

Chapter 5

Accreditation: A Commodity or a Quest for Quality?



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Abstract This chapter presents the current trends in accreditation schemes based on the analysis of the UK-based schemes such as Accreditation UK, British Accreditation Council's (BAC)/International English Language Provider Accreditation Scheme (IELP) and BALEAP Accreditation Scheme (BAS), the Finnish audit model of quality systems in higher education institutions, Languages Canada, as well as international schemes designed specifically for language training providers: The Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA), Equals and NEAS. The chapter examines the scope of the schemes: quality standards and criteria, the role of self-assessment and accreditation processes. It considers whether the schemes go beyond awarding quality labels and if they stimulate improvement incentives at the institutional level and facilitate programmes of continuous development.

5.1 Introduction

It is a cliché to say that in the era of globalisation and increasing competition, the development and growth of countries depends—among other factors—on the standards and performance of their education and training systems. Globalisation has generated a trend to adopt quality-focused strategies for the development of educational sectors both state and private and at all levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. Quality has become a household name defined as a set of attributes, fitness for purpose or value for money and concepts such as quality assurance, quality audits, quality control or quality culture (Harvey, 2004–18) are included in any discourse on standards in education. At the same time, globalisation has created demands for defining international standards which centre around concepts such as transparency, communication of the learning outcomes, self-evaluation, continuous improvement and development or accountability. The growth and expansion of the language

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education sector on the global scale has confirmed the need for visible quality labels which, over the last three decades, has led to the establishment of a number of accreditation schemes. They represent an increasing move towards more highly organised attempts to manage the delivery and assessment of quality in education which has been reinforced by the growing competition among educational institutions for students, money and reputation locally, nationally and globally (Blanc-Ramirez & Berger, 2014).

Accreditation is commonly understood to be a formal statement confirming that an institution 'has met standards set by external regulators' (Oxford English Dictionary [Online](#)) following a cyclical evaluation. Accreditation is the way through which an institution can communicate its mission and vision and its commitment to quality. It helps institutions market their programmes and services and gives them visible labelling, recognised locally in case of the national schemes and globally for the international ones. Accreditation is not an event, it is a process whose complexity should not be underestimated. It is a challenge for accreditation agencies as well as institutions. Designing an accreditation scheme requires careful consideration of a number of issues such as:

- The scope of accreditation: private or public institutions, or both.
- The framework: definitions, criteria and standards.
- Methodological approaches and practical implications.
- Inclusion of self-assessment, peer evaluation, public report.
- Respect for institutional autonomy.

There are further considerations which should not be ignored:

- How can a scheme serve a diverse constituency?
- How to establish an appropriate balance between external accountability and institutional autonomy?
- Will the tools recognise/reward excellence or will they only define and assess minimum standards?

In the process of designing an accreditation scheme, an agency or any other organisation should take into consideration the perspectives and expectations of all stakeholders, as it can be argued that within institutions which will apply for accreditation there will be a wide range of perspectives defined by the roles and positions of those involved in decision making. An imperative on the part of the owners and managers could differ considerably from the perspective of the academic staff. For the latter, the incentive will be to enhance standards, encourage self-evaluation and development and foster the culture of collegiality and support, whereas management may be more interested in accountability and is more likely to consider other tangible benefits of accreditation such as measurable reputation, commercial success or return on investment. For either group of the stakeholders, the visibility and recognition of the quality label will be essential. The accreditation scheme should accommodate different objectives and interests, and the process should bring positive outputs. It should be stressed that one of the most important factors of the accreditation process is the involvement of all staff, its understanding of the purpose of accreditation so that it is not perceived as simply an end in itself or resented for creating extra workload.

5.2 Overview of Selected Quality Assurance Schemes for Language Education: Typology and Description

The last three decades have witnessed the development of a number of accreditation schemes as nearly every nation has developed its own accreditation system for quality assurance in foreign language education. In earlier days, these schemes operated solely at the national level and focused on private language schools and English as a foreign language. However, an increasing number of institutions started seeking international accreditation. This trend was reinforced by the impact of globalisation and the growing internationalisation of standards in education, and for higher education it was initiated by the signing of the Bologna Process accord in 1999. This created the need for schemes which could be applied across a wide range of providers: stand-alone language schools and training centres as well as large and complex organisations such as universities. The demand generated the supply and a number of schemes have been established which—similarly to educational institutions—compete on the international arena. The geographical and sectorial expansion of accreditation schemes has become a fact of life.

In this section of the chapter, the following accreditation schemes will be examined:

- The UK-based schemes: Accreditation UK, BAC/IELP and BALEAP.
- The US-based scheme: CEA.
- Languages Canada.
- The Australian scheme: NEAS.
- An international scheme: Eequals.
- The Finnish scheme for HEI: FINEEC.

These schemes have been selected because they are well established both in the national and international arenas and have been designed with various types of educational organisations in mind: public and private, stand-alone independent language centres and schools as well as centres belonging to international chains, institutions under contract with colleges and universities and university-based programmes.

5.3 Criteria and Standards

The schemes mentioned above operate on the basis of clearly articulated and transparent sets of criteria and standards. The range and precise format of which differs depending on the scope of accreditation offered and its geographical and sectorial coverage.

Accreditation UK operates as a partnership between the British Council and English UK and the scheme is applied in the UK and for English only. It was established in its present format in 1996 and is open to providers of English language teaching services: language schools, home tuition providers, further education and

higher education institutions, international study centres and independent schools (Accreditation UK Handbook, 2016–2017). Its main purpose is to develop, establish and maintain quality standards for English language provision delivered in the UK for international students and accredits organisations which meet the scheme's standards. The most significant benefit it offers to accredited providers is eligibility to enrol students on a short-term student visa.

The scheme covers four main standards divided into categories and each of them includes a set of criteria.

Management:

- Legal and statutory regulations.
- Staff management.
- Student administration.
- Quality assurance.
- Publicity—information available before enrolment.

Resources and Environment:

- Premises and facilities.
- Learning resources.

Teaching and Learning:

- Academic staff profile.
- Academic management.
- Course design and implementation.
- Learner management.
- Classroom observation.

Welfare and Student Services:

- Care of students.
- Accommodation.
- Leisure opportunities.
- Care of under 18 students (if applicable).

Additional criteria include:

- Criteria for the inspection of home tuition (Home Tuition Register, Terms and Conditions, Placement, Environment).
- Criteria for the inspection of international study centres (Management and Communication, Teaching, Teacher Support, Teacher Qualifications, Curriculum, Placement, Publicity).
- Criteria for the inspection of in-company provision (Managing Client Expectations, Premises, Timetabling and Course Design, Welfare and Student Services).

International English Language Provider Accreditation Scheme (IELP) launched in 2018 by the British Accreditation Council (BAC), is a voluntary quality assurance scheme for English language providers both private and public operating outside the

UK. The scheme covers four main areas and defines minimum standards for every inspection area (IELP Scheme Document, 2018):

- Management, staffing, administration and quality assurance.
- Teaching, learning and assessment including academic management, course planning and resources.
- Learner welfare including accommodation services and social and leisure programmes.
- Premises and facilities including online, distance and blended learning provision.

The BALEAP Accreditation Scheme (BAS) is a peer-review quality assurance and enhancement scheme designed to establish and sustain the standards required for specialised courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in further and higher education, predominantly in the UK (BALEAP Accreditation Handbook, 2016). The current criteria for assessment of EAP courses are derived from a Code of Practice established in 1989 and reviewed in 2011, 2014 and 2016. There are five main areas of assessment:

- Institutional Context: communications, staff recruitment, its profile and development, terms and conditions and working environment, legal requirements concerning students visas, health and safety, learning and welfare resources.
- Course Management: academic staff qualifications and responsibilities, monitoring of effectiveness of teaching and course evaluation.
- Course Design: principles of course design, its aims and learning outcomes, course components, learning and teaching resources.
- Teaching and Learning: teachers' skills and competencies, lesson preparation and delivery.
- Assessment, Evaluation and Progression: the effectiveness and validity of assessment criteria and processes, summative assessment, progression routes, exit assessment, reports and certificates.

The Australia-based scheme NEAS provides quality assurance services to ELT and vocational providers (universities, colleges and high schools) in Australia and internationally, mainly in South East Asia and the Middle East. The NEAS Quality Assurance Framework comprises seven Quality Areas (NEAS Quality Assurance Framework Version 3.0, 2018). Within each Quality Area, there are Quality Principles, which describe salient aspects of quality, and have been mapped against the related requirements of the National (Australian) Code Practice and the standards for English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS). Each Quality Principle is supported by Quality Drivers, which specify the key elements of the Quality Principles. The NEAS Quality Framework covers the following Quality Areas:

- Teaching, Learning and Assessment: course design, teachers' qualifications, student assessment, course delivery, learning strategy, student support and feedback.

- The Student Experience: application and enrolment processes, provision for student well-being and welfare, information and support offered to students and evaluation, review and complaint procedures.
- Resources and Facilities: professional workplace, teaching and study spaces, students facilities and services, resources for courses available students and teachers.
- Administration, Management and Staffing: organisational structure, staff recruitment policy, staff qualifications, terms and conditions, staff performance and development, communication and dissemination of information.
- Promotion and Student Recruitment: promotional material and information, promotion policies, commitment to quality assurance and display of the NEAS logo.
- Welfare of Students Aged Under 18 Years: arrangements to facilitate student's recruitment, transit and reception, accommodation services, welfare, safety and security of the Centre's environment, training of staff responsible for assuring student well-being.
- Strategy, Risk and Governance: systems of strategic and business planning, organisational structure and reporting, financial systems, risk assessment and management, ethics and culture, health and safety.

The Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA) is a specialised accrediting agency that focuses on post-secondary intensive English language programmes and institutions, and it conducts accreditation activities in the USA and internationally. The CEA Scheme comprises 44 individual standards in 11 areas (CEA Standards for English Language Programs and Institutions, 2017). The standards adhere to the requirements for specific standard areas as identified by the US Department of Education regulations for recognised accrediting agencies. The 11 areas include the following standards:

- Mission.
- Curriculum: course goals and objectives, student learning outcomes, methodologies and materials.
- Faculty: qualifications and competencies of faculty members, job descriptions and terms and conditions, continuous professional development and performance reviews.
- Facilities, Equipment and Supplies.
- Administrative and Fiscal Capacity: administrative structure, governance system, administrative staff (job descriptions, competencies, continuous professional development, performance reviews), administrative policies and procedures, information channels, compliance with law, students' and personnel's contractual records and financial policies.
- Student Services: admission and enrolment policies, academic and personal counselling, pre-arrival information, induction programme, health insurance, social and recreational programme, housing and access to information.
- Recruiting.
- Length and Structure of Program Study.
- Student Achievement: placement system, assessment of progress, achievement of learning outcomes, written records and clear assessment criteria and procedures.

- Student Complaints.
- Program Development, Planning, and Review Standard.

Languages Canada is Canada's primary language organization representing its two official languages: English and French which is recognized by the Canadian government and internationally. The mission of Languages Canada is to ensure the best interest of students studying or planning to study English and/or French in Canada (Languages Canada Quality Assurance Scheme Accreditation Handbook Orion Assessment Services, 2017). Adherence to the Standards and Quality Assurance Scheme is a requirement of membership of Languages Canada. There are six areas examined and within each area there are main standards and additional specifications:

- Student Admissions: registration procedures, programme information, statements of what fees include, policy for handling student records, immigration and insurance requirements.
- Student Services: general and academic orientation, support services such as financial and legal advice, tutoring, medical services, accommodation, extracurricular activities and student welfare.
- Teaching Staff: teacher qualifications, linguistic competence, cross cultural awareness, performance appraisals, class observation and professional development.
- Curriculum: course design, course content and objectives, system of levels, methodology, testing and placement, academic resources and excursions.
- Marketing and Recruiting: student recruitment, procedures for dealing with agents and publicity materials.
- Administration: leadership, organisational structure, job descriptions and professional profile of academic leaders, administration systems and processes, policies, orientation, induction and support for staff, terms of employment, facilities and operational reviews.

Eaquals is an international member organisation whose mission is to help develop excellent standards in language teaching and learning and support quality in the teaching of any language, in any country and in any education sector. The Eaquals values such as plurilingualism, intercultural understanding, international cooperation and lifelong learning are embedded in the Eaquals Charters: The General Charter, the Charter for Course Participants, the Staff Charter and the Information Charter. The Quality Standards of the Eaquals Accreditation Scheme are derived from the Charters and are a practical expression of their philosophy. The Standards are arranged in twelve Categories which correspond to different aspects of the activity of a Language Education Centre. Within each category, there is a number of specific standards and a set of indicators of compliance. The twelve categories (The Eaquals Inspection Scheme Manual Version 7.1, 2016) include:

- Management and Administration: institutional ethos and mission, leadership and organisational structure, compliance with legislation.
- Teaching and Learning: pedagogical approach, the quality of course delivery, lesson planning and learning outcomes, use of technology and resources.

- Course Design and Supporting Systems: learning programmes (course objectives and content), system of levels, academic management and coordination structure.
- Assessment and Certification: placement procedures, formative and summative assessment, evaluation of progress and exit assessment, information on public examinations, reports and certificates.
- Academic Resources: coursebooks, core course resources, online learning platforms, reference materials, equipment and electronic connectivity.
- Learning Environment: teaching and studying environment, non-pedagogical facilities, health and safety of students and staff.
- Client Services: welfare of learners, pastoral care of students under the age of 18, accommodation services, leisure programmes, advice and support available to learners.
- Quality Assurance: monitoring and evaluation of the learning experience, class observations, student feedback.
- Staff Profile and Development: competencies, experience and qualifications of managers, teachers and administrative staff, continuous professional development for staff, performance reviews.
- Staff Employment Terms: employment contracts, terms and conditions offered to staff.
- Internal Communications: responsibilities and lines of accountability, grievance and disciplinary procedures for staff, channels of communication and information about the institution and Eaquals.
- External Communications: promotional materials, website, social media, contractual information provided to learners and sponsors, display of the Eaquals Charters and use of the logo.

Out of the twelve categories, four cover academic systems: Course Design and Supporting Systems, Teaching and Learning, Assessment and Certification and Academic Resources, and two are derived from the Staff Charter: Staff Profile and Development, and Staff Terms and Conditions. There is a separate category which covers the standards related to internal quality assurance.

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is in charge of audits of quality systems of higher education institutions (HEI), not only of language programmes. The objective of the audit is to support Finnish HEIs in developing quality systems that correspond to the European principles of quality assurance, and to demonstrate that functional and consistent quality assurance procedures are in place both in institutions and at the national level (FINEEC, 2015). The Finnish audit model is based on institutional reviews, and it covers the functions of an HEI from a broad perspective. The auditing method respects the autonomy of HEIs which are responsible for developing their own quality systems and audits assess the comprehensiveness, functionality and effectiveness of those systems. The approach and methodology differ from the schemes examined so far as its target areas focus on the quality system as a whole, its link with strategic management, on quality policies and quality management. Assessment is based on a set of criteria which refer to

the scale of four development stages of quality management: absent, emerging, developing and advanced.

5.4 Comparing Quality Standards

A comparison of the schemes with respect to their principles, quality standards and assessment criteria confirms a number of common features and highlights the main difference. Although the number of the main standards or assessment areas ranges from five (Accreditation UK and BALEAP) to 12 (Eaquals), all the schemes cover five generic standards:

- Management, Administration, Governance and Staff.
- Programme Design and Delivery.
- Assessment and Certification.
- Resources and Learning Environment.
- Student Welfare and Services.

Quality assurance is an integral element of the core standards as shown in Fig. 5.1. It is only in the Eaquals scheme where it forms a separate category.

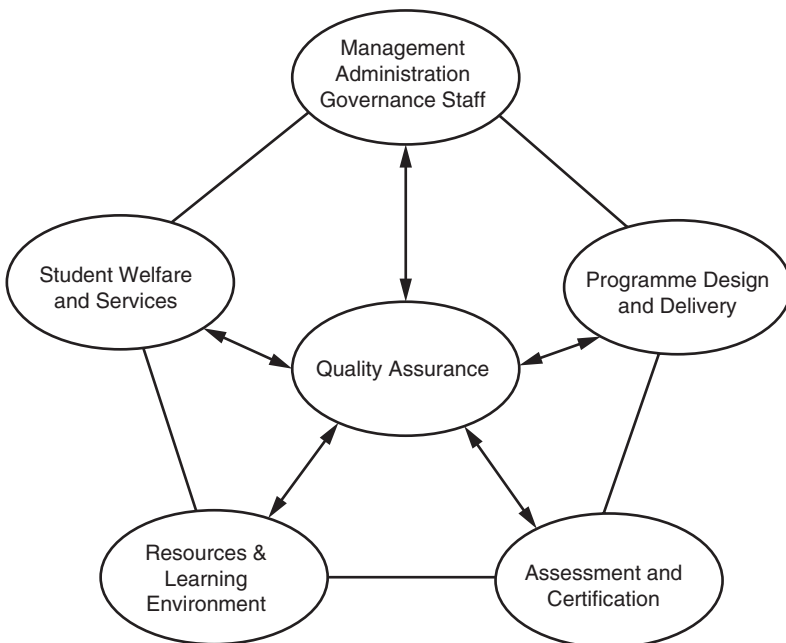


Fig. 5.1 Generic quality standards

The main difference between the schemes is in the way the standards are structured and articulated. Their focus and the level of detail depend on whether the scheme operates at the national level only, and whether it limits itself to assessing English language training. The spectrum and profile of institutions eligible for accreditation is another factor which determines the structure and coverage of the main quality standards.

Accreditation UK is more specific in the way the standards are formulated, since the scheme is applied only to ELT provision in the UK which explains reference to UK legislation such as the Advertising Standards Authority and copyright and licensing agencies operating there, visa and immigration regulations and Companies Act, and for academic staff profile the Ofqual Register of Regulated Qualifications. The scheme includes detailed criteria related to student welfare and services which take into account local legislation, in particular in relation to the care of students under the age of 18.

The BALEAP Scheme has been designed to assess EAP programmes not institutions, and it is targeted at the UK. However, its assessment criteria can be applied in the international context as well. The Standards of the BAC/IELP Scheme are detailed but not prescriptive to allow the Scheme to assess English language providers worldwide. As it applies to ELT only, it makes specific reference to English teacher qualifications and English language examinations.

The Equals scheme unlike most schemes which have been set up to operate in a single country and/or a single language, aimed from the very beginning to apply quality standards for a wide range of languages and internationally—and so to enable stakeholders to be sure that quality standards are comparable in different countries and for the teaching of different languages. This is reflected in the way the scheme has been designed. Its core Quality Standards are supported by indicators of compliance which are not intended as a checklist but as a guide to ensuring the Language Education Centre meets the Standards. In this respect, it adopts a similar approach to that of the Australian Scheme NEAS. NEAS Quality Principles are supported by more specific Quality Drivers. However, they may not be relevant to certain centres and therefore not applied in every case. This gives the scheme a clearly defined assessment framework and flexibility to accredit centres both in Australia and overseas.

The Standards of the US-based CEA scheme are elaborated in a discursive manner. Although the scheme presents a US-centred view, it has been successfully applied to accredit programmes and institutions abroad. Languages Canada, like CEA and Accreditation UK, covers extensively Student Admissions and Support Services and refers to specific requirements regarding teacher qualifications as the scheme accredits English and French programmes in Canada only. Compared to the other schemes, the Finnish one covers and reviews all functions of an HEI from a broad perspective, and it has adopted a holistic approach to assess quality in HEI.

Undoubtedly, all the schemes examined were set up with a broad view of education in mind and an objective to assess 'the whole institution'. Particular attention is paid to the assessment of academic systems which—although structured differently

in every scheme—cover academic staff qualifications and profile, course/curriculum design, course delivery (teaching and learning) including class observation, academic resources, assessment (placement testing, assessment of progress, summative and formative assessment, final examinations) and academic management supporting systems.

5.5 Principles and Processes

The accreditation schemes examined follow an established set of processes which comprise five main stages:

1. Application for accreditation.
2. Pre-site visit.
3. The site/inspection visit.
4. Post-site visit.
5. Maintenance of accreditation.

5.5.1 Application for Accreditation

All of these schemes define eligibility criteria and the applicant institutions' eligibility for accreditation is scrutinised at various levels. They are required to submit a set of advance documents such as an application form, a declaration of statutory compliance, evidence of financial stability and academic documentation.

5.5.2 Pre-Visit: Self-Reviews/Self-Assessment

The pre-visit stage includes in most cases some form of self-review. Institutional self-reviews are perceived as a valuable tool which encourages reflection, engages and empowers staff and provides a safe framework for giving and receiving feedback and acting on it effectively.

Eaquals requires its prospective members to conduct an institutional self-assessment prior to submitting the application. The self-assessment scheme includes a questionnaire and a set of tasks, and it mirrors the structure of the Accreditation Scheme. It helps identify developments needed to meet the Eaquals Standards, and its results inform an action plan. (Eaquals Self-Assessment Handbook, 2017) Additionally, Eaquals offers an option of an advisory visit which combines a pre-inspection with consultancy. It enables applicant institutions have greater control over the accreditation process, and improvements can be introduced over a period of time in a staged and more sustainable way.

Self-assessment is also a strong element of the Finnish system, deeply rooted in its evaluation tradition. Unlike the Equals self-assessment scheme, the Finnish one leaves it to the discretion of the HEI to choose how to carry out its self-evaluation. Its objective is to identify areas in need of development, provide a description of practical measures related to quality work and write a report which is submitted prior to the audit visit, and follows an established structure.

Accreditation UK neither requires nor offers a self-review, instead applicants can request pre-inspection scrutiny and participate at briefing events held by the British Council. CEA on the other hand invites institutions which meet eligibility requirements to attend a 2-day workshop. Participants learn more about the standards, and receive guidance on how to complete the self-study report. One month after the workshop, they submit a plan for the self-study. The CEA self-study is a reflective activity, whereby an institution evaluates how well it meets the CEA standards and recommends areas of improvement, if any.

Languages Canada require an off-site review to be conducted by the institution to identify any major gaps prior to the on-site audit. A Preliminary Review Report details strengths, areas for improvement and areas of concern to be addressed at the site visit. NEAS takes another approach: anonymous on-line surveys are completed by students and managers, and by teaching, administration and marketing staff in the weeks immediately prior to the site visit and their results define the areas of focus for the site visit (A Plain Guide to NEAS Quality Endorsement). Two of the examined schemes: BAC/IELP and BALEAP do not include a pre-visit self-review in the accreditation process.

5.5.3 *Site Visits*

Site visits called inspections by some schemes are commonly used in quality assurance procedures. In some schemes (FINEEC, CEA and Languages Canada) site visits and self-review reports are closely connected and the latter one defines the scope of the visit. The length of a site visit varies from scheme to scheme, and it lasts from 2 to 5 days, its length being determined by the scope of the scheme and the size of the institution.

The visits are conducted by a team of on average two or three auditors, called also inspectors, reviewers or assessors and all the schemes ensure the arms' length relationship between the auditors and the institution in order to guarantee impartiality. The auditors are carefully selected senior and knowledgeable professionals from the field of education who undergo regular training and standardisation so that the audits are carried out in a competent manner, in line with procedures, and that standards are applied consistently. During the visits the auditors verify the contents of self-review reports when applicable, evaluate whether the institution meets the standards of the scheme by inspecting documentation, premises and resources, interviewing staff and students and observing classes.

5.5.4 Post-Visit Validation Process

The visit is followed by a report delivered by the auditors within an agreed time frame. These are standardised documents which include a recommended verdict statement, an account of the visit, findings related to each standard, whether it is met or not or partially met, and a summary of strengths and weaknesses. Some reports, e.g. *Eaquals*, *Languages Canada*, *NEAS*, also contain recommendations for improvement and further development. Every scheme has developed a transparent and impartial procedure to moderate reports and validate verdicts proposed by auditors.

The 13-member CEA Commission uses the self-study report, the review team report, the response from the institution and a review of finances to make its accreditation decision. The Commission judges the institution based on its compliance with the CEA Standards.

At *Languages Canada* the accreditation process is governed by an independent Accreditation Advisory Board. The results from the Preliminary Review and On-Site Audit are assessed by a Senior Evaluator to ensure a proper recommendation has been made. At this point, approval is given to accredit or not, suspend or terminate the programme.

In Finland, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee decides on the audit results based on the audit report. The Committee is responsible for ensuring that decisions are impartial. In addition, the chair or vice-chair of the audit team gives a presentation of the audit's key results at the decision-making meeting and answers the Committee's questions on the issues presented in the report.

Following the site visit, the *NEAS* Quality Assessor submits a recommendation alongside the survey and focus group results. The final decision about Quality Endorsement resides with *NEAS* senior management and its Board (*NEAS A Plain Guide to Quality Endorsement Version 4, 2018*).

The Accreditation UK inspection reports are moderated by the Accreditation Scheme Advisory Committee who recommend the verdict to the Executive Board.

At *Eaquals*, an independent Accreditation Panel oversees the accreditation procedures and decision-making about the accreditation of new members and re-accreditation of *Eaquals* member institutions, assisting with the impartial assessment of inspection reports. Every report is read by members of the Accreditation Panel, who ensure that standards are applied consistently and reports are evidence-based and sufficiently detailed.

The *BALEAP* Accreditation Scheme Committee ratifies the decision on whether or not the course will receive accreditation. The report is submitted by the assessors to the Committee specifying the extent to which the criteria are met. In the case of *BAC/IELP* Scheme, a report of the inspection is considered by the Accreditation Committee which decides to award, defer or refuse accreditation based on the evidence of whether all minimum standards are met.

All the schemes demonstrate a high degree of similarity of approach—they all require the minimum standards to be met. The *Eaquals* grading scheme also recog-

nises excellence referring to a set of indicators of excellence which identify categories or areas where an institution exceeds the already high quality standards.

The range of verdicts varies depending on the scheme and the status of the institution. For institutions applying for continuing accreditation the verdicts state continued or re-confirmed accreditation, referral or accreditation under review, alternatively withdrawing or discontinuing accreditation, whereas for new applicants granting, pending or withholding accreditation.

5.5.5 The Accreditation Cycle and Maintenance of Accreditation

The length of accreditation varies from 2 years (NEAS) to three (BAC/IELP) and four (Accreditation UK, BALEAP, Equals, Languages Canada) and six (FINEEC). CEA initial accreditation may be granted for 1 year or 5 years.

Granting accreditation or re-confirming it is not a final stage of the process. The adherence to standards and maintaining quality is monitored by accreditation agencies as regular reviews to confirm ongoing quality are critical in an industry with a high turnover of stakeholders. They protect the wellbeing of students and safeguard the reputation of the sector.

At Languages Canada in order to ensure that all accredited programmes continue to maintain the standards, every accredited programme is subject to a Maintenance Review 2 years after the on-site visit. This consists of an update report on selected areas of the standards. Site visits are conducted once every 4 years. NEAS grants Quality Endorsement for a period of 2 years and at the same time requires an annual Return of Information to check and update the provider's/language centre's scope. In addition to biennial Quality Review Visits, short notice and unannounced site visits may occur at any time. The CEA accreditation process promotes continuous improvement and follow-up and requires annual reporting to ensure it.

BALEAP requires an Interim Declaration of Maintenance of Standards and a spot check may be carried out at any time during the four-year accreditation period. BAC/IELP awards accreditation for a period of 3 years, subject to a satisfactory interim inspection and meeting all the responsibilities of an accredited provider.

Accreditation UK includes spot checks which are routinely carried out within 18 months of first granting accreditation. Between inspections accredited members must provide an Annual Declaration. In order to ensure that standards are maintained between inspections, each year a number of accredited providers chosen at random receive unannounced interim visits.

Equals requires accredited members to conduct a mid-cycle self-review and submit a report which includes an account of new developments and a report on the implementation of the last inspection's recommendations.

FINEEC organises national follow-up seminars to support the development of quality systems in HEIs. One of the key goals of the seminars is to give feedback on

post-audit development work and to offer institutions the opportunity to discuss the development of quality systems and exchange experiences and good practices related to quality work.

Accreditation processes are mostly similar because accreditation agencies by and large set similar goals and standards. The schemes share fundamental operating principles and ethical guidelines such as impartiality and objectivity, transparency and evidence-based evaluation. Some common elements and major types of mechanisms have been identified such as eligibility criteria for applicant institutions, vetting of applications, the scope of the main quality standards, site visits and moderation of their outcomes and procedures to safeguard standards. The level of assessment may vary from one accreditation scheme to another. They aim to turn the audit process into a positive, interactive and useful experience for all stakeholders. Though indirectly, they also generate improvements and act as a stimulus for self-reflection at the institutional level, and lead to improvement-driven changes. Inspections and external site visits ensure that the institution's staff are provided with external input for further improvement and encouragement to pursue new challenges.

5.6 From Minimum Standards to Excellence

Accreditation agencies focus primarily on defining quality standards and applying them through carefully designed accreditation processes, and over the years they have gained experience in evaluating the delivery of quality in education. The primary outcome of the accreditation process is the assessment of the overall quality profile of an institution based on a set of transparent standards, and indicators of compliance. It is the concept of compliance that underpins the design of accreditation schemes. Through an accreditation process institutions are required to demonstrate compliance with the standards defined by the scheme. By and large, the stringent requirements for accreditation aim to support institutions in delivering products and services of high quality. Some accreditation schemes take it a step further and identify strengths and formulate recommendations for improvement. However, it does not mean that in a consistent way they assess and promote excellence. In the main, accreditation schemes promote a culture of compliance rather than excellence.

Compliance is associated with regulatory requirements and minimum/threshold standards, whereas excellence is described by attributes such as outstanding and exceptional, and is perceived as a mark of distinction where threshold standards are exceeded and surpassed. How can the transfer from what an institution 'is required to do' to 'what it aspires to achieve' be defined? Could excellence be assessed in a similar fashion that quality is: By means of a criterion-based process in relation to articulated standards?

The fundamental issue is the characteristics of excellence and its definition, even when the concept is applied in a clearly specified context. Excellence tends to be a

synonym of high quality, e.g. 'institution xxx is a centre of excellence'. It does not necessarily mean that the institution meets special criteria developed to access excellence. It could mean that through a process of verification it was confirmed that the institution fulfilled the requirements to be accredited: the requirements to *comply* with demanding quality standards but not to *exceed* them.

'Accreditation is a mark of excellence' is quite often claimed and no further attributes are quoted. Even when accreditation schemes talk about excellence, they refer to an ambiguous concept of excellence, or a quest for excellence rather than defined parameters. The question of how to measure excellence remains open. Do excellence frameworks differ from quality standards which define compliance? Where is the borderline? Are ethical values, corporate social responsibility, visionary leadership, focus on the future or managing for innovation key areas to assess excellence? Should areas such as institutional governance and policies, programme design and delivery, learning environment and staff profile be assessed in terms compliance with minimum requirements rather than excellence? There are more questions than answers.

It seems that the challenges accreditation schemes face have two dimensions. One dimension is the development phase: Defining excellence, specifying its tangible features, and transparent criteria for assessment. The second one is related to the rationale behind the existence of accreditations schemes, and there are fundamental issues which should be raised. To what extent will accreditation agencies be interested in promoting excellence? How will the requirement to meet outstanding standards affect perception of accreditation schemes by the industry? Will such standards discourage some institutions from applying for accreditation? Would not it be safer for accreditation schemes to operate in the realm of what is *achievable* rather than what is *aspirational*?

This said, excellence in accreditation is gradually becoming a trend, especially for agencies which have been in operation for more than a decade and where the institutions they work with have gone through three or more accreditation cycles. FINEEC and Eaquals, for example, attempt to reward excellence through a set of additional criteria and indicators.

5.7 Conclusion

The current highly competitive environment presents new challenges for all stakeholders, both educational institutions and accreditation agencies, and it has mobilised some of them to go beyond simply assessing quality and maintaining it. The new challenge will be not only to strive for excellence in educational institutions but to define it and make it an integral part of accreditation schemes. This is what accreditation agencies face in order to secure their own sustainability in the longer term. It seems that the time has come to revise the approach and make a clear distinction between the minimum/threshold standards and requirements and a criteria-based approach to evaluate excellence. Exceeding high standards rather than

fulfilling the minimum requirements, however robust they are, should mark the next stage in the development of education, and for accreditation agencies the imperative should be to define the criteria and parameters to measure excellence. To go beyond basic quality checking and maintaining standards should be a principle embedded in any accreditation process.

The common assumption is that the incentive and motivation to pursue accreditation is to raise the quality of language instruction, improve student performance, set and maintain quality standards, increase visibility, promote transparency, collegiality and disseminate good practice. However, it is difficult to measure the impact and outcomes of accreditation and to assess the effectiveness of accreditation schemes on internal quality assurance processes. If accreditation is a process which includes self-review mechanisms, then it can be argued that it contributes to the improvement of teaching and learning standards. Whether the quality of language education would have changed without accreditation schemes, is still an open question. The quest for quality is a never ending journey and the challenges the institutions and the accrediting agencies face—the fit between the commercial and the tangible, the developmental and the educational—still remains subject to wide debate.

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