**Purpose of institutional audits**

Audits have both an improvement as well as an accountability function. The workshop emphasized the former more than the latter, for purposes of realizing quality improvement in an institution.

**The scope of an audit**

Audits look at the fit between the institutional mission and the activities on the ground. It therefore examines available evidence of whether what is happening on the ground enhances the achievement of the mission. So, a typical audit process will ask the following questions:

* What are your goals and objectives?

• Are your activities linked to your goals?

• How do you know how you are going?

• What identifiable improvements are being made and what evidence is there to show such improvements?

Some of the critical aspects evaluators look for when auditing distance higher education providers are:

* The institutional context

• Quality assurance arrangements in place

• Staffing - whether there are the right people in place and whether there are enough staff

• Teaching and Learning strategies

• Arrangements for handling postgraduate students

• Engagement with industry and the community

* Research output
* International focus

• Support services & infrastructure

**How to prepare for audits**

Nicolene underscored the importance of thorough preparations for an audit. INED should put together a panel of reviewers, ideally including people from institutions. The panel should have a chair who is responsible for coordinating the audit activities of the panel and compiling a report after the audit. INED should share the names of the people who constitute the panel with the institution to be audited, which in turn should accept the composition of the panel. In the event that the institution has reservations regarding some of the panel members, the institution should be given room to air their views. The institution is also invited to provide input into the audit schedule. Relevant documentation is provided to the panel by the institution well in advance of the site visit, through INED. It is important that all panel members should read the documents thoroughly before the site visit. The panel should also hold a pre-site visit meeting to discuss issues emerging from the documents and the strategy to be used during the site visit. They should clarify roles and responsibilities for each of the panel members. They should provide the context of the audit, the focus and the mandate. Allocation of tasks and criteria to focus on during the audit interviews should be done during this pre-visit meeting and panel members should determine preliminary lines of enquiry.The bottom line is that all panel members should be well versed with the context and issues as depicted in the documentation and should be clear about what to ask, and the evidence to look for.

As part of good practice in auditing, the workshop emphasized that evidence should be objective and convincing. The panel should look out for the different ways of presenting the evidence. Cross-referencing of evidence helps verify processes and claims made. Also, the panel should look at the website of the institution for evidence of some of the claims made.

A lot of other important aspects of the audit process were also discussed during the first two days of the workshop, namely identifying lines of enquiry from the quality criteria, the role of the panel chairperson, possible outcomes of an audit exercise, and how to formulate improvement plans.