

Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Bill

**An Introduction to the
Draft Four-Stage Quality Assurance Process Guidelines**

At the meeting of the Bills Committee on the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Bill (the Bill) held on 14 November 2006, the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) was requested to provide information on the Four-Stage Quality Assurance Process Guidelines.

2. The Annex sets out the draft Four-Stage QA Process Guidelines which are still under development by the HKCAA.

Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation
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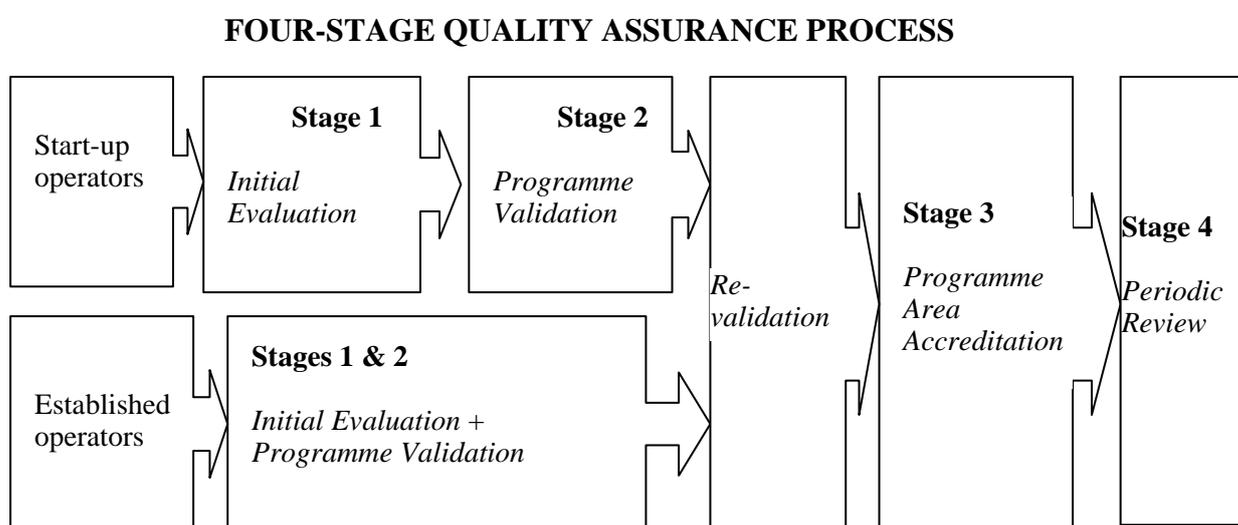
Draft Four-Stage Quality Assurance Process Guidelines

1. Preamble

- 1.1 The Four-Stage Quality Assurance Process Guidelines aim to:
- ◆ provide general information on the Four-Stage Quality Assurance Process under the QF;
 - ◆ provide advice to operators on how to prepare for a document for accreditation for each stage of the process; and
 - ◆ outline how operators and their learning programmes will be accredited for each stage of the process.
- 1.2 It is essential that operators read and understand the information in the Guidelines and its supplementary CD-ROM. It will be helpful if they can contact the HKCAA early to discuss their plans or clarify doubts before applying for accreditation assessments of the Four-Stage Quality Assurance Process.
- 1.3 At this stage, the Guidelines are still at the drafting stage in consultation with relevant parties. They will be implemented upon enactment of the Bill.

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

- 2.1 In preparation for its new role under the Qualifications Framework and for serving a clientele with vastly different characteristics, the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA), which will be specified in the Bill as the Accreditation Authority, has devised a new “fitness for purpose” Four-stage Quality Assurance (QA) Process.
- 2.2 The Four-stage QA Process comprises *Initial Evaluation*, *Programme Validation*, *Programme Area Accreditation* and *Periodic Review*.



- 2.3 *Initial Evaluation* (Stage 1) sets an upfront quality test for operators of learning programmes who are required to meet certain threshold quality standards. An operator must pass the initial organizational evaluation before it is to submit learning programmes for validation.
- 2.4 *Programme Validation* (Stage 2) is for operators who have successfully passed through the *Initial Evaluation* in Stage 1 to submit their learning programme for validation. The learning programme and the qualification to be awarded at the end of it can be registered onto the QR after validation.
- 2.5 Operators who already have at least 2 consecutive years of experience in operating programmes are considered ‘established operators’ who may apply to undergo Stage 1 and Stage 2 together.

- 2.6 Operators whose validated learning programmes have completed two cycles of revalidation and have developed a strong internal quality assurance culture and mechanism can proceed to *Programme Area Accreditation* (PAA) (Stage 3). This Stage is to ascertain the capability of the operators to quality assure their own learning programmes meeting the stipulated QF standards. A successful accreditation will confer “programme area accreditation status” to the operators. With this status, operators can develop and offer new learning programmes within **a defined programme area and at specified QF level(s) for a defined time period**, without going through prior programme validation (Stage 2) by the HKCAA. The qualifications of their learning programmes will be uploaded onto the QR within the specified time frame.
- 2.7 *Periodic Review* (Stage 4) is a periodic health check for operators with programme area accreditation status. The frequency of the reviews will depend on the maturity of the operator and subject to whether substantial changes have been made by the operator in regard to the validated programmes.

3. How long does the process take?

- 3.1 The time taken for completing each stage of the Four-stage Quality Assurance depends on the complexity of the cases and the readiness or cooperation from the operators. The following is an indicative ‘outer limit’ timeline for programmes up to QF Level 4:

- *Initial Evaluation* - 8 weeks
- *Programme Validation* - 10 weeks
- *Initial Evaluation and Programme Validation* - 12 weeks
- *Programme Area Accreditation* - 24 weeks
- *Periodic Review* - 12 weeks

4 What approach to take to prepare for the quality assurance process?

- 4.1 Under the Four-stage QA Process, accreditation is conducted using the ‘fitness for purpose’ approach. The accreditation is conducted with due consideration about the purposes to be achieved by the operator through the learning programme. The new process also recognises the variety of operators at different stages of development.

- 4.2 The accreditation process is evidence-based. Operators are required to present relevant evidence to support their application for accreditation under each stage of the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process.
- 4.3 For *Initial Evaluation* of start-up operators, the HKCAA will also take into account that these operators might not have all of their systems fully operational at the point of evaluation. In such cases, the HKCAA will look for a demonstration of capacity and ability, rather than an established track record.
- 4.4 For *Programme Validation*, it is expected that operators should demonstrate that they have the resources, capabilities and the quality assurance system to ensure that the learning programmes considered for accreditation meet the QF standards.
- 4.5 Operators applying for Stage 3 (*Programme Area Accreditation*) and Stage 4 (*Periodic Review*) should have well-trying and well-balanced systems in place for continuous internal reviews of both organisational management and the quality of the learning programmes offered. Evidence from recent internal reviews should be presented.

5. What information is required?

- 5.1 The information and the possible types of evidence required to be included in the accreditation submission are listed in the HKCAA Four-Stage QA Guidelines and the supplementary CD-ROM which will be released formally once the Bill is enacted. The guidelines have been developed in consultation with the operators.

6. How is assessment conducted?

- 6.1 The HKCAA will form an accreditation panel (hereafter ‘the panel’) to conduct each stage of the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process. The size and composition of the panel will mainly depend on the stage of accreditation being undertaken and the QF level of the learning programmes offered by the operator. The following members will be involved in conducting the accreditation assessment, where appropriate:

- An experienced sector/subject specialist who chairs the panel
- Members comprising
 - Sector/Subject specialist(s) which have relevant knowledge or experience in the specified discipline
 - One professional staff member from the HKCAA

6.2 'Peer review' is the guiding principle for accreditation used by the HKCAA. Only those accreditors who are conversant with the requirements and standards of the specific subject area will be engaged to conduct academic or vocational accreditation. Moreover, the accreditation panel will comprise a good mix of experts from education/training operators and professionals working in the relevant industrial/vocational sector.

7. What are the possible outcomes?

7.1 The possible outcome for each accreditation under the Four-Stage QA Process is one of the following:

- ◆ Approval; or
- ◆ Conditional approval (with pre-condition(s) and/or requirement(s)); or
- ◆ Non-approval.

7.2 For conditional approval (with pre-condition(s) and/or requirement(s)), the operator is required to take appropriate actions within a specified timeframe before the approval of accreditation can be confirmed.