

Guidelines
on
Four-stage Quality Assurance Process
under
the Qualifications Framework
QF Levels 4 to 7

Version 1.0

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Preamble

1. With the enactment of the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Ordinance (hereinafter ‘the AAVQ Ordinance’) (Cap. 592) the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) is to provide services in its capacity as the Accreditation Authority and the QR Authority under a seven-level Qualifications Framework (QF).
2. These Guidelines provide a general reference for operators who wish to use the services of the HKCAAVQ (formerly known as HKCAA) to seek accreditation status under QF.
3. These Guidelines are developed to help users gain a better understanding on the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process and are by no means exhaustive. They supersede the guidance notes and the HKCAA (now as HKCAAVQ) Handbooks that the HKCAAVQ published regarding accreditation matters prior to the enactment of the Ordinance.
4. The current Guidelines cover only the first two stages. As QF evolves, these Guidelines will be expanded and modified from time to time. To obtain the most up-to-date information, users should look up the electronic version of these Guidelines at the homepage of HKCAAVQ at www.hkcaavq.edu.hk.
5. When the HKCAAVQ work is done through a Panel under the principle of ‘peer review’, the Panel will make reference to these Guidelines but will have the right to make judgments according to their expertise and adjust the procedures where appropriate for the fulfilment of the Terms of Reference for the exercise.
6. Whilst the HKCAAVQ endeavours to ensure the accuracy of this general information, no statement, representation, warranty or guarantee, expressed or implied, is given as to its accuracy or appropriateness for use in any particular circumstances. HKCAAVQ reserves the right to delete, suspend or edit all information at any time in its absolute discretion without prior notice.
7. **Operators should refer to the Guidelines presenting the accreditation approach applicable to their profile.** However, the same standards, criteria and assessment tools are used regardless of the specific accreditation approach applied.
8. We welcome ideas and suggestions to improve the Guidelines to serve their purpose better. Please forward your suggestions or questions to info@hkcaavq.edu.hk or by phone at Tel: 3658 0000.

Abbreviation

CAP 279	<i>Education Ordinance</i>
CAP 320	<i>Post Secondary Colleges Ordinance</i>
CAP 493	<i>Non-local Higher and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance</i>
CAP 592	<i>Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Ordinance</i>
CEF	<i>Continuing Education Fund</i>
CPD	<i>Continuing Professional Development</i>
DR	<i>Discipline Review</i>
GLD	<i>Generic Level Descriptors</i>
HKCAA	<i>Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation</i>
HKCAAVQ	<i>Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications</i>
IE	<i>Initial Evaluation</i>
IR	<i>Institutional Review</i>
MDS	<i>Manpower Development Scheme</i>
PAA	<i>Programme Area Accreditation</i>
PR	<i>Periodic Review</i>
PV	<i>Programme Validation</i>
QF	<i>Qualifications Framework</i>
QR	<i>Qualifications Register</i>
RPL	<i>Recognition of Prior Learning</i>
SCS	<i>Specification of Competency Standards</i>
SUS	<i>Skills Upgrading Scheme</i>

1. What is the Qualifications Framework?

- 1.1 Qualifications Framework (QF), introduced by the Education Bureau (EDB), is a structure that rationalises and recognises academic and vocational qualifications. QF consists of seven levels, each of which is formulated as outcome-based Generic Level Descriptors (GLD) published by the Education Bureau (EDB). The GLD describes the common features of qualifications at the same level and helps locate a qualification at a specific level on QF. QF covers qualifications awarded at the completion of learning programmes in the academic, vocational and continuing education sectors; and qualifications gained by people through professional experience through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) scheme.
- 1.2 QF is mainly supported by the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process of the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ), which assures both the quality of the learning programmes and the credibility of the qualifications awarded by the evaluated operators.
- 1.3 The public face of QF is the Qualifications Register (QR) which contains all qualifications which have been quality assured under QF. For a quality assured learning programme to be entered into the QR, the following general requirements should be fulfilled:
 - The learning programme should carry an award (i.e. a qualification) as a formal approval of the achievement of the learning programme.
 - The learning programme should be accessible to learners of Hong Kong.
 - The learning programme should include formal assessments to ascertain that learners have achieved the specified learning outcomes of the programme.
 - The learning programme should correspond to an assigned QF level in accordance with the Generic Level Descriptors.

2. What is the purpose of QF?

- 2.1 The overarching purpose of QF is to facilitate lifelong learning in order to help upgrade Hong Kong's human resources.
- 2.2 This purpose can be achieved through the joint effort among students, employees, operators and employers:
 - With clear progression pathways in QF, students and employees can draw up their own road maps to upgrade their skills and pursue lifelong learning.

- With explicit educational and training needs, operators can offer more quality learning programmes that meet social and industrial needs.
- With employers’ participation in QF development process, the qualifications on QF will have wider recognition and meet the manpower development requirements of the industries.

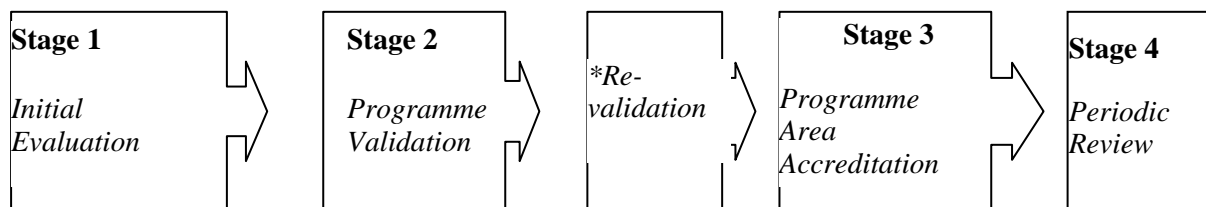
3. What is the HKCAAVQ’s role in QF?

- 3.1 The HKCAAVQ’s role in QF is to assure the quality of the learning programmes so that their qualifications can be entered into the Qualifications Register (QR) and recognised under QF.
- 3.2 As the Accreditation Authority of QF, the HKCAAVQ assesses: (1) if the operators are able to achieve their educational objectives as claimed and to operate learning programmes; and (2) if the learning programmes meet the required standards to achieve their stated learning outcomes with reference to the Generic Level Descriptors of QF. The process will also identify deficiencies that need to be addressed by operators to improve the quality of their institutional structure and their learning programmes.

4. What is the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process?

- 4.1 It is a quality assurance process with four stages, i.e. *Initial Evaluation* (IE), *Programme Validation* (PV), *Programme Area Accreditation* (PAA) and *Periodic Review* (PR), through which the HKCAAVQ evaluates operators and their learning programmes under QF. All operators that wish to have their learning programmes validated must apply for IE, followed by PV.
- 4.2 The process is outlined in the following diagram. A detailed flowchart describing the process can be found in Appendix 1(a).

FOUR-STAGE QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS



*Completion of at least two cycles of re-validation in relevant programme area(s)

- 4.3 *Initial Evaluation* is the first accreditation exercise for the HKCAAVQ to assess if operators have the institutional competency to effectively manage and provide adequate resources to the development, delivery, assessment and

quality assurance of their learning programmes and educational services. Operators must have a valid IE before they can apply to have their programmes validated. **An IE status is associated with a QF level. Within Levels 4 to 7, an IE status can cover programmes at the same level, or lower.**

- 4.4 *Programme Validation* is an overall evaluation of the learning programmes' planning and management, syllabuses, delivery arrangements, assessment methods and learning outcomes to ensure they are appropriate for the qualifications to which they lead. When the learning programmes are successfully validated, the qualifications can be entered into the QR upon the fulfilment of all requisite procedures and payment of fees as determined by the QR Authority.
- 4.5 *Programme Revalidation* is a re-evaluation of the validated learning programmes to ascertain whether the justifications for the original validation with respect to the planning and management, syllabuses, delivery arrangement, assessment methods and learning outcomes are still valid and to note progress since the last re-validation and after the programmes have been in operation for a period of time. If the learning programmes are successfully re-validated the programme(s) can stay on the QR for a specific validity period upon the fulfilment of all requisite procedures and payment of fees as determined by the QR Authority. Re-validation follows the same process as validation.
- 4.6 Operators with a track record in the area of a validated programme and who have completed at least two cycles of programme revalidation in relevant programme area(s) can be considered for *Programme Area Accreditation* (PAA) in the same area of study. Successful *Programme Area Accreditation* confers programme area accreditation status to operators. With PAA status, operators can develop and offer new learning programmes within a **defined scope of programme area** and at specified QF level(s), and enter the qualifications of those learning programmes into the QR without being subject to external quality assurance by the HKCAAVQ within the PAA validity period.
- 4.7 *Periodic Review* is a periodic monitoring and external review exercise for all operators with valid PAA status. This is a cyclical event, repeated on a regular basis, at times decided by the validity period granted for *Programme Area Accreditation*.

5. How long does the process take?

- 5.1 The timeline for completing the accreditation exercises at each stage will vary depending on the QF level of the learning programmes and the number of

learning programmes being validated. The **minimum time** required in completing the process at each stage (from receipt of the accreditation document and assuming that all requisite information by the HKCAAVQ is submitted in a timely manner) for programmes of QF Levels 4 to 7 would normally be:

- *Initial Evaluation* - 15 weeks
- *Programme Validation* - 17 weeks
- *Programme Area Accreditation* - 24 weeks
- *Periodic Review* - 20 weeks

A time schedule for an exercise will be developed with the preparation of the service agreement.

- 5.2 A weekly breakdown of a typical timeline for Initial Evaluation and Programme Validation can be found in the different sets of guidelines.

6. How to get prepared for the quality assurance process?

- 6.1 Operators are required to present evidence that they meet the required standards as specified in each stage of the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process. The evidence should be presented in the accreditation document with supporting documents, and through an on-site visit organised by the HKCAAVQ. The HKCAAVQ will assess the presented evidence and related findings to judge whether the accreditation status being sought (in respect of the operator or the programme(s)) can be granted.
- 6.2 The HKCAAVQ will also take into account that newly established operators applying for *Initial Evaluation* (IE) will not have all of their systems fully operational at the stage of IE. In such cases, the HKCAAVQ will look for a demonstration of capability and ability, rather than an established track record.
- 6.3 For *Programme Validation* of any new or operating learning programme, it is expected that through the accreditation exercises operators can demonstrate that they have the resources and capabilities to offer the programmes and that the programmes meet the required QF standards at the claimed QF level.
- 6.4 Operators applying for *Programme Area Accreditation* and *Periodic Review* should have tested systems in place and in operation to conduct internal reviews of both their organisational governance and management and the learning programmes they offer, as part of their approach to continuous improvement. Evidence from recent internal reviews should be presented in support of the accreditation document required by the HKCAAVQ.

7. What information is required?

- 7.1 Each stage in the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process has a specific purpose and therefore has to be documented by evidence to demonstrate that operators meet the required standards.
- 7.2 The required information and the possible types of evidence that should be submitted for Initial Evaluation and Programme Validation are listed in the different sets of guidelines.

8. How is the quality assurance process conducted?

- 8.1 An accreditation panel (hereafter ‘the panel’) will be convened to conduct each stage of the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process. The size and composition of the panel will depend on the stage of accreditation and the QF level(s) of the learning programmes being validated. The following members will be involved in conducting the accreditation assessment, where appropriate:
- A panel chairman, an experienced sector/subject/QA specialist
 - Members comprising
 - Sector/Subject/QA specialist(s), that is, specialist(s) in a specific discipline/industry /quality assurance issues
 - One professional staff member from the HKCAAVQ
- 8.2 The HKCAAVQ uses four guiding principles for accreditation to conduct the Four-stage QA process.
- Peer review
 - Fitness for purpose
 - Evidence-based
 - Threshold standard
- 8.3 The principle of ‘Peer Review’ is to engage sector/industry experts who have the expertise and experience in the discipline/industry/quality assurance. The role of the panel is to review the quality of operators and their learning programmes, collect and evaluate evidence and form a judgment as to whether the operators or their learning programmes meet the required standards and stated aims.
- 8.4 ‘Fitness for purpose’ means that operators and programmes are accredited against threshold standards and based on their stated objectives, the scope and level of the learning programmes they offer. As operators are different in size, complexity in operation and scope of expertise, the HKCAAVQ will take these differences into account. The minimum standards which different kinds

of operators have to meet remain the same, but the type of evidence they present may be different.

- 8.5 The accreditation process is evidence-based. ‘Evidence-based’ means that an accreditation decision is to be made with reference to evidence provided by operators to support their claim that they meet the threshold accreditation standards and their own objectives. Judgment will be made independently of any other previous determination made on the same operator and/or the same learning programme.
- 8.6 The accreditation process is conducted based on threshold standard. ‘Threshold standard’ means that assessment is based on the minimum requirements of the stipulated accreditation criteria for the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process. The accreditation panel’s assessment will be guided by the standards set out in the RELEVANT Guidelines and will be in line with the requirements of the Generic Level Descriptors and any other relevant documents.
- 8.7 In addition to verifying that the operators and their learning programmes meet the minimum standard required under QF, the Four-stage QA process is also a continuous effort for quality enhancement. The accreditation exercises could be helpful in educating operators to develop internal mechanisms aimed at further developing the programme quality.

9. What are the possible outcomes?

- 9.1 The possible outcomes are
- Approval
 - Approval with pre-condition(s) and/or requirement(s)
 - Non-approval
- 9.2 Where pre-condition(s) and/ or requirement(s) are stipulated, the fulfilment of the pre-condition(s) and/or requirement(s) within a specified timeframe is **mandatory to obtain and to maintain valid accreditation status.**

Appendix 1(a) Flow Chart of the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process

