



香港學術及職業資歷評審局
Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of
Academic & Vocational Qualifications

Review of the Accreditation Standards under the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process

Summary of Findings | February 2018

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1. Background

- 1.1 As the Accreditation Authority (AA) under the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (QF), the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) is tasked with developing and implementing the standards and mechanisms for accreditation under the QF in accordance with Section 4(1)(a) of the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (AAVQ) Ordinance (Cap. 592).
- 1.2 HKCAAVQ promulgated the Four-stage Quality Assurance (QA) Process, together with a set of accreditation standards and criteria, which underpinned the QF, in 2008. The standards and criteria set out the minimum requirements to be met by operators and learning programmes for entry into the Qualifications Register (QR), with reference to the outcome-based Generic Level Descriptors (GLDs).
- 1.3 In 2013, HKCAAVQ completed a review of the Four-stage QA Process, resulting in 11 refinements. Those refinements focused on optimising the implementation of the Four-stage QA Process without changing the accreditation standards. Since the launch of the Four-stage QA Process in 2008, the education and training landscape has changed significantly and there have been a number of important developments. In the light of these developments, and others that are anticipated to happen in the near future, in 2015, HKCAAVQ considered it was timely and useful to initiate a review of the accreditation standards (the “Review”). While the Review covers Institutional Review for the purpose of seeking registration under the Post Secondary Colleges Ordinance (Cap. 320), this summary is confined to the part of the Review covering the accreditation standards and criteria of the Four-stage QA Process and accreditation of Non-local Learning Programmes.
- 1.4 The high-level expectations of the outcomes of the Review are:
 - The accreditation standards can be consistently interpreted and understood and effectively implemented to ensure high quality outcomes while meeting the quality expectations in the current context;
 - The accreditation standards encourage development of institutional internal quality assurance capability; and
 - The accreditation standards allow for a differentiated approach in accreditation to cope with the diverse educational and training markets.
- 1.5 The Review is monitored by a Taskforce set up by the Council, and input has been sought from an Advisory Panel comprising members from a broad cross-section of the education and training sector. There is also an internal Working Group to support the Review.

2. The Need for Change

2.1 Since the launch of the Four-stage QA Process in 2008, there have been a number of important developments in the local education and training sector, which include:

Higher education sector

- Introduction of the New Academic Structure;
- Promulgation of the Revised Common Descriptors for Associate Degree and Higher Diploma Programmes under the New Academic Structure;
- Publication of graduate profile and employment pathway for all degree programmes;
- Promulgation of the roadmap with criteria for institutions registered under Cap. 320 becoming private universities;
- Increased calls for transparency;
- Change of student demographics and impact on competition and quality;

Vocational and professional education and training (VPET) sector

- Development of new Specifications of Competency Standards (SCS) and Specification of Generic (Foundation) Competencies;
- Wider participation of industries in setting up a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanism under the QF;
- Development and recognition of the work-based, non-formal and informal learning;

Qualifications Framework

- Launch of the Award Titles Scheme (ATS) and Use of Credit under the QF;
- Introduction of the Policy, Principles and Operational Guidelines for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) under the QF in Hong Kong;
- Promotion of vocational and professional education and training;
- Comparability Study of the QF and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for Lifelong Learning;

Delivery of education and training

- Proliferation of innovative delivery modes, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other methods of online delivery;
- Increased number of Hong Kong operators operating or planning to operate in the Mainland; and
- Increased use of data as evidence for quality assurance.

2.2 It is also a common practice for accreditation bodies to review their accreditation standards every five to ten years to ensure that their accreditation standards are contemporary, robust, and support the needs and development in the sector while enabling innovation. Given these developments, the conduct of a review is particularly relevant to HKCAAVQ for ensuring that the accreditation standards, which cover both higher education and VPET, continue to be fit for purpose for an increasing diversity of

operators and learning programmes, and reflect the expectations of the Hong Kong society on recognised operators and learning programmes.

- 2.3 The Review was not anticipated to be a complete overhaul of the existing accreditation standards and criteria, but was aimed at bringing them up-to-date after many important developments and in anticipation of new developments, and clarifying the requirements embedded in the standards and criteria. The Review was limited to the accreditation standards and criteria in relevant guidelines, and did not cover the outcome standards of the QF or the accreditation process.

3. Issues

3.1 Guided by a number of research themes identified by the Taskforce of the Review, a scoping exercise was conducted in 2016 to inform the research focus, resulting in the following 14 broad issues that warranted consideration for the review of the accreditation standards:

Research Theme	Issue Statement
Presentation of Standards	1. More context-sensitive guidance should be provided to facilitate consistent interpretation and application of standards (and criteria).
	2. To strengthen a systematic approach of applying GLDs in accreditation.
New Forms of Delivery	3. More guidance should be provided to facilitate consistent interpretation and application of standards (and criteria) in the context of online or blended delivery.
	4. To review the neutrality of standards with respect to operating models or delivery modes.
Measuring Outcomes	5. The standards (and criteria) should articulate the expectations in relation to learner-centered approach and outcome-based education (OBE), at both institutional and programme level.
	6. The standards should be able to encourage progressive demonstration of effective implementation of Outcome-based Education (OBE) through the Four-stage QA Process, from programme to institutional level.
Maturity of Operators	7. The standards (and criteria) should articulate a clear and progressive expectation of moving from compliance to enhancement, beyond meeting the threshold standards.
	8. There should be some minimum requirements for ensuring that an accredited operator is capable of self-improvement.
Institutional vs. Programme Accreditation	9. To rationalise and articulate the focuses of different accreditation exercises within the Four-stage QA Process.
LPA vs. re-LPA ¹	10. To develop re-LPA standards with a focus on effectiveness of implementation, changes and improvements.
Disclosure of Information	11. To consider to what extent information disclosure is relevant in different stages of the Four-stage QA Process.
Academic vs. VPET Accreditation	12. To better articulate how different evidence can be used to demonstrate meeting the same standards with respect to the nature of operators and/or programmes.
CAT ² and VPET Developments	13. More contextual guidance should be provided to facilitate shared understanding of work-based, workplace, non-formal and informal learning, and how they should be assessed in accreditation.
	14. The standards (and criteria) should articulate the expectations in relation to relevant government guidelines and policies where appropriate.

¹ LPA refers to Learning Programme Accreditation and re-LPA refers to Learning Programme Re-accreditation

² Credit Accumulation and Transfer. <https://www.hkqf.gov.hk/en/KeyFeatures/cat/index.html>.

- 3.2 These 14 issues were further summarised into three overarching dimensions which provided a higher level conceptual framework guiding the development of the revisions to the accreditation standards. These three dimensions are:
- i. Provide more guidance to operators and panels in applying the standards, while maintaining a suitable degree of flexibility to address the diversity of operators and learning programmes accredited by HKCAAVQ;
 - ii. Strengthen the embodiment of outcome-based accreditation in the accreditation standards and criteria; and
 - iii. Encourage the development of competence of operators in effective management and continuous self-improvement.
- 3.3 Based on these principles, draft revisions to the accreditation standards were developed, followed by a full-scale consultation which is detailed in the next chapter.

4. Consultation

- 4.1 Following the development of the draft revisions made to the accreditation standards, a full-scale consultation was conducted from June to August 2017 to seek views from stakeholders. The consultation was based on a Consultation Document which was divided into two parts. Part A was an Issues Paper which explained the issues, the proposed directions of change, the conceptual framework and the main considerations that have driven the development of revisions. Part B contained the draft revisions to the accreditation standards. The stakeholders covered in the consultation included:
- HKCAAVQ’s accredited operators
 - HKCAAVQ’s specialists
 - HKCAAVQ’s professional staff
 - Other relevant parties
- 4.2 The consultation collected feedback from stakeholders through the following three channels:
- Online survey with specific questions on Part A and Part B of the Consultation Document
 - Invitations to written submissions in a free-text format
 - Consultation forums
- 4.3 A significant portion of accredited operators participated in the consultation via one or more of the three channels. These operators represented more than 96% of the qualifications on the QR accredited by HKCAAVQ.

Percentage of accredited operators who participated in the consultation	Percentage of HKCAAVQ accredited qualifications on the QR
50.3%	96.5%

- 4.4 The overall findings of the consultation clearly indicated that the 14 issues were comprehensive, and were supportive of the proposed directions of change. Quantitative results from the survey are summarised in **Table 1**, which are in good agreement with the qualitative comments collected during the consultation through the other two channels. All the questions in the survey obtained an average score at 3.76 or above on the five-point scale (with strongly agree at 5 and strongly disagree at 1). This indicated that in general respondents agreed with the proposed changes in the draft revisions to the accreditation standards. There were a number of suggestions for further improvements in the language, terminologies and presentation, which will be addressed in the final version of the revised accreditation standards.

Table 1: Summary of the Survey Results

Questions in the Survey	Average Score
<i>Part 1: Questions Related to the Issues Paper (with 133 responses)</i>	
Do you think the three proposed directions of change are sufficient to address the issues identified in Section A-1 of the Consultation Document?	3.84
Do you think each stage in the Four-stage QA Process, sets suitably higher expectations for operators to demonstrate their competence of management and quality assurance of learning programmes?	4.00
The standards and criteria serve different purposes in terms of the proposed new structure of presentation. Do you think that this is appropriate?	3.99
Do you think the new structure for presentation of accreditation standards can facilitate more coherent, consistent and context-sensitive interpretation and application of the standards?	3.94
<i>Part 2a: Questions Related to Draft Revisions to Accreditation Standards in Initial Evaluation (IE) and Learning Programme Accreditation (LPA)/Learning Programme Re-accreditation (re-LPA) (with 129 responses)</i>	
Are the standards clearly articulated for IE and LPA/re-LPA?	3.95
Are the standards in IE and LPA/re-LPA clearly linked to the Purpose Statements provided in Section A-3?	3.96
Are the statements “Why this accreditation standard is important?” in IE and LPA/re-LPA helpful to explain the standards?	4.02
Are the standards in IE and LPA/re-LPA applicable to operators and learning programmes of all different types (higher education, vocational and professional education and training, in-house training and continuing education)?	3.77
Are the criteria in IE and LPA/re-LPA providing adequate flexibility for context-sensitive applications?	3.82
<i>Part 2b: Questions Related to Draft Revisions to Accreditation Standards in Programme Area Accreditation (PAA) and Periodic Review (PR) (with 37 responses)</i>	
Are the standards clearly articulated for PAA and PR?	3.95
Are the standards in PAA and PR clearly linked to the Purpose Statements provided in Section A-3?	3.95
Are the statements “Why this accreditation standard is important?” in PAA and PR helpful to explain the standards?	4.00

Questions in the Survey	Average Score
Are the standards in PAA and PR applicable to operators and learning programmes of all different types (higher education, vocational and professional education and training, in-house training and continuing education)?	3.76
Are the criteria in PAA and PR providing adequate flexibility for context-sensitive applications?	3.84

*The average score was calculated based on the five-point scale: “Strongly Agree” = 5, “Agree” = 4, “Neutral” = 3, “Disagree” = 2 and “Strongly Disagree” = 1.

4.5 The Taskforce considered the findings and suggestions from the consultation and confirmed the directions of change which are detailed in the next chapter. The Taskforce also confirmed the following positions for the finalisation of the revised accreditation standards:

- HKCAAVQ’s accreditation standards of the Four-stage QA Process collectively set out the **competence requirements** that an operator must meet to demonstrate that it can achieve its objectives and deliver the expected programme learning outcomes.
- Good governance is an important aspect of organisational competence in education and training provision.
- The Institutional Review (IR) and Discipline Review (DR) of Programme Area Accreditation (PAA) are to be merged into a single set of accreditation standards. However, following the general principle of differentiation of the accreditation approach, an operator may be exempted from certain requirements depending on its accreditation track record.
- Operators are expected to regularly review the effectiveness of their internal quality assurance systems.
- Accreditation of Non-local Learning Programmes is based on partnership as defined by the partnership agreement between the local and non-local operators. The track record from a partnership cannot be used to substantiate an application for PAA for a local operator.
- Benchmarking is a good practice that should be appropriately adopted by operators in reviewing their organisational and/or programme performance.
- Regardless of the nature of a learning programme, the programme structure should be underpinned by a logical sequence of content and activities.

- Whether to allow franchising of programmes (i.e. the awarding body authorises another organisation to deliver a programme leading to one of its qualifications) falls outside the scope of the Review.
- Evidence requirements are to be detached from the accreditation standards so that it is more convenient to bring them up-to-date from time to time.

5. Changes Adopted after the Consultation

- 5.1 The Four-stage QA Process is designed to assess different aspects of organisational competence at different stages of the Process. In the revised accreditation standards, these aspects are ordered under different **Domains of Competence** to serve the purpose of a particular stage as described by a **Purpose Statement**. The Purpose Statement and Domains of Competence are set out below:

Initial Evaluation (IE):

Purpose Statement	Domain of Competence
To ascertain whether an operator is competent to operate learning programme(s) that meet QF standards up to a certain QF level.	IE-1 Organisational Governance and Management IE-2 Financial Viability and Resources Management IE-3 Organisational Staffing IE-4 Organisational Quality Assurance

Learning Programme Accreditation (LPA)/Re-accreditation (re-LPA):

Purpose Statement	Domain of Competence
The purpose is twofold: To ascertain whether a learning programme (proposed or accredited) meets a QF standard to achieve the claimed objectives. To ascertain whether the operator of a learning programme is competent to continuously monitor and improve the effectiveness of its programme operation to achieve the claimed programme objectives.	LPA-1 Programme Objectives and Learning Outcomes LPA-2 Learner Admission and Selection LPA-3 Programme Structure and Content LPA-4 Learning, Teaching and Assessment LPA-5 Programme Leadership and Staffing LPA-6 Learning, Teaching and Enabling Resources/Services LPA-7 Programme Approval, Review and Quality Assurance

Programme Area Accreditation (PAA):

Purpose Statement	Domain of Competence
To ascertain whether an operator is competent to quality assure its learning programme(s) within a programme area up to a certain QF level, as demonstrated from the track record of its operation of accredited learning programmes in a particular discipline or industry area, and	Institutional Domain: PAA-1 Organisational Governance and Management PAA-2 Strategic Planning and Development PAA-3 Financial Management and Viability PAA-4 Organisational Quality Assurance and Enhancement

its capacity to enhance its organisational effectiveness to achieve the educational/training objectives.	Programme Area Domain: PAA-5 Programme Area Development and Management PAA-6 Learning, Teaching and Assessment PAA-7 Staffing and Staff Development PAA-8 Programme Area Resources and Services
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Periodic Institutional Review (PIR) [formerly known as Periodic Review (PR)]:

Purpose Statement	Domain of Competence
To ascertain whether an operator continues to be effective to achieve its vision and mission by systematically enhancing quality of its operation by formulating and implementing actions based on evidence.	PIR-1 Organisational Effectiveness and Planning PIR-2 Organisational Leadership and Staffing PIR-3 Programme Area Development and Management PIR-4 Management of Resources and Services PIR-5 Organisational Quality Assurance and Enhancement

- 5.2 For each domain in a stage, an accreditation standard is developed to describe the level of competence applicable to the purpose of that stage. **For each standard, a holistic determination will be made as to whether the standard has been met**, taking into consideration all evidence made available by operators during the conduct of an accreditation exercise. To provide more guidance to operators and panels in assessing whether a standard is met, each accreditation standard is accompanied by a set of minimum requirements and explanatory notes. Minimum requirements are to be complied with by all operators and programmes. Explanatory notes explain why the accreditation standard is important and also the contextual matters that should be considered depending on the nature of operators and/or the learning programmes. An example of a domain of competence in the IE stage can be found in [Appendix 1](#).
- 5.3 **Evidence Guides** will be developed to describe the possible sources of evidence to demonstrate competence against the revised accreditation standards, providing more specific guidance to address the diversity of operators and learning programmes that are subject to accreditation by HKCAAVQ.
- 5.4 With the new structure and positions confirmed by the Taskforce, the 14 issues identified are being addressed in the revised accreditation standards (see **Table 2** below).

Table 2: How the 14 Issues are Addressed in the Revised Accreditation Standards

Issue Statement	How it is addressed in the revised accreditation standards
1. More context-sensitive guidance should be provided to facilitate consistent interpretation and application of standards (and criteria).	Explanatory notes are provided for each standard to help operators and panels in assessing whether a standard is met.
2. To strengthen a systematic approach of applying GLDs in accreditation.	There are references from the accreditation standards and explanatory notes to the GLDs where appropriate.
3. More guidance should be provided to facilitate consistent interpretation and application of standards (and criteria) in the context of online or blended delivery.	The revised accreditation standards are neutral in terms of models and modes of delivery. Evidence requirements for specific models or modes will be provided.
4. To review the neutrality of standards with respect to operating models or delivery modes.	The revised accreditation standards are neutral in terms of models and modes of delivery. Specific considerations, for example, collaboration provisions, are provided where appropriate.
5. The standards (and criteria) should articulate the expectations in relation to learner-centered approach and outcome-based education (OBE), at both institutional and programme level.	The revised accreditation standards clearly differentiate different types of outcomes at learner, programme and/or organisational levels.
6. The standards should be able to encourage progressive demonstration of effective implementation of OBE through the Four-stage QA Process, from programme to institutional level.	The revised accreditation standards are designed to drive the alignment of outcomes at learner, programme and/or organisational levels.
7. The standards (and criteria) should articulate a clear and progressive expectation of moving from compliance to enhancement, beyond meeting the threshold standards.	The Purpose Statements clearly show a progression from meeting minimum competence requirements to a focus on improving effectiveness of actual implementation.
8. There should be some minimum requirements for ensuring that an accredited operator is capable of self-improvement.	All operators are expected to have internal quality assurance system capable of monitoring performance and making enhancements.
9. To rationalise and articulate the focuses of different accreditation exercises within the Four-stage QA Process.	A Purpose Statement is defined for each stage, showing the different focuses of different accreditation exercises.
10. To develop re-LPA standards with a focus on effectiveness of implementation, changes and improvements.	The Purpose Statement of LPA/re-LPA clearly articulates a requirement on continuous improvement based on actual outcomes of implementation.
11. To consider to what extent information disclosure is relevant in different stages of the Four-stage QA Process.	The revised accreditation standards require that learners enrolled in a learning programme are provided with accurate and up-to-date information about the programme and the qualifications that the programme may lead to.

Issue Statement	How it is addressed in the revised accreditation standards
12. To better articulate how different evidence can be used to demonstrate meeting the same standards with respect to the nature of operators and/or programmes.	Evidence Guides will be published with consideration of the nature of operators and/or programmes.
13. More contextual guidance should be provided to facilitate shared understanding of work-based, workplace, non-formal and informal learning, and how they should be assessed in accreditation.	The revised accreditation standards are neutral in terms of models and modes of delivery. Evidence requirements for specific models or modes will be provided.
14. The standards (and criteria) should articulate the expectations in relation to relevant government guidelines and policies where appropriate.	Special considerations relevant to government guidelines and policies are provided where appropriate.

6. Implementation/Transition

- 6.1 The implementation plan of the revised accreditation standards will follow the below timeline:
- i. The revised accreditation standards of the Four-stage QA Process and the Evidence Guides will be promulgated on 1 April 2018.
 - ii. The revised accreditation standards will take effect for accreditation documents submitted after 1 April 2019.
 - iii. HKCAAVQ may invite operators to pilot test the revised accreditation standards in the transition period from 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019.
- 6.2 HKCAAVQ will provide training on the revised accreditation standards for operators and specialists starting from 1 April 2018.
- 6.3 Any appeal against an accreditation decision will be based on the accreditation standards adopted when the accreditation exercise is conducted.

Appendix 1: An Illustration of the Revised Structure of Presentation

Domain: IE-1 Organisational Governance and Management

Accreditation Standard

The governing body of the operator has clearly defined and appropriate educational/training objectives and has implemented a management structure to realise those objectives, for the delivery of learning programme(s) that fall within the scope of the QF level(s) sought.

Minimum requirements:

- IE-1.1 The operator is an organisation, or part of one, that can legally operate learning programmes in Hong Kong.
- IE-1.2 The people with key responsibilities for its education and training operations are fit-and-proper persons.
- IE-1.3 The operator has governing and management team members, structures, policies and processes to effectively manage its operation and they are responsible for the quality of its educational/training.
- IE-1.4 The operator has a governance and management team with appropriate skills and expertise to lead an education/organisation and to manage its learning programme(s).
- IE-1.5 The operator has reliable administration and management systems and procedures in place to ensure security, accuracy and currency of its records.
- IE-1.6 Learners enrolled in a learning programme are provided with accurate and up-to-date information about the programme and the qualifications that the programme may lead to.
- IE-1.7 The governing body must ensure that the name of the operator adequately represents the nature of its operation (reflecting the learning programme(s) and the corresponding award(s)).

Explanatory Notes for IE-1

Why this accreditation standard is important

This standard is to ensure that the operator has established governance and management arrangements incorporating input from key stakeholders, which can ensure that key decision-making processes are effective in continuously assessing and enhancing the quality and effectiveness of its own operation, and protecting the interests of learners.

A collaborative provision refers to the provision of learning programme(s) leading or contributing to the award of credit or a qualification that are delivered, assessed or supported through an arrangement involving more than one parties. In the context of non-local programmes, the term 'operator' refers to the collaborative provision as defined by a formal partnership agreement between the local and non-local operator.

Matters for consideration

- The operator assumes full accountability and responsibility for its education and training operations, regardless of whether any third-parties, including its parent or associated organisation(s), are involved.
- The operator has a clear structure, in terms of functions and responsibility, for decision-making and management of its education and training operations.
- The operator has developed a strategic plan which has identified educational/training objectives, and is supported by implementation plan(s) with measureable performance indicators.
- The operator has procedures to handle grievances and/or complaints from staff and learners in a fair and transparent manner.
- The operator has policies and procedures in place which ensure protection of learners, covering issues including but not limited to conflicts of interest, discrimination, harassment, and responsibility to learners.
- The operator has policies that set out arrangements for learners enrolled in a learning programme to

complete their qualifications in the event of termination or closure of the organisation/programme(s).

Special considerations for Collaborative Programmes

- Each awarding body within a partnership must either have a self-accrediting status or have already obtained a recognised accreditation status for the collaborative programme(s).
- Each partner in the collaboration must enter into a collaborative provision as a matter of organisational policy. A properly authorised body within the governance and management structure of the organisation with the authority to commit the necessary resources must have taken the decision to enter into a contract.
- The non-local operator should be fully authorised to operate in the country in which it is based, and the terms of its accreditation should permit (or not prohibit) its participation in collaborative provision with a partner outside its own country as well as to award qualifications.
- There should be a written and legally binding agreement setting out the rights and obligations of the partners. The agreement must cover the responsibilities of each operator and the specific matters relating to each learning programme offered through the collaboration.
- There should be a clear, written statement of responsibilities for making policy and operational decisions concerning the learning programmes covered by the collaboration. The awarding body should assume overall responsibility for the academic standards and quality of the collaborative programme.
- The partnership must have effective arrangements for information to be shared between the partners.

Note: For illustration purpose only. The revised accreditation standards of the Four-stage QA Process will be promulgated on 1 April 2018.