong have distinct and varied missions, reflecting the UGC's vision of a differentiated yet interlocking system. The QAC does not attempt to straitjacket institutions through a single set of standards or objectives, but recognises that each institution has objectives appropriate to its mission. The QAC therefore defines quality in terms of 'Fitness for Purpose', where institutions have different purposes which reflect their missions and the role statements they have agreed with the UGC.

The main objective of QAC quality audits is to assure the quality of student learning in UGC-funded institutions. The audits are intended to assure the UGC and the public that institutions deliver on the promises they make in their role and mission statements. A QAC audit is therefore an audit of an institution's Fitness for Purpose in teaching and learning. The audit examines whether the institution has procedures in place appropriate for its stated purposes, whether it pursues activities and applies resources to achieve those purposes, and whether there is verifiable evidence to show that the purposes are being achieved. QAC audits take forward and supersede the Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews (TLQPR) previously applied to UGC-funded institutions.

A QAC audit is not a review against a predefined set of standards. It does, however, oblige institutions to articulate and justify the standards they set for themselves, and demonstrate how the standards are achieved. This point is discussed further in section 3.3.

QAC audits address institutional activities associated with programmes at first degree level and above (including research degrees). The quality of student learning is the centrepiece of audit. The QAC audits research and managerial activities only in so far as they affect the quality of teaching and learning.

The audit model adopted by the QAC has the following characteristics:

- (a) The quality of student learning is the centrepiece.
- (b) There is an emphasis on quality enhancement: audits are intended to help institutions enhance quality rather than penalise them for perceived weaknesses. The QAC constructively engages with institutions and does not position itself to find fault in institutions.
- (c) An audit is viewed as a collaboration between the QAC and the institution: the institution is fully involved in all stages of the audit process.
- (d) An institution's self-accrediting status is recognised: audits are not an exercise in validating or re-accrediting programmes.

OVERVIEW OF QAC AUDITS

- (e) The audit process involves institutional self-evaluation, followed by peer review which makes evidence based findings.
- (f) There is no attempt to make comparisons among institutions.
- (g) Audits attempt to avoid excessive intrusiveness.

With respect to (a) above, the audit process is particularly concerned with the ways institutions articulate and measure the student learning outcomes they expect or aspire to. The UGC encourages institutions to adopt an outcome-based approach to student learning, and the QAC audit process reinforces this objective. The emphasis on learning outcomes is elaborated further in section 3.3 and Annex A.5.

3.2 Audit methodology

The QAC's audit methodology is widely used in Fitness for Purpose audits. The methodology is based around the following four questions, often referred to as Approach-Deployment-Results-Improvement (ADRI):

1. (Approach) What is the institution's purpose?
2. (Deployment) How does the institution achieve its purpose?
3. (Results) What evidence does the institution have that its purpose is being achieved?
4. (Improvement) What processes are in place for improvement?

The ADRI methodology can be elaborated as follows:

1. *What objectives is the institution trying to achieve and on what basis does it set the objectives?*

The audit checks that the institution articulates overall learning objectives which are consistent with its mission and with the role statement agreed with the UGC. The audit examines how these overall objectives are set and justified, and the extent to which they take cognizance of relevant external reference points (e.g. Qualifications Framework descriptors). The audit further examines how the overall objectives are communicated throughout the institution, and the extent to which they are reflected in the desired learning outcomes of individual programmes. The audit also examines how objectives are set for each activity which contributes to student learning (the audit 'focus areas', see section 3.4 below).

OVERVIEW OF QAC AUDITS

2. *How does the institution go about achieving its objectives?*

The means of achieving the desired objectives should be expressed in the institution's plans, policies and procedures, and its activities and deployment of resources should be geared towards achieving its objectives. The audit checks that plans are aligned with desired objectives, and are given effect through appropriate policies and procedures (e.g. on curriculum design and on assessment). The audit also checks that policies and procedures are implemented widely and consistently throughout the institution.

3. *How does the institution measure achievement of its objectives and what evidence is there that the objectives are being achieved?*

The audit examines the adequacy of the measures (e.g. benchmarks, students' achievements, performance indicators) used by the institution to demonstrate that it achieves its objectives in each of the focus areas. Institutions may use a variety of measures, reflecting different objectives. Some objectives may be directly measurable (e.g. graduation rates) while others can only be inferred from proxy evidence (e.g. certain graduate attributes being inferred from employer satisfaction). The audit does not mandate specific measures, but checks that the measures are appropriate to the objectives and are set at an appropriate level. The audit examines the institution's performance against its own measures, and checks that the institution systematically collects and analyses evidence of its performance.

4. *What processes are in place for improvement?*

The audit examines whether the institution analyses its performance in order to effect improvement. If the evidence collected under 3 above suggests that objectives are not being achieved to the extent desired, how does the institution adjust its plans, policies and procedures? If objectives are being achieved, how does the institution modify objectives in order to improve the quality of student learning? The audit checks that there are robust feedback loops from evidence of performance back to planning and implementation.

3.3 Standards and external reference points

Academic standards express the levels of achievement that a student must reach to gain an academic award. In Hong Kong, as in many other countries, the self-accrediting institutions define their own academic standards, but there is public expectation that the standards are in some sense appropriate and comparable with standards elsewhere. QAC audits reflect this public expectation by obliging institutions to articulate and justify the standards they use. The articulation and justification of standards takes place in the context of each institution's mission and role, and is consistent with the Fitness for purpose model of audit.

OVERVIEW OF QAC AUDITS

More generally, a QAC audit examines whether an institution's objectives, procedures and outcomes are informed by appropriate external reference points. External reference points take many forms including codes of good practice, professional accreditation requirements, and employer expectations of graduates. Institutions should use reference points appropriate to their various objectives – the important point is that each institution looks outward as well as inward in setting its objectives, in formulating procedures to achieve those objectives, and in defining measures of achievement. In particular, in setting its academic standards an institution should take account of external reference points such as public and employer expectations, the requirements of professions, and the standards of other institutions in Hong Kong and elsewhere.

For example, an institution's objectives should reflect the role statement it has agreed with the UGC; its procedures should reflect relevant codes of conduct or good practice from Hong Kong or elsewhere; and its outcomes in professional disciplines should reflect the standards required by various professional bodies. At a more detailed level, the objectives, curriculum and learning outcomes of a particular programme may be informed by professional accreditation requirements. Similarly, programme content may be informed by curricula published by international professional societies, and outcomes may be defined in terms of eligibility for graduate study locally or overseas. An illustrative list of external reference points is given in Annex A.5: note that this list is not exhaustive and that the QAC does not mandate the use of particular reference points other than the institution's role statement.

As noted in section 3.2, a QAC audit examines the adequacy of the measures used by an institution to demonstrate that it achieves its objectives. An important element of this examination is the extent to which the measures allow the institution to place its achievement in a broader context, through the use of benchmarks and other comparative data. Information for the assessment of comparative outcomes may come from national or international surveys, from professional bodies, from benchmarking data, or from other systems of measurement developed by the institution. Further guidance is given in Annex A.5.

3.4 The scope of audit: focus areas

Since student learning is the focal point of the audit system, audits examine all aspects of an institution's activities which contribute to student learning quality. These activities range from planning and policy development, through programme design, approval and review, to teaching, assessment and student support. The QAC has selected a set of such activities, common to all institutions, as the 'focus areas' of audit. Each focus area is a significant contributor to student learning quality, and is sufficiently generic that it can be interpreted in a way which is relevant to each institution's activities and practices. Taken together, the focus areas effectively define the scope of a QAC audit.

OVERVIEW OF QAC AUDITS

The eleven common focus areas of audit are:

1. Articulation of appropriate objectives

Rationale: the institution is unlikely to achieve high quality student learning unless its objectives are clearly expressed and well understood by staff.

2. Management, planning and accountability

Rationale: achievement of high quality learning requires good planning, clear management structures, and accountability for achieving objectives.

3. Programme development and approval processes

Rationale: the integrity of programme development and approval processes lie at the heart of an institution's self-accrediting status, and hence at the heart of public confidence in programme quality.

4. Programme monitoring and review

Rationale: monitoring and review are essential to maintaining the quality of programmes; they are also a crucial characteristic of self-accreditation.

5. Curriculum design

Rationale: the quality of the curriculum is a critical contributor to student learning, so it is important to examine how the curriculum is designed (e.g. use of external inputs).

6. Programme delivery, including resources, teaching mode, and the student learning environment

Rationale: student learning depends on how programmes are delivered, on the allocation of sufficient resources, and on the adequacy of the learning environment (e.g. library, IT, student support services).

7. Experiential and other 'out of classroom' learning (e.g. leadership development, overseas exchange, work-integrated learning, service learning)

Rationale: these non-traditional activities are increasingly used to further student learning outside the more narrowly understood programme delivery.

8. Assessment

Rationale: assessment is a major determinant of student learning behaviour and source of information for students and institutions about the achievement of learning outcomes, so it is important to examine whether it systematically reinforces positive learning outcomes.

OVERVIEW OF QAC AUDITS

9. Teaching quality and staff development

Rationale: good teaching is a significant contributor to student learning, so it is important to examine how the institution develops, supports and rewards good teaching by staff.

10. Student participation

Rationale: student participation at various levels in the planning and management processes increases a sense of ownership of the learning experience and improves the quality of learning.

11. Activities specific to research degrees

Rationale: there are some teaching and learning activities (e.g. supervision, examination) which are unique or of particular importance in research degree programmes. Since research degrees fall within the audit scope, it is important to examine these activities. However, audits do not focus on research quality per se, which continues within the remit of the Research Grants Council.

Institutions which engage in activities outside the standard focus areas, which also contribute significantly to learning outcomes, may nominate those activities for inclusion in their audit. However, such activities must be clearly outside the chosen focus areas, and not simply variations in practice (e.g. variations in teaching practice or delivery mode). Inclusion of a nominated area in an audit is at the discretion of the QAC.

Audit panels examine how an institution's practices in each focus area contribute to student learning quality. In each area they apply the underlying ADRI methodology – 'What is the institution trying to do? How is it doing it? What evidence is there of success? What processes are in place for improvement?' The kinds of questions which an audit panel might ask in each focus area are elaborated in Annex A.3.

The focus areas listed above are used across all programmes, including UGC-funded programmes, self-financed programmes and joint programmes. In the case of programmes offered outside Hong Kong the listed focus areas are supplemented by others which relate to activities specific to extra-territorial delivery (see Annex D: Auditing Programmes Outside Hong Kong).

OVERVIEW OF QAC AUDITS

3.5 Sample programme reviews

As part of a QAC audit, the panel examines in depth a sample of programmes to seek evidence that the institution's quality assurance processes are in fact being implemented in practice and that stated outcomes are being achieved. These sample programme reviews are viewed as closer examinations within the wider audit. The eleven focus areas of the audit (section 3.4) are investigated to greater depth in the selected programmes than in the audit as a whole. In a sense, each selected programme is treated as a test case of the institution's performance in the focus areas. For example, staff responsible for the programme may be asked about curriculum design, assessment processes, and how they know that appropriate learning outcomes are achieved. Sample programme reviews are not, however, discipline reviews by discipline specialists, and they are not intended as a means of making cross-sector comparisons of programme quality (because the aims and content of programmes, even within the same discipline, may differ among institutions).³

Programmes are selected for sample review by the audit panel in consultation with the QAC Secretariat. The programmes selected are ones which the panel considers will throw light on various aspects of the institution's educational activities (for more detailed selection criteria, see section 6.1). The number of programmes selected (normally no more than three) is determined by the audit panel.

3.6 Institutional self-review

Since quality enhancement is one of the major aims of the audit process, audits are preceded by a period of institutional self-review culminating in an Institutional Submission to the audit panel. The self-review is an opportunity for the institution to analyse and reflect on its objectives in student learning, on its procedures, standards and benchmarks, and to check that it has appropriate outcome measures in place. There is no prescribed manner in which to conduct the self-review, but the institution should address the audit focus areas and should ask itself questions such as 'What are we trying to do?', 'How are we doing it?', 'How do we know we are effective?', 'How can we improve?' These questions implicitly include consideration of outcomes.

A significant benefit of self-review is that the institution itself is likely to identify areas where it can improve. Indeed, enhancements to quality may stem as much from an honest and thorough self-review as from the findings of the audit panel, which may simply validate and affirm the conclusions reached by the institution.

³ In practice, the programmes selected vary in discipline from audit to audit.

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A major output of the self-review is the Institutional Submission which serves as a principal source of information in the audit. The draft Institutional Submission is submitted to the QAC for feedback about 6 months before the audit visit, and the final Institutional Submission is submitted about 3 months before the audit visit. The structure and content of the Institutional Submission are described in section 5.5.

3.7 Attitudinal approach to audit

One of the principal aims of QAC audits is quality enhancement, both in the institutions audited and across the higher education sector as a whole. This aim is best achieved if each audit is approached as a collaborative exercise between the QAC, represented by the audit panel and the Audit Co-ordinator, and the institution. Institutions will maximise their benefit from the process if they conduct a thorough and honest self-review, engage openly with the audit panel, and accept the panel's findings in a constructive manner. On their part, the QAC and the audit panel approach the audit in a professional and constructive way, exercising peer judgement while respecting the institution's autonomy and ethos.

STAGES IN A QAC AUDIT

4 STAGES IN A QAC AUDIT

The QAC audit process comprises five stages which are summarised below. Full details of each stage are contained in later sections of this manual.

1. Preparation

The QAC audits all UGC-funded institutions on a 4-year cycle, with two audits per year. The schedule of audits is determined by the QAC in consultation with institutions before the start of each audit cycle. Institutions were advised in mid-2007 of the year and approximate timing of their first audit.

The preparation phase includes finalising the date and timeframe of the audit; determination of any additional focus areas; appointment of the audit panel; institutional self-review; and preparation of the Institutional Submission.

2. Preliminary phase

The principal activities in the preliminary phase are as follows:

- An **Initial Meeting** of the panel, which identifies and discusses major issues to be addressed in the audit, selects programmes for sample review, identifies any further information or documents required from the institution (particularly for sample programme reviews), considers whether to visit multiple campuses or programmes offered outside Hong Kong, and considers the categories of person to interview during the Audit Visit.
- A **Preliminary Visit** to the institution by the Audit Co-ordinator and the Panel Chair (or alternate) to discuss the programmes for sample review, discuss arrangements for any visits outside Hong Kong, clarify any further information requirements, discuss the list of potential interviewees, and discuss the schedule and logistics of the Audit Visit.
- **Visits to locations outside Hong Kong** (if any) to examine programmes offered there. The visits are undertaken by the Audit Co-ordinator and at least one panel member, normally accompanied by a representative of the institution.

3. The Audit Visit

During the Audit Visit (which normally lasts 3-5 days, depending on the complexity of the institution and the number of sample programme reviews) the panel conducts interviews with groups of staff, students and other stakeholders, studies documents requested during the preliminary phase or during the visit itself, follows audit trails, formulates and progressively refines its findings, and finally makes a brief oral presentation of its views in general terms to the institution.

STAGES IN A QAC AUDIT

4. Reporting

Audit reports include commendations, affirmations and recommendations, supported by detailed analysis and commentary (see section 6 for more detail). As soon as possible after the Audit Visit the panel provides the institution with a draft report for feedback on any factual errors or misrepresentations. Taking the institution's feedback into account, the panel finalises the report and invites the institution to submit a brief response which is appended to the report. The panel then submits the report to the QAC for consideration, publication and transmission to the UGC. The final report, including the institutional response, is published in full.

5. Follow-up

About 18 months after publication of the audit report the institution is required to submit a progress report on its responses to audit findings, particularly to affirmations and recommendations. The QAC may seek to clarify any issues in the progress report before publishing it and forwarding it with any evaluative comments to the UGC. Comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of institutional actions is part of the next audit.

STAGES IN A QAC AUDIT

Audit Timetable

An indicative timetable of the audit process is given below. The process is overseen by the Audit Co-ordinator (a member of the QAC Secretariat), who acts as the single point of contact between the institution and the QAC and between the QAC and the panel.

Date	QAC	Institution	Panel
A – 9 months	Negotiate audit date with institution Discuss any additional focus areas		
A – 9 months	Select panel (consult institution on possible conflicts of interest)	Conduct self-review Compile Institutional Submission	
A – 6 months		Submit draft of Institutional Submission for feedback from QAC	
A – 5 months	Provide feedback on draft Institutional Submission		
A – 12 weeks		Submit Institutional Submission	
A – 12 weeks	Distribute Institutional Submission to panel members		
A – 9 weeks			Initial Meeting: consider Submission, identify major issues & questions, select programmes for sample review, determine the need for visits outside Hong Kong (if any), identify any further information required
A – 8 weeks	Request further information from institution Advise and seek feedback from institution on programmes for sample review, and on visits outside Hong Kong (also discussed during Preliminary Visit) Construct draft audit schedule, including persons to be interviewed (Panel Chair involved)	Respond to panel selection of programmes for sample review, and sites for visits outside Hong Kong, if any (also discussed during Preliminary Visit)	Chair consulted on audit schedule, interviewees and issues/questions Chair also consulted on any institutional feedback on programmes selected for sample review or for visits outside Hong Kong
A – 6 weeks	Preliminary Visit to institution (subset of panel): Discuss audit schedule, programmes for sample review, visits outside Hong Kong (if any), and interviewees Clarify any further information requirements Discuss venue and logistics		
A – 3 weeks	Visits outside Hong Kong, if any (subset of panel + institutional representative)		
A – 2 weeks	Construct list of issues/questions for each audit session	Provide further information requested Arrange logistics	
A	Audit Visit		
A + 2 to A + 7 weeks	Send successive drafts of audit report to panel members		Return comments on successive drafts of audit report to QAC
A + 8 weeks	Send final draft report to institution		

STAGES IN A QAC AUDIT

Date	QAC	Institution	Panel
A + 10 weeks		Return comments on final draft report to QAC	
A + 12 weeks	Finalise report (Panel Chair involved if necessary) Send report to institution & seek response for inclusion		Chair consulted on final report if necessary
A + 14 weeks		Return institutional response for inclusion in report	
A + 15 weeks	Formally submit report to QAC for consideration and forwarding to UGC		
Approx. A + 4 months	Publish audit report		
A + 21 months	Request progress report from institution		
A + 22 months		Submit progress report	

PREPARATION

5 PREPARATION

5.1 Initiation of the process

The QAC audits all UGC-funded institutions on a 4-year cycle, normally with two audits per year (although the arrangements may vary according to practical considerations at the time). The schedule for each cycle of audits is determined by the QAC on the advice of the UGC and in consultation with the institutions. Factors taken into account include requests by individual institutions, perhaps arising from foreseen major internal changes such as a change of leadership; anticipated external burdens on institutions, such as the '3+3+4' changes to be introduced in 2012; and the need to manage the QAC's workload. Institutions were advised in mid-2007 of the year of their first audit.

Approximately 9 months before the date of the Audit Visit the QAC writes to the institution to initiate the audit process. In particular, the QAC proposes specific dates for key points in the audit process – submission of the Institutional Submission, the Preliminary Visit and the Audit Visit itself. The institution may negotiate minor adjustments to these dates to suit any internal constraints.

At this stage the QAC appoints a member of its Secretariat as the Audit Co-ordinator, and the institution is asked to nominate a person to act as the institutional contact throughout the audit.

5.2 Additional focus areas

The institution is also asked at this stage whether it wishes to nominate any additional focus area(s) for the audit.⁴ Nominated focus areas must be clearly outside the standard focus areas, and not simply variations in practice (e.g. variations in teaching practice or delivery mode). The institution must also demonstrate that a nominated focus area contributes significantly to student learning outcomes across the institution. In deciding whether or not to accept an additional focus area the QAC may discuss the reasons for nomination with the institution.

5.3 Panel selection

About 8 months before the audit visit the QAC starts to assemble a short-list of potential panel members. Panel members are drawn from the QAC's Register of Auditors which includes:

- senior university staff (or retirees) in Hong Kong with broad experience in the practice and management of teaching and learning, and
- persons from outside Hong Kong, usually from a university or quality assurance agency, with audit experience in higher education, and
- lay persons from outside higher education.

⁴ See section 5.5 for another opportunity to nominate an additional focus area.

PREPARATION

A panel normally has five members (with a maximum of seven⁵), with the Audit Co-ordinator acting as panel secretary, but not as a member of the panel. The QAC tries to select panel members with complementary expertise, and to ensure that the panel incorporates expertise relevant to the institution being audited. A panel normally has 1-3 members from the Hong Kong higher education sector, 2-3 academics or quality agency staff from overseas, and at most one lay person. The Panel Chair usually has previous experience of higher education quality reviews. This composition takes into account the need to provide local context and to draw on overseas experience, as well as the operational practicality of the panel. The presence of local academics also reinforces the peer review nature of the audit process.

A short-list of proposed panel members is provided to the institution before membership is finalised, allowing the institution to object to any person on grounds of conflict of interest (see Annex C) or for any other material reason. Potential panel members are also asked to make a statement on possible conflict of interest. The QAC decides whether any perceived conflicts of interest, or any other concerns raised by the institution, are sufficient cause to remove a person from the short-list. The appointment of auditors, Panel Chair and the Audit Co-ordinator for a specific audit are subject to endorsement by the Council.

5.4 Self-review

As part of its preparation for audit, the institution is required to review all of its operations which contribute to the quality of student learning. This self-review is an opportunity for the institution to analyse and reflect on its objectives for student learning, on its procedures, standards and benchmarks, and to check that it has appropriate outcome measures in place. The self-review also forms a basis for the Institutional Submission to the audit (see section 5.5). The institution should start the self-review at least 9 months before the date of the audit visit.⁶

The QAC does not prescribe how to conduct the self-review, but the institution should ask itself questions such as 'What are we trying to do?', 'How are we doing it?', 'How do we know we are effective?', 'How can we improve?' These questions should be asked in the general context of the institution's educational objectives and also in the specific context of each of the audit focus areas. For example, in the context of the institution's overall educational objectives the institution might ask itself:

- What student learning outcomes are we trying to achieve? What kind of graduates are we trying to produce, and why? How do our desired learning outcomes relate to our mission and to the role agreed with the UGC? What standards do we have in place, and how are they derived? Are our desired learning outcomes reflected in all programmes?

⁵ The greater number may be required for a very complex institution (e.g. with large extension or self-financing arms).

⁶ Although the date of the audit visit may not be known until 9 months beforehand, the institution knows the year of audit well in advance (see section 5.1).

PREPARATION

- How are we trying to achieve our desired student learning outcomes? How do our plans align with our desired outcomes? Are our policies and procedures appropriate and widely understood? Are our policies and procedures followed consistently throughout the institution? How do we know?
 - How do we know we are achieving our desired student learning outcomes? What measures (quantitative or qualitative) do we have in place? Are they appropriate? Do the measures relate to benchmarks or other external reference points? How do we collect evidence of performance? What does the evidence tell us?
 - How do we respond to what the evidence tells us? What feedback mechanisms do we have in place? How do we know they work? How do we raise aspirations and standards?
- Similarly, in each focus area the institution might ask:
- What are our objectives in this area? Why are they appropriate, and how do they contribute to student learning outcomes?
 - How are we trying to achieve our objectives in this area? Is this the best way? Are our policies and procedures followed consistently throughout the institution? How do we know?
 - How do we know we are achieving our objectives? What performance indicators or other measures do we have in place? Are they appropriate, and why? What does the data or other evidence tell us?
 - How do we respond to what the evidence tells us? How do we identify and rectify problems? How do we raise standards?

A significant benefit of the self-review is that the institution itself is likely to identify various aspects of its activities which it can improve. In terms of quality enhancement, much of the value of the audit process can come from a thorough and honest self-review. Endorsement by the audit panel of the institution's own findings can be a powerful stimulus to improvement.

The self-review should inform the Institutional Submission, which serves as a principal source of information in the audit.

PREPARATION

5.5 Institutional Submission

The Institutional Submission is the major written source of information for audit panels. It is a document in which the institution articulates its desired outcomes, demonstrates the extent to which it achieves them, and describes its mechanisms for improvement. In keeping with the Fitness for Purpose basis of audit, the QAC does not prescribe a detailed format for the Institutional Submission, since the varying nature of institutional objectives and procedures is difficult to capture in a standard way. However, in developing the Institutional Submission, institutions should adhere as closely as possible to the broad guidelines on its structure given below.

To avoid wasted effort, and to ensure adequacy of the Institutional Submission, the institution submits a draft of the Institutional Submission to the QAC about 6 months before the audit visit.⁷ The final Institutional Submission is due about 3 months before the audit visit. The Audit Co-ordinator does not evaluate the draft Institutional Submission in any auditing sense, but simply checks that it adheres to the guidelines and that all focus areas are adequately addressed. The Audit Co-ordinator advises the institution on apparent omissions and on where clarification may be needed. This early interaction between the Audit Co-ordinator and the institution enhances the formative and collaborative nature of the process and can increase the institution's sense of involvement.

The institution, as a result of its self-review and the drafting of the Institutional Submission, may find that it wishes to nominate an additional focus area of audit. Such a late nomination is regarded as exceptional, but if adequately justified by the institution, will be considered by the QAC in the way described in section 5.2.

The Institutional Submission should be presented as two parts – the **Main Submission** and the **Supplementary Material** – described below. To contain the effort required by the institution and the audit panel, the Main Submission should be limited to 12,000 words, plus any relevant statistical and other data. The institution is required to provide 7 hard copies of the Institutional Submission and one electronic copy (e.g. on CD or similar medium).

Broad guidelines on the structure of the Institutional Submission are given below: details of the suggested content are given in Annex A.1.

Part A: Main Submission

Section 1: Introduction to the Institution

The aim of the introduction is to convey a thumbnail sketch of the institution – its origins, role, scope, size, and structure.

⁷ The submitted draft should be only the Main Submission together with a list of items expected to be in the Supplementary Material (see below for an explanation of these terms).

PREPARATION

Section 2: Overview of the Teaching and Learning Quality Assurance System

The aim of this section is to give an overview of how the institution assures the quality of student learning.

Sections 3-N: Focus Areas

These sections should address the audit focus areas (section 3.4), including any additional areas agreed between the institution and the QAC.

Section N+1: Conclusion

This is an optional section in which the institution may wish briefly to highlight the major points or otherwise summarise the Institutional Submission.

References

A list of references to all documents mentioned in the Main Submission.

Part B: Supplementary Material

This includes key institutional and external documents which are referred to in the Main Submission.

PRELIMINARY PHASE

6 PRELIMINARY PHASE

The preliminary phase is the period from receipt of the Institutional Submission to the start of the Audit Visit. During this phase the audit panel does all the work necessary to prepare itself for the visit, and the institution and the Audit Co-ordinator together make the necessary logistical preparations. Any visits outside Hong Kong are also conducted during this phase.

6.1 Initial Meeting of the Panel

On receiving the Institutional Submission the Audit Co-ordinator forwards a copy to all members of the audit panel. About 3 weeks later (9 weeks before the Audit Visit) the panel holds its Initial Meeting in Hong Kong. All members, including overseas members, attend in person. The business of the Initial Meeting, which normally lasts a full day, is as follows:

1. The Audit Co-ordinator reminds panel members of the QAC's audit procedures.⁸ Members are also reminded of their respective roles in the audit process (Annexes B.3-B.5).
2. The panel discusses the Institutional Submission in detail, identifying major issues or questions to be addressed during the audit.
3. The panel selects programmes for sample review, using criteria including the following (see also section 6.2, point 1):
 - relevance – the extent to which a programme may shed light on any major audit issues the panel has identified
 - distinctiveness – the extent to which a programme breaks new ground or employs innovative modes of delivery
 - diversity – selection of programmes in diverse areas (e.g. engineering and humanities) or of diverse types (e.g. self-financing and publicly funded) to provide distinctive samples to examine
 - significance – the size of a programme in terms of staff, students or resources, or its strategic importance to the institution's future
 - recent review – to examine whether a programme which has been recently reviewed (by the institution or by an external body) has adopted any changes recommended
 - coverage – the extent to which the QAC wishes to enhance its knowledge of a wide variety of programme types (the QAC's perspective is provided by the Audit Co-ordinator)
 - any particular circumstances of concern or interest to the QAC (any such circumstances are conveyed by the Audit Co-ordinator).

⁸ Panel members have previously undergone mandatory preparation.

PRELIMINARY PHASE

Since the audit is not a discipline review, there is no attempt to select programmes in the same discipline areas in all institutions.

4. The panel identifies any further information or documents required from the institution, and whether such information is needed before or at the Audit Visit. Some of the information will relate to the programmes selected for sample review (e.g. programme approval or review documents⁹, entry and graduation data, student feedback). The panel may also seek relevant information from a source other than the institution (e.g. UGC data, or EDB employer survey results). Such requests are serviced by the QAC provided the information is in the public domain, and the Audit Co-ordinator informs the institution of the information supplied.
5. If the institution operates in more than one location the panel considers whether to extend the Audit Visit beyond a single location (usually the principal campus). To simplify the logistics and minimise travel time, the panel will confine the Audit Visit to a single location unless it considers there are significant benefits in doing otherwise. In some cases the panel may decide to cover other location(s) in the Preliminary Visit (section 6.2) rather than in the main Audit Visit.
6. The panel considers whether to visit any locations outside Hong Kong at which the institution offers programmes. Relevant factors include:
 - significance – the size of the programme in terms of staff, students or resources, or its strategic importance to the institution's future
 - risk – the likelihood and consequences (for both students and the institution) of a failure in the teaching or quality assurance arrangements with the partner outside Hong Kong
 - practicality – the practical issues associated with visiting one or more locations outside Hong Kong in the time available.

Procedures for auditing programmes outside Hong Kong are detailed in Annex D.

7. The panel considers which persons to interview during the Audit Visit and the proposed length of each meeting. In most cases interviewees are selected according to their positions or roles in the institution. In some cases the panel may give discretion to the institution to select individuals who meet specified criteria (e.g. a sample of final year students in a particular programme, a sample of recently appointed staff in a variety of disciplines). In the case of students, the panel may indicate how it wishes the institution to select them (e.g. by random selection from the relevant enrolment list).

⁹ The panel interprets such documents in the context in which they were written.

PRELIMINARY PHASE

Following the Initial Meeting the Audit Co-ordinator writes to the institution to inform it of:

- the programmes selected for sample review, with brief reasons
- any further information or documents required from the institution, and whether such information is needed before or at the Audit Visit
- the location(s) in Hong Kong which the panel suggests for the Audit Visit (usually only the principal campus)
- any locations to be visited outside Hong Kong, with an indication of the programmes of interest, and brief reasons
- the set of potential interviewees for the Audit Visit, with a draft interview schedule.

Each of these issues is discussed with the institution during the Preliminary Visit (section 6.2).

6.2 Preliminary Visit

About 6 weeks before the Audit Visit the Audit Co-ordinator and the Panel Chair (or an alternate panel member) conduct a Preliminary Visit to the institution. The purpose of the Preliminary Visit is to prepare the ground for the Audit Visit by discussing detailed arrangements and clarifying any uncertainties. Arrangements for any visits outside Hong Kong are also discussed during the Preliminary Visit. In cases where the institution operates in more than one location in Hong Kong the panel may decide at its Initial Meeting to incorporate one or more of the secondary locations into the Preliminary Visit (the Audit Visit is normally confined to the principal location). In such cases the Audit Co-ordinator will notify the institution in advance.

The topics covered during the Preliminary Visit are as follows (an agenda is provided by the Audit Co-ordinator beforehand):

1. Programmes for sample review. The programmes selected by the panel for sample review are discussed and confirmed. If in some instance the institution considers that another programme better meets the panel's expressed reasons for selection, or meets some institutional need for attention, it may suggest that programme as an alternative. The final choice rests, however, with the panel.
2. Visits outside Hong Kong. The locations and programmes of interest for any visits outside Hong Kong are confirmed. Again, the institution may suggest alternative locations or programmes which might better meet the panel's requirements, but the final choice rests with the panel. The timing and detailed arrangements for the visits are also discussed. Procedures for auditing programmes outside Hong Kong are detailed in Annex D.

PRELIMINARY PHASE

3. Draft schedule and interviewees. The draft schedule for the Audit Visit is discussed in detail. The institution may suggest amendments to better meet the needs of the panel or which arise from its own constraints (e.g. its ability to assemble external stakeholders at particular times). The list of interviewees is also discussed, with the panel representatives checking that the panel has selected the most appropriate people for each session. In some cases the panel may have misunderstood an individual's role and the institution may suggest an alternative. Where the panel has given discretion to the institution to select individuals (section 6.1, point 7) the panel representatives ensure that the institution understands the kind of person the panel wishes to interview.
4. Further information requested by panel. The panel representatives clarify, if necessary, any requests for further information, and check that the institution is able to provide the information requested.
5. Arrangements for the exit meeting. The panel representatives ensure that the institution understands the purpose and nature of the exit meeting (section 7.6), and the institution indicates which senior staff are likely to be present.
6. Venue for Audit Visit. The panel representatives inspect the venue proposed by the institution for interviews and panel discussions. Typical requirements for the venue and for other logistical arrangements are detailed in Annex A.2.

Following the Preliminary Visit the Audit Co-ordinator writes to the institution to confirm the outcomes and the arrangements made.

6.3 Visits outside Hong Kong

Any visits to locations outside Hong Kong are made in the period between the Preliminary Visit and the Audit Visit. The institution (in consultation with the Audit Co-ordinator) is responsible for making arrangements for the visits, including any necessary liaison with partners. The visits are conducted by the Audit Co-ordinator and a member of the panel. They are accompanied by a representative of the institution who ensures that the arrangements go smoothly but does not take part in any auditing activities. Procedures for visits outside Hong Kong are detailed in Annex D.

Information obtained during visits outside Hong Kong informs panel discussions during the Audit Visit. If necessary, the information is cross-checked with the institution during the Audit Visit.

THE AUDIT VISIT

7 THE AUDIT VISIT

7.1 Overview

The purpose of the Audit Visit is to allow the panel to test the material presented by the institution through first-hand investigation and personal interactions. The visit allows the panel to clarify and interpret the material it has been given, to examine evidence, and through meetings with staff, students and other stakeholders, to verify that policies and procedures are carried out in practice. The visit is organised so as to allow the panel sufficient time to pursue documentary audit trails and to form valid, evidence based judgements about the institution's processes and outcomes.

During the Audit Visit the panel:

- interviews staff, students and other stakeholders
- peruses documents requested at the Initial Meeting, the Preliminary Visit, or during the Audit Visit itself
- progressively reflects on and discusses the written and verbal material so far presented
- progressively refines findings and draft recommendations
- gives a brief oral presentation of its findings during an exit meeting with the institution's leaders.

The Audit Visit lasts for 3 to 5 days, depending on the complexity of the institution and the number of sample programme reviews undertaken. An indicative Audit Visit schedule is given in Annex A.2.

7.2 Interviews

The purpose of conducting interviews is to clarify written material, to gain the perspectives of different stakeholders, to verify that policies and procedures are carried out in practice, and to seek evidence of outcomes. Potential interviewees are identified by the panel at its Initial Meeting, and the list is finalised after consultation with the institution at the Preliminary Visit.

To gain a wide variety of inputs, interviews are usually conducted with groups of interviewees (normally no more than eight at a time). Typical interviewees are:

- the President (Vice-Chancellor) and selected members of the Council, including lay members: these persons are responsible for setting and monitoring the institution's strategic directions and desired outcomes

THE AUDIT VISIT

- senior staff responsible for developing teaching and learning policies and overseeing implementation, including members of key committees and those with responsibility for staff development and educational development
- staff responsible for managing individual programmes (e.g. programme and subject co-ordinators)
- heads of academic departments (or similar units) with responsibility for resource allocation and staff supervision
- teaching staff at various levels and with various degrees of experience, including recently appointed staff
- managers of student support services, and others who contribute to the student learning experience
- members of student representative bodies and student members of relevant committees
- students in a variety of programmes, both undergraduate and postgraduate, from Hong Kong and elsewhere
- graduates, recent or longstanding, from a variety of programmes
- external stakeholders, such as employers and representatives of professional bodies.

Interviews are typically scheduled in sessions up to 45 minutes. Some meetings may be longer, depending on the participants involved and the topics to be covered. A draft schedule is agreed at the panel's Initial Meeting, for subsequent discussion with the institution. In each session the panel will have a set of particular issues and questions it wishes to address, and the Chair will direct the session so as to achieve the panel's aims. Despite the need for efficiency, interviews are conducted in a friendly and receptive manner. To help people selected for interview, the QAC prepares briefing notes on the nature and style of interviews which the institution may wish to distribute beforehand.

Interview sessions have most value if questions are answered frankly and honestly. To encourage frankness, the panel does not reveal outside a session what is said by any individual, nor are individuals identified in the audit report. The institution is encouraged to require the same degree of confidentiality from interviewees.

THE AUDIT VISIT

7.3 Informal sessions

In some cases the panel may wish to meet stakeholders (e.g. students, employers) in a less formal setting than an interview. In such a case the panel will ask the institution to arrange a buffet lunch or similar event at which each panel member can sit with a group of stakeholders and discuss issues of interest with them. An informal session of this kind allows the panel to sample a wider range of stakeholder views than is possible in a formal interview.

Arrangements for any informal sessions will be discussed with the institution during the Preliminary Visit.

7.4 Sessions on request

As indicated above, the panel schedules meetings with a wide variety of people who are identified either by the panel or by the institution. The panel also reserves time to meet any individuals or groups who have not been identified in this way but who wish to meet the panel. This ensures that all interested parties are able to put their point of view to the panel, even if not formally selected for interview.

The institution is asked before the Audit Visit to advertise to all staff and students the availability of such sessions 'on request'. To ensure that all requests are met, the length of a session 'on request' is limited to 15 minutes, and the panel may need to conduct some sessions in parallel by splitting into smaller teams. For scheduling and planning purposes the panel requires that persons requesting such sessions provide in confidence a brief written summary of their intended topic of discussion by the start of the Audit Visit.

As with interviews, the proceedings of sessions 'on request' are confidential.

7.5 Panel deliberations

The Audit Visit schedule incorporates periods for panel discussion and reflection. During these periods the panel progressively refines its findings. Findings are evidence based, drawing on information in the Institutional Submission and other documents and on the information obtained in interviews and other interactions. The panel does not base its findings on the opinions of single individuals (staff, students or other stakeholders), and it often designs interview questions so as to corroborate (or otherwise) information it has already obtained.

As well as the scheduled discussion sessions, the panel may also work over lunch or in the evenings. To maximise the periods available for discussion and to maintain the integrity of the audit process, the panel (and individual members) does not accept offers of hospitality from members of the institution and such offers are not expected. Arrangements for lunch and other refreshment are made during the Preliminary Visit.

THE AUDIT VISIT

7.6 Exit meeting

At the end of the Audit Visit the panel holds an exit meeting with the Vice-Chancellor/President (or delegate) and any other senior staff the institution wishes to include (likely attendees are discussed during the Preliminary Visit, section 6.2). The purpose is to give immediate feedback to the institution, as well as providing appropriate closure to the visit. The Panel Chair gives an overview of the panel's draft findings and an indication of areas where the panel may make commendations, affirmations and recommendations. Because the panel may not yet have fully refined its views the Chair presents no detailed justifications, and the oral presentation does not prejudice or constrain the content of the final written report. The presentation is an opportunity for the institution to hear the panel's preliminary views, but not an occasion for rebuttal or debate.

7.7 Feedback

Soon after the Audit Visit the Audit Co-ordinator seeks feedback from the institution about the preparation for and conduct of the audit, with a view to improving the process over time. After completion of the audit report (section 7) the Audit Co-ordinator seeks similar feedback from panel members.

THE AUDIT REPORT

8 THE AUDIT REPORT

8.1 Format

The audit report presents the panel's findings, supported by detailed analysis and commentary. Findings are presented for each of the audit focus areas, as well as for the institution as a whole. Where appropriate, the findings are expressed as:

- **commendations** of good practice
- **affirmations**, which recognise improvements the institution is already making as a result of its self-review
- **recommendations** for improvement.

Programmes selected for sample review (sections 3.5, 6.1) are treated during the audit as test cases of the institution's performance in the audit focus areas. The evidence obtained from the sample reviews, and any conclusions about the programmes, are incorporated into relevant parts of the audit report.

The report also contains an executive summary which may be useful for the general public and the media.

Finally, the institution has an opportunity to prepare a brief response to the report, which is included as an appendix.

A schematic overview of the report is given in Annex A.4

THE AUDIT REPORT

8.2 Fairness, accuracy and balance

While the report expresses the findings of the audit panel, ownership rests with the QAC as the body which is accountable to the UGC, the institutions and the public for the integrity of the audit system. The QAC is therefore ultimately responsible for the report's fairness, accuracy and balance. The means by which the QAC discharges its responsibility include:

- audit procedures based on the well-tried ADRI methodology (section 3.2) and which emphasise seeking and validating evidence from multiple sources (Annex B.8)
- selection of panels with appropriate preparation and experience (Annex B.2)
- avoidance of conflict of interest (section 5.3 and Annex C)
- appointment of the Audit Co-ordinator from the QAC Secretariat
- interaction with the institution during preparation for audit (sections 4 and 5)
- opportunity for the institution to comment on the draft audit report and to include an institutional response in the final report (section 8.3)
- scrutiny of the audit report by the QAC before publication (section 8.4).

8.3 Production

The Audit Co-ordinator produces the audit report by incorporating panel members' feedback into a succession of drafts. When the panel has agreed on a definitive draft the institution is given the opportunity to point out any factual errors or apparent misrepresentations, and to request removal of any information it considers confidential or sensitive.¹⁰ The institution's feedback is considered by the Audit Co-ordinator in consultation with the Panel Chair when finalising the report. Since the QAC owns the final report (section 8.2), the Audit Co-ordinator has ultimate responsibility for resolving any (unlikely) disagreements on the content of the report which are unable to be resolved within the panel.

Once the report is finalised, the Audit Co-ordinator invites the institution to submit a brief response (1-2 pages) for inclusion as an appendix. The Audit Co-ordinator aims to complete the report within 14 weeks of the Audit Visit.

¹⁰ The opportunity to request removal of sensitive information is a safety mechanism unlikely to be needed in practice, since the Audit Co-ordinator and the panel observe the QAC's policy on privacy and disclosure of information (Annex E).

THE AUDIT REPORT

8.4 Consideration by the QAC

The final report, including the institutional response, is submitted by the Secretary, QAC, (on behalf of the panel) for consideration by the Council. The Council approves the report for publication (section 8.5) and forwards it with the Council's comments to the UGC. In making its comments the Council follows the protocol below:

- The QAC accepts the report as the work of an expert panel, and does not question the findings. The QAC does, however, assure itself that approved or agreed procedures have been followed (section 8.2), and that the institution has been given a 'fair hearing' during the audit process.
- To differentiate clearly between the quality assurance role of the QAC and the funding role of the UGC, the QAC makes no recommendations or other comments on the funding of the institution.
- The QAC may draw the UGC's attention to particular strengths, areas for improvement and examples of good practice revealed by the audit.
- The QAC may interpret particular findings in the context of quality assurance in the local higher education sector as a whole.
- The QAC may comment on the institutional response included in the report. If the institution substantively disputes the audit findings the QAC attempts to form a view on whether the institution's response is justified.¹¹
- The QAC may point out any issues on which it thinks the UGC may want to act (section 8.6), and may suggest what non-financial action the UGC might take, (e.g. quality improvement measures on a sector-wide basis, and/or in respect of a particular institution).
- The QAC may indicate how it intends to use the audit findings to inform its own quality enhancement activities.
- The QAC may comment in any other fashion which is consistent with the points above.

In making its comments the QAC draws on its experience of conducting previous audits and on its overview of quality assurance across the higher education sector.

¹¹ The QAC may consult the Audit Co-ordinator and/or the Panel Chair. If the QAC is unable to form a confident view it simply says so.

THE AUDIT REPORT

8.5 Publication

After consideration and approval by the QAC (section 8.4) the audit report, including the institutional response, is published in full.¹² Publication meets public expectations that the institution is accountable and the audit process is transparent. Confidential or private information which may have been disclosed during the audit is protected through the QAC's policy on privacy and disclosure of information (Annex E). The institution is advised a few days before publication so that it may make any preparations, including preparing a media statement, that it wishes.

8.6 Consideration by the UGC

The UGC considers the audit report together with any comments from the QAC (section 8.4). The UGC's approach is to support and encourage the institution, and to remediate any problems, rather than to penalise it for any shortcomings.

After considering the report the UGC writes to the institution to acknowledge that the audit has occurred and to convey its comments on the major findings. If the institution has disputed an audit finding, the UGC may (on the advice of the QAC, section 8.4) indicate whether it accepts the finding and expects the institution to take action.

If an audit reveals an issue of major concern, the UGC may seek discussion with the institution without waiting for the normal progress report (section 9.1) and may invite the institution to take quick improvement measures. Such a response occurs only if the UGC considers that there is significant reputational danger to the institution or to the sector as a whole, or where there are grounds to believe that UGC funds are being used inappropriately.

¹² Publication includes placing the report and institutional response, including Chinese translations, on the QAC website and notifying the media.

FOLLOW-UP

9 FOLLOW-UP

9.1 Progress report

Since one of the principal aims of audit is quality enhancement, the QAC expects that the institution will act on the findings in the audit report. Indeed, the institution's sense of professionalism and care for its reputation will motivate it to do so. The QAC expects the institution to implement the audit recommendations unless there are good reasons (such as a significant change in circumstances) not to do so. The QAC therefore requires the institution to submit a progress report on its responses to audit findings, particularly its actions with respect to affirmations and recommendations for improvement, within 18 months of publication of the report. The progress report may give an overview of the institution's actions, and should detail for each affirmation and recommendation in the report:

- the action(s) taken by the institution
- the person(s) or body responsible
- the date by which the action has been (or is expected to be) completed
- the means by which the institution will assess the effectiveness of the action.

The institution should justify any case where no action has been taken.

9.2 Consideration by the QAC

In considering the progress report, the QAC plays both an evaluative role and a facilitative role. On the one hand the QAC needs to be assured (and hence able to assure the UGC and the public) that the institution is taking appropriate actions for improvement. On the other hand the QAC seeks to help the institution enhance its quality assurance capabilities. The QAC therefore assesses the adequacy of the institution's actions in response to the audit and offers advice (if appropriate) on how the institution's response could be more effective. As part of this process the QAC may seek further information or clarification from the institution, and may ask the institution to modify the progress report accordingly. The QAC may also consult the Panel Chair.

The QAC then publishes the progress report on its website, and forwards the report and the QAC's comments to the UGC. In making its comments the QAC:

- respects the institution's autonomy
- makes no recommendations or other comments on the funding of the institution
- indicates satisfaction or otherwise with the actions taken by the institution, and highlights any areas where it considers the institutional response to be inadequate

FOLLOW-UP

- interprets, where relevant, particular actions in the context of similar actions taken by other institutions or in the context of quality assurance in the Hong Kong higher education sector as a whole
- draws to the UGC's attention any issues on which the QAC thinks the UGC may want to act
- indicates how any institutional action may inform its own quality enhancement activities.

In making its comments the QAC draws on its experience of conducting previous audits and on its overview of quality assurance across the local higher education sector.

9.3 Consideration by the UGC

The UGC considers the progress report together with any comments from the QAC (section 9.2). If the UGC is satisfied by the progress made in implementing audit affirmations and recommendations it acknowledges the efforts made by the institution.

If the UGC considers that the institution has not responded adequately to the audit findings it enters a dialogue with the institution in an attempt to resolve the issue.

9.4 Subsequent audit

The audit report and the institution's progress report are provided to the panel which conducts the next QAC audit of the institution. That subsequent audit considers, among other issues, the actions taken by the institution in the intervening period and seeks evidence that the actions have been effective.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

ANNEX A: FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

A.1 Content of the Institutional Submission

The Institutional Submission should be presented as two parts – the **Main Submission** and the **Supplementary Material** – described below. To contain the effort required by the institution and the audit panel, the Main Submission should be limited to 12,000 words, plus any relevant statistical and other data. The **suggested** content for each part of the Submission is outlined below.

Part A: Main Submission

Section 1: Introduction to the Institution

The aim of the introduction is to convey a thumbnail sketch of the institution – its origins, role, scope, size, and structure. Content should include:

- a brief history of the institution (e.g. date of foundation or conferral of self-accrediting status, antecedent institutions, significant shaping events) intended to convey where the institution has come from
- the institution's role as agreed with the UGC, and any other statement of mission or goals
- the range of programmes, including UGC-funded, self-financing, joint and those offered outside Hong Kong
- key data about the institution, including student load (by programme and in total), number of staff, annual revenue by source, and number and location of campuses
- organisational structure: faculties, schools, departments, administrative units, support services
- governance and management structures: key committees and lines of responsibility.

The institution may also include other information it considers relevant, but should bear in mind that this is an introductory section and avoid unnecessary detail.

Section 2: Overview of the Teaching and Learning Quality Assurance System

The aim of this section is to give an overview of how the institution assures the quality of student learning. Content should include:

- the institution's objectives in teaching and learning, how they are derived, and how they relate to the institution's mission and role (this might include reference to a statement of graduate attributes, or some other description of the learning outcomes the institution aspires to achieve)

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

- the principal mechanisms by which the institution attempts to achieve its teaching and learning objectives, and in particular its desired student learning outcomes (this might include reference to major policies on staff, resources, teaching methods, learning modes and external input)
- the measures (quantitative or qualitative) by which the institution judges its success, and why those measures are relevant (this might include reference to student assessment, benchmarks, professional standards, or other external reference points)
- a summary and brief analysis of the institution's recent performance against the chosen measures
- the mechanisms in place for enhancing performance, including a description of major feedback loops
- any points for improvement identified in the self-review.

This section should take a whole-of-institution view and should avoid excessive detail by referring where appropriate to more detailed descriptions in the following sections, which relate to particular audit focus areas.

Sections 3-N: Focus Areas

These sections should address the audit focus areas (section 3.4), including any additional areas agreed between the institution and the QAC. Generally speaking, each section will address a single focus area, but the institution may choose to combine two or more focus areas in a single section (perhaps because the institution handles the areas in a particularly integrated way to achieve a particular student learning outcome) or to subsume one area into several others (e.g. areas 1 or 2 could be subsumed into relevant parts of all the other sections). Whatever format is chosen, the audit panel must be able to identify clearly the information relevant to each focus area.

The audit of programmes outside Hong Kong involves consideration of additional focus areas (Annex D). These focus areas need not be addressed in separate sections in the Institutional Submission – they may be subsumed into relevant parts of other sections or, if the institution has significant activity outside Hong Kong, they may be combined into a single additional section concerned with extra-territorial programmes.

Each section should set out:

- the institution's objectives for that focus area, how the objectives are set, and how they contribute to student learning outcomes
- the ways in which the institution tries to achieve those objectives

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

- the evidence it has of success, including any performance indicators it uses (and justification of their relevance)
- the processes in place for improvement
- any points for improvement identified in the self-review.

The content of each section should reflect the QAC's emphasis on outcomes and improvement. The section should indicate whether and how external reference points are used, particularly in assessing success. Wherever possible, quantitative data should be presented either as a time series (indicating a trend over time) or as a comparator (indicating performance relative to an external reference point).¹³ Each section should also illustrate processes for quality improvement by providing examples of how perceived deficiencies have led to specific improvements.

Institutions will naturally give different emphases to the various focus areas, reflecting the importance of each area in achieving the institution's desired learning outcomes. For example, an institution with little postgraduate research activity may devote comparatively little space to focus area 11 '*Issues specific to research degrees*'. Conversely, an institution with a large number of self-financing programmes may wish to describe in some detail how it ensures that adequate resources are devoted to programme delivery (focus area 7).

Section N+1: Conclusion

This is an optional section in which the institution may wish briefly to highlight the major points or otherwise summarise the Institutional Submission.

References

Throughout the Main Submission, appropriate reference should be made to relevant institutional or external documents. The form of referencing (e.g. footnotes, side-bars, end-notes) may be chosen by the institution, but references should be sufficient to allow the audit panel to locate the corresponding documents if they wish. References to Web documents should ensure the URL is up to date.

Key documents should be included in the Supplementary Material, described below.

¹³ Graphical presentations of data (e.g. graphs, histograms, pie charts) are usually easier to interpret than numerical presentation (e.g. tables). If convenient, data may be presented as Appendices to the Main Submission rather than embedded in the text.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

Part B: Supplementary Material

This includes key institutional documents (e.g. role statement, assessment policy) which are referred to in the Main Submission. It may also include key external documents (e.g. statement of professional standards, extract of external review report) referred to in the Main Submission. The institution needs to exercise some judgement in deciding which of the documents referred to in the Main Submission are sufficiently important to include in the Supplementary Material¹⁴. Some guidance is provided below.

Guidance on Supplementary Material

Documents in the Supplementary Material must be labelled SM1, SM2, SM3, etc., together with a brief title (e.g. SM1: Role Statement). These labels must be used for referencing the documents in the Main Submission.

Not every document referred to in the Main Submission need be included in the Supplementary Material. Indeed, to do so would be impractical, since the number of such documents will generally be large. Rather, the Supplementary Material should be limited to those documents which the panel is most likely to wish to peruse in order to fully understand the Main Submission. Clearly the institution needs to exercise some judgement in deciding which documents to include. The institution is helped in this by the Audit Co-ordinator, who offers comments at the draft Institutional Submission stage.

The institution may also be helped by the following guidelines, which are advisory only – they cannot be definitive as institutions vary in their objectives and their documentation.

1. It is better to include too little than too much, as the audit panel does not want to be overwhelmed and it can request additional documents if it wishes. This also saves the institution unnecessary work.
2. Documents included in the Supplementary Material should already exist rather than being written specially for the audit.
3. The following documents should be considered for inclusion unless the information has been provided in the Main Submission. The QAC recognises that not all the documents will exist in all institutions, and that institutions may organise their documents in different ways.
 - List of faculties, the departments/schools within each faculty, and administrative divisions
 - List of campuses/locations in Hong Kong, and which faculties/departments/schools are represented at each campus

¹⁴ The audit panel may later request other documents (see section 6.1).

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

- Role Statement agreed with the UGC and any institutional mission statement.
 - The most recent institutional Annual Report, Strategic Plan, and Teaching and Learning Plan (or equivalents).
 - Statement of desired graduate attributes.
 - The institution's policies in key areas such as
 - programme development and approval
 - programme monitoring and review
 - assessment
 - research degree supervision and examination
 - academic staff promotion
 - student participation (e.g. student representation on committees and in other decision making processes, student feedback on teaching and courses, student rights and responsibilities)
 - faculty/department/school review
 - List of reviews of faculties/departments/schools and learning support services undertaken in the last 5 years, including reviews by external bodies (e.g. for professional accreditation)
 - List of programmes offered outside Hong Kong, including for each programme the location, partner, duration of the partnership, and student load
 - List of joint programmes offered in Hong Kong, including for each programme the partner, duration of the partnership, and student load
 - List of self-financing programmes, including for each programme the date of first offering, the current fees, and student load
 - Key data (management information) used by the institution, e.g. as the basis for strategic planning or to drive the development of teaching and learning policies or procedures and which might be referenced in sections of the Main Submission.
4. The institution should include any document which is extensively referenced in the Main Submission, or which plays a major role in the institution's quality assurance system, or which provides significant evidence of student learning quality.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

A.2 Indicative Audit Visit Programme and Venue

The following programme is indicative only, and will vary from institution to institution. The duration of the Audit Visit may vary according to the complexity of the institution, the number of sample programme reviews, and issues identified by the panel.

Sessions are typically up to 45 minutes long, though some may be longer, depending on the participants involved and the topics to be covered. Lunch sessions are typically 60 minutes. Periods for panel reflection and review are interspersed between various sessions. The panel may also wish to spend some time visiting institutional facilities.

Groups should usually contain no more than eight people. Where the panel splits for the lunch sessions, it may meet 20 to 30 people. The panel prefers not to meet the same person more than once, unless the person has multiple roles and there is no logical alternative.

Session	Activity/Group
0.1	Panel visits institution to peruse information provided on site
0.2	Panel reviews plans for visit (especially Day 1)
DAY 1 (General themes: Programme management; Review of sample programme A)	
1.1	President/Vice-Chancellor
1.2	Senior managers responsible for teaching and learning at institutional level
1.3	Senior managers of self-financing branch, or others responsible for self-financing programmes
1.4	Members of Academic Committee (or group responsible for approval of new programmes)
1.5	Members of selected Faculty Boards (or Faculty committees responsible for programme oversight)
1.6	Lunch: discussion with undergraduate students; range of levels and disciplines (including international, mature, class representatives) (<i>split Panel</i>)
1.7	Programme and course co-ordinators from sample programme A (<i>as selected by Panel</i>)
1.8	Academic staff delivering programme A
1.9	Technical/administrative staff supporting programme A
1.10	Students in programme A at a range of levels
	Panel inspects any further documents requested
	Panel review of Day 1
	Panel review of plans for Day 2
DAY 2 (General themes: Review of sample programme B; Teaching and staff development)	
2.1	Programme and course co-ordinators from sample programme B (<i>as selected by Panel</i>)
2.2	Academic staff delivering programme B
2.3	Technical/administrative staff supporting programme B
2.4	Students in programme B at a range of levels
2.5	Members of Teaching & Learning Committee (or group responsible for teaching quality)
2.6	Lunch (Panel only)
2.7	Staff from unit responsible for academic staff development

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

Session	Activity/Group
2.8	Academic staff from a variety of disciplines at a variety of levels, including some recently promoted
2.9	Recently appointed academic staff (at various levels) in a variety of disciplines
2.10	Officers of student association(s) and student members of committees
	Panel inspects any further documents requested
	Panel review of Day 2
	Panel review of plans for Day 3
DAY 3 (General themes: Student support services; external relations; research degrees)	
3.1	Graduates of various programmes (including Programmes A&B) from a variety of graduation years
3.2	Staff from Library and Information Technology
3.3	Staff from student support/service areas (including international student office, alumni, careers, counselling, learning support)
3.4	Programme and course co-ordinators of programmes visited outside Hong Kong, if any
3.5	Chancellor and other external members of Council
	Lunch with external stakeholders (including employers, professional associations, members of programme advisory committees) (<i>split Panel</i>)
3.6	Members of Postgraduate Committee (or group overseeing research degrees); staff of graduate studies office (or admin. unit supporting research students)
3.7	Research degree supervisors from a range of disciplines
3.8	Postgraduate research students from a range of disciplines
3.9	Sessions on request (<i>for explanation, see section 7.4</i>)
3.10	Free for further or call-back interviews
	Panel inspects any further documents requested
	Panel review of Day 3
	Panel review of plans for Day 4
DAY 4	
4.1	Inspect further documentation
4.2	Free for further or call-back interviews
4.3	Panel formulates findings
4.4	Exit meeting with President/Vice-Chancellor (and possibly others, at the President's discretion)

An additional half day, or even a fifth day, may be needed in some cases. For example, more time may be needed for an additional sample programme review (about half a day), exploration of the institution's self-financing programmes, exploration of arrangements for joint programmes, or deeper investigation of particular issues the panel identified by the panel.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

Venue

During the audit visit the panel requires a room in which it can base itself, conduct interviews and hold panel discussions. A board room, large committee room or teaching room may be adequate, provided it has the following features:

- a central table large enough to seat the panel and Audit Co-ordinator (up to 7 people) and their papers on one side and up to 8 interviewees on the other side
- sufficient other space to keep the documents requested by the panel before or during the visit
- a side table on which to place water, tea and other light refreshments (this can be in an adjacent room if necessary)
- adequate air-conditioning or heating
- privacy and adequate insulation from outside noise
- availability throughout the visit, including out of normal hours if necessary
- security overnight and at other times the panel is not present.

Ideally there should be a room nearby where the institution can assemble interviewees before each session.

Informal lunch sessions require a room with several tables, each large enough to seat a panel member and up to 5 other people. The lunch may be buffet style, and should not be elaborate, as the main purpose is to converse with those present.

A.3 Elaboration of Audit Focus Areas

Focus areas define the scope of audit (section 3.4). Audit panels examine how the institution's practices in each focus area contribute to student learning outcomes. In each area they apply the underlying ADRI methodology – 'What is the institution trying to do? How is it doing it? What evidence is there of success? What processes are in place for improvement?'

The following list illustrates the kind of questions which might be asked in each of the audit focus areas. **The list is indicative rather than prescriptive or exhaustive.**

1. Articulation of appropriate objectives
 - What overall objectives is the institution trying to achieve?
 - Are these appropriate to its agreed role?
 - What student learning outcomes are expected, and how are they measured? What are the performance indicators, benchmarks or other reference points?

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- Are the desired objectives communicated and understood throughout the institution?
 - Do individual programmes specify desired learning outcomes (e.g. graduate attributes)?
 - Are programme objectives consistent with institutional objectives?
2. Management, planning and accountability
- What is the organisational framework within which teaching and learning is managed? Is it effective? How does the institution know?
 - What are the responsibilities and accountabilities for delivering outcomes?
 - How does the institution measure performance against plan?
 - What are the communication and reporting mechanisms? Are they effective?
 - How do students participate in planning and management for learning?
3. Programme development and approval processes
- What are the criteria for introducing new programmes? Are they consistent with the institution's role?
 - How are the rationale and expected outcomes for new programmes articulated? Who approves them?
 - What external input is there to programme planning and development, including curriculum?
 - How are planned learning experiences, including 'out of class' experiences, related to desired learning outcomes?
 - What processes are in place to check that resources (e.g. staff, library, IT, laboratories) are available, and that the delivery mode and assessment are appropriate to the desired outcomes?
 - Is there adequate internal consultation (e.g. to prevent duplication)?
 - What processes govern the programme change processes?
 - How are programmes made up of courses, to produce a coherent, integrated whole?

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

4. Programme monitoring and review
 - How does the institution know that programmes are delivering the desired student learning outcomes? Does it use external references or benchmarks?
 - What are the frequency, scope and process of programme review? What are the criteria for programme continuation?
 - What data is used in monitoring and review (e.g. student demand and entry qualifications, student feedback, employer feedback, employment data, graduate destinations)?
 - What external input is there?
 - How does the institution make improvements to the programme?
5. Curriculum design
 - How does curriculum design relate to desired student learning outcomes?
 - What external input or reference points are used?
 - How are curricula systematically updated?
6. Programme delivery, including resources, teaching mode, and the student learning environment
 - Are sufficient resources (e.g. staff, library, IT, laboratories) applied to the achievement of programme outcomes?
 - Are the learning environment and the modes of delivery geared to desired learning outcomes?
 - How do student support services measure their effectiveness? How do they ensure that their activities are aligned to institutional goals? How do they obtain and use student feedback?
7. Experiential and other 'out of classroom' learning (e.g. leadership development, overseas exchange, work-integrated learning, service learning)
 - How does this form of learning contribute to desired student learning outcomes?
 - How is the learning experience designed? What are the inputs?
 - Are appropriate resources applied to delivering and supporting the experience?
 - How are the effects of the learning experience evaluated?

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

- What processes lead to improvement?
 - How is out of classroom learning integrated with curricular learning? What evidence is there of effective integration?
8. Assessment
- Does the institution have an assessment policy which addresses issues such as equity, accuracy and student workload? Is it widely implemented and effective?
 - Is assessment designed to evaluate and enhance students' achievement of desired learning outcomes?
 - How is out of classroom learning assessed?
 - What processes are in place to detect and handle plagiarism or fraud? Are they effective?
 - What external checks or reference points are used? Are they effective?
9. Teaching quality and staff development
- How is teaching quality assessed?
 - How is student feedback obtained and used?
 - Are inexperienced staff offered an introduction to teaching? Is it mandatory? Is it effective?
 - What other teaching development activities or opportunities are offered? How are they supported by the institution? Are they effective? What is the take-up rate?
 - How is teaching informed by staff's research or professional activities?
 - What support is available to staff for the effective delivery and assessment of in-class and out of class learning?
 - How is the teaching performance of individual staff monitored and enhanced? How does teaching performance affect promotion?

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

10. Student participation

- What opportunities are there for students to participate in programme planning, monitoring and review? Do relevant organisational structures (e.g. department/faculty committees) have student members?
- Are there processes for systematically obtaining and using student feedback on courses, programmes and teaching?
- Are there processes for systematically obtaining and using student feedback on support services?

11. Activities specific to research degrees

- What learning outcomes does the institution expect from research degree programmes? Are there any external reference points?
- What criteria are used for admission to research degree programmes? How are they established and are they appropriate?
- What resources are provided to research students? How does the institution know these are sufficient?
- How does the institution appoint supervisors and monitor the quality of supervision?
- How is the progress of research students monitored? How are problems identified and handled?
- What are the examination processes? What is the external involvement?
- How does the institution foster and monitor an appropriate intellectual climate for research students?

Additional focus areas for programmes offered outside Hong Kong

The scope of audit is widened for programmes offered outside Hong Kong so as to cover issues not present in locally offered Hong Kong programmes (Annex D). The additional focus areas are elaborated below through indicative questions.

12. Contractual arrangements with the partner

- Are agreements in place? Are they up to date?
- Do the agreements cover all relevant issues (e.g. programme structure, entry requirements, teaching obligations, assessment, fee levels, fee distribution, quality assurance, advertising materials)?

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

- Do the agreements clearly cover the responsibilities of each party?
 - Does the partner have the necessary local approval to offer the programme?
13. Qualifications, appointment and role of partner staff
- How does the partner select or appoint staff who contribute to the programme? What qualifications must they have? Are these adequate for their role in the programme? What other criteria are used? Is the Hong Kong institution involved in selection or appointment? Which party authorises selection or appointment?
 - What role(s) do partner staff play in programme delivery? How is their performance monitored?
 - How are partner staff informed of desired learning outcomes?
14. Entry requirements for students
- Are the entry requirements equivalent to those in Hong Kong? How is this evaluated?
 - Who makes admission decisions, and on what basis?
 - Are there English language requirements? How are they established and implemented? How does the institution know they are adequate?
15. Equivalence of curriculum and assessment with programmes offered in Hong Kong
- What is the source of programme material, including curriculum and assessment items?
 - How is the curriculum or programme delivery contextualised for the local environment?
 - Who performs assessment? How is it monitored and validated?
 - What is the evidence of equivalent learning outcomes? If a similar programme is not offered in Hong Kong, how are learning outcomes evaluated?
16. Student learning environment, including access to learning resources
- How does the institution ensure an adequate student learning environment (e.g. classrooms, laboratories, IT, library)?
 - Do students have access to the partner's learning resources (e.g. internet, library)?
 - Do students have access to the institution's learning resources? If the access is electronic, how is adequate service and support ensured?

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

17. Student feedback and participation
 - How is student feedback on courses and teaching obtained and used?
 - How do students participate in programme monitoring or review?

A.4 Schematic Audit Report

All QAC audit reports adopt a similar structure while allowing the panel to present its findings in the manner it considers most useful. Common elements of each report are as follows:

1. Procedures: background and conduct of the audit.
2. Executive Summary
 - Summary of the panel's findings, consistent in content and balance with the body of the report.
 - List of commendations, affirmations and recommendations.
3. Body: detailed discussion of the institution's overall approach to student learning quality and of each of the audit focus areas. The discussion of each area includes institutional objectives; relevant data and evidence (and its sources); and the panel's analysis and conclusions, including any commendations, affirmations and recommendations. Evidence gained from sample programme reviews is included at appropriate points, as are any conclusions about those programmes.
4. Appendices
 - Brief institutional response to the audit findings.
 - QAC mission and terms of reference.
 - List of panel members.
 - Glossary of abbreviations and acronyms used in the report.

A.5 Guidance in Identifying External Reference Points and Outcome Measures

An institution's assessment processes can give some confidence that learning outcomes are being achieved. If assessment items are aligned to learning outcomes, the performance of students is an indication of the extent to which learning outcomes have been achieved. Feedback from student performance into curriculum, programme delivery and other learning experiences is an important means of enhancing students' learning experience and improving the learning outcomes. Use of external reference points (e.g. professional standards, external examiners (see below)) gives added assurance that the outcomes have been specified and measured appropriately.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

In 2006 the UGC launched an initiative to encourage institutions to move toward an 'outcome-based' approach to student learning. This initiative includes the creation of a task force across the institutions and the provision of funds to facilitate the work. The outcome-based initiative should help institutions in identifying appropriate measures for their teaching and learning activities, so that this initiative and the quality assurance system become mutually reinforcing.

Institutions are encouraged to use external reference points as a way of relating their objectives, procedures and outcomes to the broader higher education environment. External reference points take many forms, including:

- legislative and other regulatory requirements
- codes of good practice published in Hong Kong or elsewhere
- accreditation or registration requirements of professional bodies
- requirements for graduate study in Hong Kong or elsewhere
- benchmark data
- comparative data from government, student and employer surveys
- other systems of measurement devised by an institution.

Other ways of relating objectives, procedures and outcomes to the external environment include:

- use of external examiners
- external reviews of faculties, schools and administrative units
- external programme reviews.

The following list of external reference points is purely illustrative: the QAC does not mandate the use of any specific reference points other than the institution's role statement agreed with the UGC. Institutions should use whatever reference points are relevant to their mission and goals.

Institutional Role Statement

Institutional objectives are expected to be derived from and consistent with the role statement.

Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (www.hkqf.gov.hk/guie/HKQF_intro.asp)

The Qualifications Framework (QF) applies across all levels of post-secondary training and education in Hong Kong. Levels 5-7 of the QF are relevant to first and higher degrees. However, the QF descriptors of achievement at those levels are very generic and provide limited help in identifying specific outcome measures. Institutions may aspire to higher levels of achievement than are implied by some of the descriptors.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

Education Quality Work: The Hong Kong Experience. *A handbook of good practices in assuring and improving teaching and learning quality*. Published in 2005 by an Editorial Committee, Chaired by Professor TP Leung, on behalf of the eight UGC-funded institutions, the Handbook encapsulates the experiences of the UGC-funded institutions as revealed by the 1997 and 2003 Teaching and Learning Quality Reviews (TLQPR).

Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) 2005, *Provision of Education to International Students: Code of Practice and Guidelines for Australian Universities*. Available at: www.avcc.edu.au.

Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) 2005, *Universities and their Students: Principles for the Provision of Education by Australian Universities*. Available at: www.avcc.edu.au/content.asp?page=/policies_programmes/teaching_learning/guidelines/index.htm.

Australian Department of Education, Science and Training, *National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students (the National Code)*. Available at: www.dest.gov.au/sectors/international_education?policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/esos/#National_Code_of_Practice. [Note that a revised National Code is proposed to come into effect in mid-2007.]

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) 2005, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. Available at: www.enqa.eu/files/BergenReport210205.pdf

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FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

A.6 Representations by Institutions

Although the audit procedures are designed to treat institutions fairly, institutions may on occasion wish to make representations that:

- (a) audit procedures have not been properly followed, or
- (b) specific audit findings are unjustified.

The QAC's policy on handling representations from institutions is as follows:

1. The QAC investigates all representations or complaints from institutions.
2. The QAC does **not** investigate representations or complaints from individuals. Such representations must be made through the relevant institution.
3. A representation should be made and resolved as soon as possible after the event that gives rise to it.
4. Representations may be made verbally or in writing, but it is expected that serious complaints, or complaints which are not resolved quickly, will be expressed in writing.
5. Representations about the audit process (type (a) above) should be made first to the QAC Audit Co-ordinator for the audit. There are ample opportunities for interaction between the Audit Co-ordinator and the institution during all phases of an audit, and most representations will be capable of immediate resolution.
6. Representations of type (a) which cannot be resolved by the Audit Co-ordinator are referred to the QAC Secretary and, if still unresolved, to the Chair of the QAC. If the Chair considers that the representation could materially affect the audit report he/she determines personally or in consultation with other Council members what action, if any, to take. The Council prefers not to involve the UGC, but does not rule out the need for it to make a report to the UGC (since the QAC is accountable to the UGC).
7. Since the institution has an opportunity to comment on the draft audit report, the only basis for a representation of type (b) is that the institution considers that its comments have not adequately been taken into account, or the draft has been otherwise changed. Such a representation should be made to the QAC Secretary who, if he/she cannot resolve it, refers it to the Chair of the QAC. The Chair handles the representation in the same way as described in paragraph 6 above.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS

A.7 Audit of Non-UGC-Funded Institutions

The QAC's Terms of Reference (section 1.1) allow the QAC to review the quality of programmes (at first degree level and above) of non-UGC-funded institutions if the Administration so requests. Such a request is transmitted via the UGC.

For reasons of equity, the procedures followed in the audit of non-UGC-funded institutions are as far as possible the same as those for UGC-funded institutions. In practice the differences between audits of the two kinds of institution stem from the fact that audits of non-UGC-funded institutions are requested by the Administration rather than occurring as part of a cycle determined by the QAC. Such differences are agreed by the Administration and the QAC when the audit is commissioned, and the institution is notified.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

ANNEX B: FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

B.1 Register of Auditors

The QAC considers that audits are best conducted by persons with intimate knowledge and experience of teaching and learning in higher education. That is, an audit is a form of peer review. Because of the relatively small size of the Hong Kong higher education sector, the QAC draws auditors from outside Hong Kong as well as locally. Overseas auditors bring experience of educational quality assurance in other countries, and increase confidence that audits are being conducted to appropriate international standards. The QAC also appoints lay auditors from outside the higher education field. Such auditors can bring fresh perspectives and insights to an audit panel, but to maintain the emphasis on peer review at most one such auditor is appointed to any panel.

The QAC maintains a Register of Auditors, comprising people of appropriate experience who are willing to serve on audit panels. In light of the considerations above, auditors are typically:

- (a) staff (current or recently retired) of Hong Kong higher education institutions; or
- (b) persons from outside Hong Kong, usually from a higher education institution or quality assurance agency, with audit experience in higher education; or
- (c) lay persons from outside higher education.

Junior staff or students of higher education institutions are not normally appointed as auditors as they are unlikely to possess the experience required (see below for desirable attributes of auditors).

Appointment of persons to the Register of Auditors requires endorsement of the Council.

Desirable attributes of auditors are listed below. Panels as a whole possess the breadth of attributes described.

Quality audit and higher education related attributes:

- experience in the management and practice of teaching and learning, including research degree supervision
- experience of undertaking quality reviews (audit, assessment, accreditation, etc.) in educational, professional or industrial settings
- knowledge and understanding of the Hong Kong higher education sector, including its broader context
- ability to understand and evaluate information provided by institutions in a manner that is sensitive to the particular context from which it arises.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

General attributes:

- experience in managerial positions
- ability to focus knowledge and experience to evaluate institutional procedures and practices
- constructive ability to suggest improvements relative to an institution's particular context
- ability to reconcile theory with organisational realities
- ability to work in a team, firmly but co-operatively
- ability to communicate effectively
- ability to adhere to agreed protocols, procedures and deadlines
- integrity, discretion, commitment and diligence.

From time to time the QAC invites Hong Kong higher education institutions to nominate appropriately qualified academic or administrative staff (current or recent) for appointment to the Register. Other auditors are sought through the QAC's contacts with overseas quality assurance agencies, overseas universities, and the business and professional communities in Hong Kong. To ensure adequate turn-over of auditors, appointment to the Register is for a fixed period of 3 years, though the QAC may at its discretion retain experience by inviting an auditor to continue for a further period.

B.2 Auditor Preparation

This Annex gives an overview of the formal preparation of auditors to undertake QAC audits. Further details are contained in preparation manuals and materials.

Although all auditors appointed to the Register have some experience in quality review, they may not be familiar with the QAC's audit methodology and processes. Auditors from overseas may be unfamiliar with the Hong Kong higher education system, and lay auditors may have no experience of quality assurance in higher education. The QAC therefore requires auditors to undergo preparation as a condition of appointment to the Register. Preparation must be completed before an auditor can take part in an audit.

Preparation sessions typically last two days: an 'induction' day and a more 'intensive' day. Sessions are conducted periodically in Hong Kong by QAC staff and external advisors. For practical reasons some overseas auditors may be unable to attend an induction session in Hong Kong. These auditors are provided with written materials. The 'intensive' preparation day for overseas auditors may also take place outside Hong Kong if that proves more practicable. The direct costs of attendance at preparation sessions are borne by the QAC.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

Topics included in the preparation sessions include:

- background material on the QAC and salient features of the Hong Kong higher education system
- the respective roles of the UGC, the QAC and an audit panel
- the purpose, methodology and focus areas of QAC audits
- overview of the audit process, and the responsibilities of panel members
- analysing documents provided by the institution
- information gathering techniques (Annex B.8)
- effective interview techniques (Annex B.8)
- evaluating performance measures and other evidence
- assessing the effectiveness of feedback loops
- auditing programmes offered outside Hong Kong.

One of the QAC's objectives is to promote quality assurance in higher education institutions in Hong Kong. Opportunities to attend auditor preparation sessions are therefore offered to nominated staff from Hong Kong institutions, subject to availability of places. These staff can then act as a source of expertise within their institutions, and may subsequently be nominated to the Register of Auditors.

B.3 Roles and Responsibilities of Panel Members

Panel members are selected so that the panel as a whole possesses the expertise and experience to enable the audit to be carried out effectively. Members bring their own perspectives and experience to the audit process, but should avoid applying pre-conceived templates to their consideration of the audited institution. Similarly, members must not address the process entirely from the perspective of their own speciality or the practices of their own organisation. The panel must come to clear and well-founded conclusions in the context of the QAC's terms of reference and audit methodology.

Panel members are expected to read thoroughly the Institutional Submission and associated documents. Adequate identification and exploration of issues by the panel depends on its members being thoroughly familiar with the Institutional Submission at the time of the Initial Meeting and again at the Audit Visit. The credibility of the audit may be undermined if members' remarks or questions reveal ignorance of the information provided by the institution.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

In some cases the Panel Chair may take advantage of the particular expertise and interests of a panel member by asking him or her to take special responsibility for one or more of the audit focus areas. This does not absolve other members from their responsibility to be familiar with all aspects of the audit, but the designated member(s) is expected to concentrate particularly on the agreed area(s) and may be asked to lead the questioning in the relevant interviews.

Without being excessively formal, panel members should work with and through the Chair in panel discussions. Members should respect the agenda agreed by the panel for the various meetings, and support the Chair as he/she matches the pace of the meeting to the size of the agenda and the need to reach outcomes. During interview sessions, members should pursue agreed lines of enquiry and support the Chair in covering all the issues in the time available.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

The following table summarises the expectations of members of an audit panel. Note that the Panel Chair has additional roles and responsibilities (Annex B.4).

Summary of expectations of panel members serving on an audit panel

Prior to appointment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Inform the QAC of any matters that are or could be perceived to be a conflict of interest in undertaking the audit.
At time of appointment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sign and return the Declarations Form and complete any other administrative details.
On receipt of the Institutional Submission
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Refresh knowledge of the QAC's audit methodology. ○ Read thoroughly the Institutional Submission and associated documentation provided to become thoroughly familiar with the institution's policies, procedures and criteria for quality. ○ Provide brief written comments on the Institutional Submission to the Audit Co-ordinator before the Initial Meeting.
During the Initial Meeting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Participate fully in the meeting, contributing to discussion on all items and achievement of the desired outcomes (section 6.1). ○ Be willing, if requested by the Chair, to accept special responsibility for one or more areas or topics.
Following the Initial Meeting and before the Audit Visit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Comment as desired or requested on the documentation prepared by the Audit Co-ordinator as an outcome of the Initial Meeting. ○ Read supplementary documentation supplied by the institution in response to the panel's requests. ○ Participate in the development of questions to be asked by the panel at the Audit Visit. ○ Possibly participate, by agreement, in visit(s) to the institution's partners outside Hong Kong.
During the Audit Visit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Participate fully in all aspects of the Visit, including interview sessions and panel-only discussion and decision-making (some discussions may continue well into the evening). ○ Where the panel divides into subgroups for parallel sessions, be prepared to provide notes for the rest of the panel on the subgroup's discussions.
After the Audit Visit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Read and provide comment on draft(s) of the audit report. ○ Contribute, if requested, to the drafting by developing new or revised section(s). While the Audit Co-ordinator is responsible for writing the report, all panel members should be satisfied that the report is accurate and balanced. ○ Give feedback to the QAC on the entire audit process, using the form provided.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

B.4 Additional Roles and Responsibilities of the Panel Chair

Before the Audit Visit the Panel Chair has two major additional responsibilities to those outlined above. The first is to chair the Initial Meeting of the panel (section 6.1). The second is to accompany the Audit Co-ordinator on the Preliminary Visit to the institution (section 6.2). The Chair is also likely to be asked to participate in visits outside Hong Kong (where the panel decides that such visits are necessary, see Annex D), though another panel member may take on this role.

During the Audit Visit, the Chair should create an atmosphere in which all panel members can contribute to constructive discussion, leading to well founded, evidence based conclusions. During interviews and other meetings the Chair should ensure that institutional participants feel that the panel is open-minded and receptive. The atmosphere should be one of engagement, courtesy and frankness. The tone of the visit, and much of its success, depends on the Chair's ability to enable the panel to work as a team rather than as a set of individuals, and to bring out the best in those whom the panel meets.

At the end of the Audit Visit the panel holds an exit meeting with the President/Vice-Chancellor (or delegate) and other institutional leaders (section 7.6). The Chair should adhere to the guidelines for the exit meeting (Annex B.7), and in making the oral presentation should avoid a didactic manner and prescriptive language.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

Summary of expectations of the Chair, additional to those of other panel members

During the Initial Meeting

- Chair the meeting, facilitating development of good working relationships among the panel and achievement of the necessary outcomes (section 6.1).
- Allocate (if appropriate) special areas of responsibility to panel members (section 3 above).

Following the Initial Meeting and before the Audit Visit

- Accompany the Audit Co-ordinator on the Preliminary Visit to the institution.
- Participate, by agreement, in visit(s) to the institution's partners outside Hong Kong. (Another panel member may take this role.)

During the Audit Visit

- Chair interview sessions and panel discussions, welcoming participants at the start of each session.
- Keep sessions and panel discussions running to schedule, without unnecessarily curtailing contributions.
- In the panel deliberations between interviews, lead (with the Audit Co-ordinator) the panel in summarising what has been learned. This helps the panel maintain a collective position.
- Where the panel divides into subgroups for parallel sessions, ensure the subgroup has an agreed agenda and provides notes for the rest of the panel on the subgroup's discussions.
- Towards the end of the visit, guide (with the Audit Co-ordinator) the panel towards findings which are appropriate, well founded and clearly expressed.
- In the exit meeting, orally present an outline of the panel's findings.

After the Audit Visit

- Liaise with the Audit Co-ordinator to ensure that the audit report is fair and accurate.
- Respond to any queries from the QAC or the UGC during their consideration of the audit report (such queries may arise, for example, from the institutional response).
- Respond, if possible, to any issues raised by the QAC or the UGC during their consideration of the institution's progress report. It is recognised that, 18 months after the audit, the Chair may not always be able to do this.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

B.5 Additional Roles and Responsibilities of the Audit Co-ordinator

The role of the Audit Co-ordinator is to guide the panel and the institution through all stages of the audit, ensuring that approved procedures are followed. There are two broad aspects to the role. The first is essentially administrative, making all the necessary arrangements for the audit to run smoothly. This involves initiating and replying to correspondence, keeping records of meetings and discussions, and overseeing logistical arrangements for the various visits. The second aspect is professional, using knowledge and experience of quality audit to advise and support the panel and to advise the institution as appropriate. This includes commenting on the draft Institutional Submission, participating in interview sessions during the Audit Visit, and helping the Panel Chair guide the panel towards well-founded and balanced findings. The Audit Co-ordinator is also responsible for producing the audit report. The Audit Co-ordinator has the authority to ensure compliance with approved QAC procedures.

While the Audit Co-ordinator plays a major role in the audit process, he/she is not a member of the panel and does not share the panel's responsibility for the audit findings. This neutral role is intended to improve interaction with the institution during the preparatory and preliminary phases of audit and to enhance the institution's confidence that due process will be observed.

All communications between the QAC, the institution and the panel must be clear, consistent and non-repetitive. The Audit Co-ordinator therefore acts as the single point of contact between the QAC and the institution and between the QAC and the panel. Except during visits, there is no direct communication between the institution and the panel.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

Summary of expectations of the Audit Co-ordinator

During the Preparation Phase

- Establish dates for completion of the Institutional Submission, and for the Initial Meeting, Preliminary Visit and Audit Visit.
- Arrange QAC consideration of any institutional request for additional audit focus areas.
- Provide feedback on the draft Institutional Submission.
- Make arrangements for the Initial Meeting, including distribution of the Institutional Submission.

During the Initial Meeting

- Assist the Chair in achieving the necessary outcomes (section 6.1).
- Record discussion of the Institutional Submission, including identification of major issues and requests for further information.
- Record the meeting's decisions, with reasons, particularly on programmes for sample review, visits to multiple campuses, visits outside Hong Kong, and potential interviewees at the Audit Visit.

Following the Initial Meeting and before the Audit Visit

- Inform the institution of outcomes from the Initial Meeting (section 6.1).
- Make arrangements for the Preliminary Visit and accompany the Panel Chair on the visit.
- Make arrangements, with the institution, for any visits outside Hong Kong; participate in the visits; and write a report for the full panel.
- Liaise with the institution on provision of further information requested by the panel and ensure that the information is provided.
- Liaise with the institution on the programme and arrangements for the Audit Visit.

During the Audit Visit

- Liaise with the institution's nominated contact person throughout the visit, including seeking further information or additional meetings as necessary, soliciting informal feedback on institutional perceptions of the interview process, and ensuring that the visit proceeds smoothly.
- Assist the Chair in keeping to the planned programme.
- Participate as requested by the Chair in interview and other sessions.
- Record succinct summaries and notes of issues for clarification, consideration and reporting.
- In the panel deliberations between interviews, assist the panel in summarising what has been learned.
- Assist the Chair in guiding the panel towards findings which are appropriate, well founded and clearly expressed.

After the Audit Visit

- Produce the audit report, through iteration with panel members and the institution (section 8.3).
- Obtain feedback from panel members and the institution on the conduct of the audit (section 7.7).
- Respond to any issues raised by the QAC or the UGC during their consideration of the audit report.
- Initiate and oversee the follow-up process (section 8).

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

B.6 Summary Timeline for Panel Members

A full summary of the audit process is given in section 4. For the convenience of panel members the following table summarises the approximate dates and duration of their involvement.

Action	Start ¹⁵	Duration
Appointment of panel (including consideration of conflict of interest)	A – 39	6-8 weeks
Institution submits Institutional Submission	A – 12	
Audit panel reads Institutional Submission	A – 11	2-3 weeks
Initial Meeting of panel	A – 9	1 day
Panel's questions, requests and visit proposals are sent to and considered by the institution	A – 8	2 weeks
Preliminary Visit: Panel Chair and Audit Co-ordinator visit institution to discuss arrangements for the Audit Visit and any visits to partners	A – 6	1 day
Visit(s) to partner organisations arranged	A – 6	3 weeks
Visit(s) to partner organisations (subset of panel)	A – 3	up to 1 week
Final planning for Audit Visit (Audit Co-ordinator keeps panel informed)	A – 2	2 weeks
Audit Visit	A	3-5 days
Report writing		
Report drafted by Audit Co-ordinator with several iterations sent to panel members for input	A + 1	7-8 weeks
Institution considers and comments on final draft report	A + 8	2-3 weeks
Report revised, with input from Panel Chair if necessary	A + 10	2 weeks
Report published, after formal response from institution and consideration by QAC	A + 18	

B.7 Guidelines for exit meetings

The panel formulates its preliminary findings during the final day of the audit visit. These will be refined through internal communication in the days immediately following the visit, when the panel has had time to reflect further on the information gathered. Consequently, it is premature for the panel to report to the institution on its detailed findings of the audit while on site.

¹⁵ Approximate dates, expressed in weeks before or after the Audit Visit.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

However, it is important that the institution receives initial and immediate feedback on the panel's overall impression of the audit before it leaves the institution. This is partly as a courtesy, to recognise the fact that the institution had been preparing for the audit for several months, which inevitably will have had a major impact on the institution, and on key staff in particular; and partly to seek an initial response from the institution to the audit process and the approach and initial findings of the audit panel.

At the end of the Audit Visit the panel therefore holds an exit meeting with the President/Vice-Chancellor (or delegate) and any other senior staff the institution wishes to include (section 7.6). The Panel Chair orally presents the panel's overall impression of the institution's approach to the management of teaching and learning, and of its effectiveness in assuring and enhancing the quality of its educational provision and the student learning experience. The Chair indicates areas where the panel will be commending the institution, and those areas in which the panel is considering making recommendations for improvement: neither list is exhaustive. The Chair makes clear that he/she is giving an overview of the panel's views, without detailed evidence or justification, but indicates that this will be provided in the audit report. Institutional representatives may seek clarification of some points, or correct any apparent misconceptions, but the Chair should ensure that the meeting does not become an occasion for rebuttal or debate.

B.8 Information Gathering and Interview Techniques

Audit panels base their findings on information from a number of sources: the institution, the public record, and the views of individuals and organisations gathered through interview. It is essential to the integrity of the process that panels gather and interpret information in a systematic way. The following paragraphs give some guidance, and the topic is also extensively covered during auditor preparation (Annex B.2).

The Institutional Submission

The Institutional Submission is the principal source of information for the panel, particularly during the audit's preliminary phase. It is the Institutional Submission on which the panel bases its further enquiries. The panel must therefore be satisfied that the Institutional Submission provides adequate information for its needs, and use the Initial Meeting to identify any gaps, ambiguities or other inadequacies which the institution can be asked to remedy. In particular, the panel should ask itself:

- Does the information provided in Section 1 give a clear overview of the institution and the range of its activities?
- Does the information provided in Section 2 give a clear overview of the institution's quality assurance system for teaching and learning?

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

- Is the information provided consistent throughout the Submission?
- Are claims and assertions supported by evidence?
- Is the use of data selective or comprehensive?
- Does data adequately show trends over time or comparisons with external reference points?

The panel may ask the institution for clarification or further information but should be careful to not over-burden the institution with requests or overwhelm itself with more information than it can handle.

Sampling

An institution can provide far more information than an audit panel could handle in the time at its disposal. This is one reason that the audit process emphasises self-review in which the institution forms its own conclusions which are then validated (or otherwise) by the panel.

For the same reason, an audit panel's investigation is characterised by sampling. The panel's work depends on well-chosen purposive sampling, to gain the maximum information from the selected samples. The panel determines at its Initial Meeting the kind of sampling it wants to undertake and asks the institution for the required additional information.

The selection of samples occurs at two levels. The first arises from the panel's analysis of the Institutional Submission, during which particular topics may be identified as potentially significant or problematic, and therefore selected for further investigation. The selection of programmes for sample review (sections 3.5 and 6.1) is an example of this level of sampling: depending on the issues identified, panels may also choose to sample organisational units, teaching and learning practices, support services, the application of policies, or other activities. Panels may also choose to track some key issues across or through the institution.

At the second level, the panel agrees on the documentary or oral evidence it needs to sample within the selected areas, taking account of the need to triangulate evidence (see below). Depending on the issue being pursued, a panel may decide to sample in *depth* or in *breadth*. Examples of sampling in depth are to interview students from the programmes selected for sample review or from the same faculties as the staff being interviewed. An example of sampling in breadth is to interview students from a variety of faculties. Similarly, sampling in depth may involve seeking a full document trail (e.g. for the approval of a specific programme or for the award of grades in a specific course); sampling in breadth may require only key documents from a variety of sources.¹⁶ The key principle is to identify the major issues, consider what form of sample is likely to generate the best information, and then to choose a sample that is best suited to the range of issues to be explored.

¹⁶ Sample documents are interpreted with reference to the context in which they were written.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

Triangulation

Triangulation is the technique of investigating a topic by considering information from sources of different types. For example, a panel may discuss selected policies and their implementation with senior management, with other staff and with students to see if the various opinions and experiences of the policy and its workings are consistent. Aspects of a topic may be checked through committee minutes, course and teaching evaluations, programme reviews, reports of professional accreditations, external examiners' reports, and interviews with staff, students and external stakeholders. Where conflicting information is received from different sources, the panel must decide how to further investigate the topic, so it can reach a considered conclusion. Given the restricted time available during an Audit Visit the panel may be unable to reach a conclusion on a particular topic and may simply draw attention to the inconsistency in the audit report.

Gathering evidence through interviews

During interviews the panel is trying to clarify issues, to glean explanations, justifications and further information, and to gain the perspectives of different stakeholders. In particular, panel members need to:

- explore discrepancies between what is written and what is said
- seek clarification and confirmation when required
- use closed and open-ended questions as appropriate
- listen as well as ask
- concentrate on major rather than minor issues
- distinguish between those interviewee opinions that fairly represent the constituency as a whole, and those which may be views of the one individual.

The panel should attempt to assure itself that it has obtained and considered all information relevant to its conclusions.

Styles of questioning at Audit Visits

Creating an atmosphere for genuine dialogue during the Audit Visit is extremely important, and panel members should try to act as colleagues and peers of the interviewees rather than inspectors. To this end, the questioning and discussion must be fair and polite. It must also be rigorous and incisive, as the audit report must reflect both the institution's achievements and its areas for improvement, and the evidence-gathering process must therefore be thorough. Panel members should ensure that all interviewees are engaged in the discussion.

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR AUDITORS

A panel uses a variety of questioning styles to gather the information it requires. To pursue a particular issue, the panel might begin by seeking information through an open-ended question, and then investigate the issue further, probing it through asking further questions based on the answer to the first. This often leads to the use of closed questions (requiring a 'yes' or 'no' answer), and perhaps finally checking to confirm the impression obtained.

Much time can be wasted if panel members do not plan and focus their questions. The skills of effective interviewing are discussed in detail in the QAC's auditor preparation sessions, but in brief, auditors are advised against:

- asking multiple-part questions
- using wordy preamble to questions
- telling anecdotes or making speeches
- detailing the situation in their own organisation
- offering suggestions or advice.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

ANNEX C: CONFLICT OF INTEREST

To avoid perceptions of bias, and to ensure the integrity of the audit system, it is essential that conflicts of interest be avoided. The QAC requires auditors to declare any matters that could lead to a conflict of interest in being appointed to a particular audit panel, and institutions are given the opportunity to object to a particular appointee if they consider there may be a conflict of interest.

Circumstances in which a conflict of interest may exist or be perceived include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The auditor is an employee of the institution to be audited, or has been an employee within the last 3 years.
- Any close relative of the auditor is an employee of the institution.
- The auditor is a failed applicant, a current applicant or a prospect for a position at the institution.
- The auditor is a senior advisor or consultant to the institution, or has been in the last 3 years.
- The auditor, or any close relative, is a student at the institution.
- The auditor is a graduate of the institution.
- There is kinship, close friendship or animosity between the auditor and any senior manager in the institution.
- The auditor is antipathetic to the mission, goals or ethos of the institution.

Being an employee of another higher education institution in Hong Kong is not in itself regarded as a conflict of interest.

Auditors are asked to declare before appointment to a particular panel whether there are any circumstances, including but not limited to those above, which could lead to a conflict of interest. Similarly, institutions are asked before a panel is finalised whether they object to any potential member on grounds of perceived conflict of interest or for any other material reason. The decision on appointment is made by the QAC after considering the information provided by auditors and any objections raised by the institution.

The Audit Co-ordinator is subject to the same policy and procedures on conflict of interest as members of the panel. However, as the QAC has a limited pool of staff from which to draw the Audit Co-ordinator the QAC may in some cases simply acknowledge that a potential conflict of interest exists and appoint the Audit Co-ordinator nevertheless. In such cases the Audit Co-ordinator is expected to act in a professional manner by not allowing the conflict to affect his or her actions or behaviour.

AUDITING PROGRAMMES OFFERED OUTSIDE HONG KONG

ANNEX D: AUDITING PROGRAMMES OFFERED OUTSIDE HONG KONG

D.1 Overview

This Annex describes how the QAC audits programmes offered outside Hong Kong by an audited institution, or jointly with a partner(s) outside Hong Kong, leading to a qualification awarded wholly or partly by the audited institution. The purpose of auditing such programmes is to examine whether the quality of student learning is the same as in the corresponding or similar programmes offered in Hong Kong.

Programmes offered outside Hong Kong raise a number of quality assurance issues not encountered in locally offered Hong Kong programmes. The issues stem from several factors, principally:

- the institution usually shares responsibility for programme delivery with a partner outside Hong Kong – roles and responsibilities must be clearly delineated
- programme delivery may involve partner staff as well as the institution's staff
- students are located remotely, with no physical access to the institution's resources.

Audits of programmes offered outside Hong Kong examine whether, despite these factors, student learning quality is the same as that in the corresponding locally offered Hong Kong programmes. Issues examined include:

- Contractual arrangements with the partner
- Qualifications, appointment and role of partner staff
- Entry requirements for students
- Equivalence of curriculum and assessment with programmes offered in Hong Kong
- Student learning environment, including access to learning resources
- Student feedback and participation.

These issues are regarded as additional focus areas of audit, and are elaborated in Annex A.3.

AUDITING PROGRAMMES OFFERED OUTSIDE HONG KONG

D.2 Selection of Programmes for Audit

The audit panel decides at its Initial Meeting (section 6.1) whether to audit any programmes offered outside Hong Kong. Criteria used include:

- significance – the size of a programme offered outside Hong Kong in terms of staff, students or resources, or its strategic importance to the institution's future
- risk – the likelihood and consequences (for both students and the institution) of a failure in the teaching or quality assurance arrangements with the partner organisation
- practicality – the practical issues associated with visiting one or more locations outside Hong Kong in the time available
- any other issues the panel considers relevant.

The selection may be provisional, to be confirmed after seeking further information from, and having discussions with, the institution. The final selection is confirmed at the Preliminary Visit.

D.3 Visits outside Hong Kong

Visits to locations outside Hong Kong are normally scheduled to occur after the Preliminary Visit and before the Audit Visit. Visits are conducted by a delegation consisting of at least one panel member and the Audit Co-ordinator, accompanied by a member of the institution. The role of the accompanying person is to liaise with the local partner(s), to ensure that appropriate arrangements are made for the visit(s), and to provide introductions to partner personnel. The person should preferably be familiar with the institution's activities in the locations visited (for example, he/she may be a senior person in the institution's international office, or the Dean of a relevant Faculty). The accompanying person does not take part in auditing activities, but may provide formal input to the delegation during the time outside Hong Kong.

The QAC informs the relevant quality agency in each destination country that it will be conducting the visit in its jurisdiction.

An underlying principle of visits outside Hong Kong is that the object of audit is the institution, not the partner. Audit reports do not comment on individual partners. The institution should make this clear to the partner before the visit, and the delegation reinforces the point during the visit.

During the visit the delegation typically meets with:

- the CEO (or delegate) of the partner organisation: this meeting acknowledges the partner's co-operation in the audit, and explains its purpose
- the local co-ordinator(s) of the programme(s) of interest
- local staff involved in programme delivery

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- local staff involved in student support
- students and graduates of the programme(s)
- employers or other external stakeholders.

The delegation may also inspect relevant documents (e.g. advertising material, enrolment records, assessment items) and tour the facilities used for the programme(s). A visit to a single partner usually takes most of a day; in some cases it may be possible to visit two partners in the same city within a single day.

It is the institution's responsibility to ensure that adequate arrangements are made with the partner to allow the visit to proceed smoothly and effectively. The institution should liaise with the Audit Co-ordinator on arrangements for travel and accommodation. Travel and accommodation costs for the delegation are paid by the QAC; the costs for the accompanying person are paid by the institution.

D.4 Consideration during the Audit Visit

Information obtained from visits outside Hong Kong is conveyed to the full audit panel at the start of the Audit Visit (if there is time, the Audit Co-ordinator may distribute a summary beforehand). The panel may need to check some of the information with the institution during the Audit Visit, and may need to explore certain issues with staff engaged in the programmes visited. The Audit Co-ordinator ensures that adequate provision to do this is made in the Audit Visit schedule.

D.5 Reporting

Findings about programmes offered outside Hong Kong are presented in appropriate parts of the audit report. At the discretion of the panel, findings are presented as a distinct section of the report or are incorporated into other sections as appropriate.

PRIVACY AND DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION

ANNEX E: PRIVACY AND DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION

An effective audit requires access to a considerable amount of information, some of which may be sensitive or confidential. The QAC has therefore developed policies and procedures to safeguard such information. Institutions and their staff can be assured that confidential information disclosed during an audit will not be publicly released or used in an inappropriate manner.

The QAC's policy on privacy and disclosure of information is as follows:

- Information provided by an institution is used only for the purpose of audit.
- Information marked by an institution as confidential is not disclosed by the QAC or by individual auditors, though it may be used to inform audit findings.
- Staff, students or other stakeholders who are invited to provide information may elect to do so in confidence, in which case the information is treated in the same way as confidential information provided by the institution.
- Audit interviews are confidential in the sense the panel does not reveal outside a session what is said by any individual, nor are individuals identified in the audit report. The institution is encouraged to require the same degree of confidentiality from interviewees.
- The QAC and auditors must keep confidential information in a secure fashion.
- Auditors are required to destroy material relating to an audit, including the Institutional Submission and any notes or annotations they have made, once an audit is complete.
- Auditors make no media or other public comment on audits in which they participate. The only persons authorised to comment on an individual audit are the Secretary and Chair of the QAC.
- QAC members, staff and auditors (on appointment to a panel) sign a confidentiality agreement which binds them to follow QAC procedures.

PERSONAL NOTES

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