



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

# Review of Accreditation Standards and Criteria

Discussion Paper | May 2016

# Introduction

1. As the Accreditation Authority (AA) under the 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 Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (AAVQ) Ordinance (Cap. 592).
2. HKCAAVQ promulgated the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process, together with a set of accreditation standards and criteria, which underpins the QF in 2008. The standards and criteria set out the minimum standards in relation to operators and learning programmes for entry into the Qualifications Register, with reference to the outcome-based Generic Level Descriptors (GLD).
3. Since 2008, many developments have taken place in the education and training sector of Hong Kong, while international practice in quality assurance and accreditation have also evolved significantly. It is also 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 and criteria, that cover both higher education and vocational and professional education and training, are fit for purpose for an increasingly wide diversity of operators and learning programmes.
4. In 2013, HKCAAVQ completed a review of the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process, resulting in 11 refinements. Those refinements focused on optimising the implementation of the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process, without changing the accreditation standards. HKCAAVQ is now conducting a review of the standards and criteria (the Review). The scope of the Review covers the accreditation standards and criteria of the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process, Institutional Review for the purpose of seeking registration under the Post Secondary Colleges Ordinance (Cap. 320), and accreditation of Non-local Learning Programmes.
5. Initial preparation of the Review began in late 2015 and it is expected that the revised standards will be endorsed by the HKCAAVQ Council in the second quarter of 2018. There are four distinct phases in the Review:
  - a. Preparation Phase  
Charting and development of project plan and scope
  - b. Research Phase  
Collection and analysis of data for identification of issues. This involves a range of research activities covering desktop research, focus group meeting and survey for example.
  - c. Consultation and Deliberation Phase  
Consultation with stakeholders on proposed directions of change.

d. Finalisation Phase

Finalisation of refinements to accreditation standards and criteria.

6. HKCAAVQ is now entering the second phase of the Review. The purpose of this Discussion Paper is to collect views from stakeholders **for informing the scope and seeking feedback on the focus of the Review**. In this document, there are a number of questions serving as prompts for reflection and further exploration, and as guiding questions in the focus group meetings with stakeholders. They do not represent the considered view of HKCAAVQ at this juncture. There will be a formal and wide consultation process on the proposed directions of change, which is the third phase of the Review.

# Background

7. The Four-stage Quality Assurance Process is the process adopted by HKCAAVQ to accredit operators and their learning programmes for recognition under the QF. The Guidelines on the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process (**Four-stage Guidelines**) and the corresponding guidance notes, describes the four stages in the process and encompasses the accreditation standards and criteria of each of the four stages. The Four-stage Quality Assurance Process is depicted below.



8. According to Cap. 592 Schedule 3, for qualifications that may be entered into the QR, HKCAAVQ, as the Accreditation Authority, has to make the following determinations:
- (a) the operator of the learning programme is competent to operate learning programmes that meet QF standards;
  - (b) the learning programme meets a QF standard; and
  - (c) the operator of the learning programme is competent
    - (i) to ensure that the programmes operated by the operator meet QF standards; and
    - (ii) to determine whether the programmes operated by the operator meet QF standards.

In Cap. 592, “meet a QF standard” is defined with reference to the levels of the QF, which are characterised by a set of Generic Level Descriptors (GLD) which specifies, in four domains, the outcome standards expected of the qualifications at each level. The accreditation standards, which are not the outcome standards, are developed for HKCAAVQ to make the determinations listed above. The outcome standards in the form of the GLD are owned by the Government and outside the scope of this Review. Driven by the outcome-based approach which underpins the QF, HKCAAVQ’s accreditation standards are designed to ensure that learning programmes support students in attaining the intended learning outcomes upon graduation from an accredited learning programme.

9. IE and LPA correspond to (a) and (b) respectively, while PAA and PR are related to (c). The four stages are designed to progressively develop Operators’ competency in self-review, self-monitoring and enhancement of their internal quality assurance capacity. The external accreditation exercises help Operators develop internal mechanisms to improve the quality of their institutional operations and learning programmes. Each stage builds on the previous one and allows Operators to demonstrate their maturity in developing and

operating accredited programmes over time and to construct a track record of successful accreditation. In recognition of the diversity of operators and programmes, HKCAAVQ has not been overly prescriptive in its accreditation approach.

10. In the context of this Review, standard and criteria<sup>1</sup> are defined as follows:

**Standard** – A standard sets out the requirement relating to an aspect of an operator or programme that a determination will be made on whether sufficient evidence has been provided to demonstrate that the requirement has been met.

**Criteria** – A standard is supported by a set of criteria which sets out important expectations in relation to the corresponding standard. The criteria serve as guidance for institutions to consider whether the evidence provided is sufficient to demonstrate how a standard is met.

The accreditation standards, and the corresponding criteria, are important for ensuring that an accredited operator or programme meets the outcome standards as required under the ordinance.

11. For operators wanting to have their registered/exempted non-local courses under the Non-local Higher and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance (Cap. 493) accredited for entry into QR leading to recognition under the QF, they have to undertake the Non-local Programme (NLP) accreditation. The NLP accreditation model is based on the Four-stage Guidelines, with the same accreditation standards and criteria for accreditation of learning programmes, whereas the Initial Evaluation stage has been adapted for assessment of a partnership instead of a local institution. The process, standards and criteria of NLP accreditation are elaborated in the Guidelines on Accreditation of Non-local Learning Programmes (**NLP Guidelines**) and the corresponding submission guides.

12. HKCAAVQ also conducts Institutional Review for institutions seeking registration under Cap. 320 (IR for Cap. 320). A post-secondary college registered under Cap. 320 may, with the prior approval of the Chief Executive in Council, award degrees. For an institution registered under Cap. 320, its learning programmes are still subject to learning programme accreditation and periodic re-accreditation under the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process.

13. A list of the Guidelines that fall within the scope of the Review is provided below:

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| <p>(i) <b>Guidelines on the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process</b> (<a href="#">link</a>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Initial Evaluation (<a href="#">link</a>)</li></ul> |
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<sup>1</sup> In the current guidelines, “criteria” are the areas for accreditation consideration, and “standards” are the minimum requirements to be met under each criterion.

- Learning Programme Accreditation ([link](#))
- Programme Area Accreditation ([link](#))
- Periodic Review ([link](#))

**(ii) NLP Guidelines**

- Guidelines on Accreditation of Non-local Learning Programmes ([link](#))

**(iii) IR for Cap. 320 Guidelines**

- Guidelines on Institutional Review for the Purpose of Seeking Cap. 320 Registration ([link](#))

# The Need for Change

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

## *Developments in the 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 university;
- Increased calls for transparency;
- Change of student demographics and impact on competition and quality;

## *Developments in the vocational and professional education and training sector*

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

## *Development of the Qualifications Framework*

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

## *Development of the delivery of education and training*

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

15. In the light of community expectations of quality and against the backdrop of the changing environment of the education and training sector, it is timely and useful to initiate a review to consider whether the accreditation standards and criteria contained in the different sets of Guidelines and relevant Guidance Notes (as listed in Paragraph 7), sufficiently address

the current and foreseeable developments of the sector, and reflect the expectations of the Hong Kong society on operators and learning programmes.

16. The Review is not anticipated to be an overhaul of the existing accreditation standards and criteria, but is aimed at bringing them up-to-date after many important developments (and in anticipation of new developments) and to clarify the requirements embedded in the standards and criteria. As explained before, the Review is limited to the accreditation standards and criteria in relevant guidelines, and does not cover the outcome standards of the Qualifications Framework.

## Key Questions

17. In light of the many developments (and in anticipation of new developments) in the education and training sector, HKCAAVQ considers it important to ensure that the accreditation standards and criteria are up-to-date and clearly articulate the high expectations of the Hong Kong society on the quality of the education and training provisions in Hong Kong.

Q 1

- Could the existing accreditation standards and criteria be enhanced to better address the current and future environment? If so, what issues should be considered?

Q 2

- What are the developments that you think HKCAAVQ should take into consideration in order to ensure the relevance of our accreditation standards and criteria in the current and future education and training environment? (One example is the proliferation of online delivery modes).

18. The QF is underpinned by the outcome-based educational philosophy, characterised by outcome-based GLD which describe the common features of qualifications at seven different levels. The GLD describe the requirements of each level in four aspects – “Knowledge and Intellectual Skills”, “Processes”, “Application, Autonomy and Accountability” and “Communications, IT and Numeracy”. Different industries may draw up their own competency requirements and standards, known as “Specification of Competency Standards” (SCSs), by making reference to the GLD. The outcome standards in the form of the GLD are owned by the Government and outside the scope of this Review.

Q 3

- Is the implementation of outcome-based education sufficiently captured in the existing accreditation standards and criteria? If not, what improvements are required?

19. In addition to safeguarding the standards of education and training in Hong Kong, HKCAAVQ also endeavours to enhance the quality of local education and training by

providing a pathway for operators to gain maturity in quality assuring their learning programmes throughout the four stages of accreditation. Therefore, an operator should be able to identify the appropriate evidence in consideration of its own vision, mission and strategic directions to demonstrate meeting the standards.

Q 4

- How can the accreditation standards and criteria be enhanced to encourage development of internal quality assurance capability of the operators for continuous improvement?

Q 5

- How can the current structure and format of the accreditation standards and criteria be enhanced to provide more clarity and guidance to operators when evaluating whether they meet the accreditation requirements?

Q 6

- Do you think there should be different standards for accreditation and re-accreditation of learning programmes? Please explain the reasons for your response.

20. To further promote public and international understanding about the qualifications recognised under the QF, it is important that adequate and appropriate information about accredited learning programmes is available to learners and employers. In this regard, regular disclosure of key information, such as staffing and graduate statistics of learning programmes, may be conducive to a culture of transparency and accountability. Internationally, there is a trend to require institutions to publish more information especially in the following four categories:

- Student data
- Staff data
- Output/Outcome data (e.g. graduation and employment data)
- Financial data

Q 7

- From the perspective of enhancing transparency, how can the standards and criteria be improved to support the availability of accessible and appropriate information for learners and employers?

21. It is a rather unique feature of HKCAAVQ that it provides both academic and vocational accreditation services. This is in good alignment with the vision that the QF is to facilitate articulation among academic, vocational and continuing education, with a common quality assurance mechanism for qualifications offered by the non-self-accrediting institutions. Currently, the same accreditation standards and criteria are adopted in the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process in both sectors. There have been views that more considerations should be given to the diversity and the different nature of academic and vocational education/training.

Q 8

- Do you think there should be different sets of accreditation standards for the academic and vocational sectors? Please explain the reasons for your response.

22. Credit is often described as “a common currency of volume of learning” which is important for promoting acceptance of the QF locally and internationally. With the implementation of the Policy, Principles and Operational Guidelines for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) under QF in HK, the recognition and transfer of prior learning to future learning will be facilitated, thus building effective pathways to support learner mobility and progression. With the rebranding of vocational education to vocational and professional education and training (VPET) in progress, it is believed that CAT will play an increasingly important role in linking vocational and professional education and training.

Q 9

- Do you think the current accreditation standards and criteria sufficiently address the developments of CAT and VPET? If not, what changes are required?

Q 10

- Do you have any views that are not covered in Question 1-9 but are considered relevant to this Review? Please explain the reasons for your response.

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