Linking External and Internal Quality Assurance

Overview

Within the context of expanding enrolments and privatization of higher education, quality assurance (QA) has been at the centre of higher education reform worldwide. Its development has been driven firstly by external quality assurance (EQA) bodies as a mechanism for control, accountability, and improvement. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have responded to the demands of QA agencies, and developed mechanisms for their own internal quality assurance (IQA).

University case studies from research on IQA conducted by the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) analysed existing IQA practices and factors that condition the effectiveness of IQA in HEIs in eight countries. Based on research data, this brief examines how EQA shaped IQA in the universities studied, and how the link between the two mechanisms can be improved for sustainable and continuous quality enhancement.

Evolving EQA purposes and modalities

Over the past 30 years, external quality assurance (EQA) has evolved in many countries as a major, yet diverse strand of higher education reform. In some countries, EQA is a compulsory process, while in others it is voluntary, and higher education institutions (HEIs) must make an application. Some countries prefer a fitness for purpose approach to quality assurance (QA), where the performance of an HEI is measured against its objectives. Others, however, use a standard-based approach, where all HEIs and their educational offer are assessed against common standards.

Worldwide, most countries use accreditation as their preferred mechanism for QA, which implies a decision on whether an institution or a study programme complies with common standards. Other countries prefer quality audit, which focuses on the strength of the internal quality assurance (IQA) of the HEI under assessment (Martin and Stella, 2007). The latter lightens the workload of a QA body, and has a stronger potential for quality enhancement, as the responsibility for quality enhancement rests with HEIs and their units.

In addition, EQA in the higher education sector is an evolving practice, and has seen continual innovations in approaches and modalities, such as moving from a developmental approach to a more control-oriented system, or from a programme focus to an institutional one.

EQA impacts the development of IQA

IIEP's research found that national QA frameworks had a significant effect on the development of IQA in universities. All eight case universities adapted their IQA to the requirements of their national EQA framework. In countries where EQA did not exist, for instance Bangladesh, the establishment of IQA in response to foreign accreditation could guide the development of a national EQA system.

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> **Box 1. The national review system in South Africa**
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> National quality audits and programme accreditation in South Africa led to many changes in universities. One visible effect was the development of IQA policies and QA structures in universities in accordance with criteria and requirements emanating from the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). At the University of the Free State (UFS), a formalized, centrally located QA system was first established in 2006 in response to HEQC's institutional quality audit system. HEQC's 2008 audit report highlighted the lack of monitoring of quality policies at the university, particularly at the decentralized level. This led to the transformation of the institutional structure for IQA and the integration of QA into the Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning.

IIEP's research identified the following ways in which EQA encouraged the development of IQA in the case universities:

EQA can establish standards for IQA

In Austria, the University Act of 2002 provided increased institutional autonomy to universities, while also requiring the development of institutional IQA systems. Although the imposition of common standards for IQA development initially met with restraint, the Higher Education Act of 2012 requires public universities to conduct institutional quality audits to review the status of their IQA system. In Kenya, similarly, the Commission for University Education (CUE) extended its EQA system to include public universities, in addition to private ones. The CUE required chartered universities to have a functional IQA system with a QA structure, an established and well-staffed QA unit, and an approved QA policy, all of which were implemented.

EQA can make recommendations for IQA

In South Africa, under the post-apartheid transformation agenda, an EQA system was introduced to unify the South African higher education sector. In addition to programme accreditation and reviews, institutional audits were conducted to assess whether HEIs had the appropriate level of capacity for IQA. South African universities adapted their IQA to be in line with the recommendations of the audit reports.

EQA systems can make quality audit an option for accreditation

In Germany, programme accreditation developed in response to the Bologna Process, and the introduction of the Bachelor-Master-PhD qualification structure in 1998. Eight regional or programme-specific accreditation agencies were established and given the ability to grant accreditation by the German Accreditation Council, a buffer organization established in 1998. Programme accreditation triggered the development of IQA tools in German universities (e.g. student course evaluation, graduate tracer studies, workload assessment). Programme accreditation, however, also produced a considerable workload for German universities, and was not seen as highly effective in terms of quality enhancement. In 2009, the German Accreditation Council made it possible for German universities to have their own IQA systems accredited in line with six framing criteria for IQA systems. If universities obtain system accreditation, they no longer need to submit their programmes for external accreditation, as they become self-accrediting organizations.

A national qualifications framework can impact the modalities for assessment

In Bahrain, the current EQA system comprises institutional and programme review. Institutional review assesses the effectiveness of an institution's QA system against a predefined set of quality indicators. In 2012, the national qualifications framework (NQF) was established with 10 NQF levels for the education system. Programme review focuses on the quality of existing academic programmes within a particular discipline or subject area, and includes an analysis of the effectiveness of quality management and assurance.

> **Box 2. System accreditation at UDE, Germany**
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> At the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE), preparing for system accreditation in 2010 enabled the university to develop IQA. German universities granted system accreditation by the German Accreditation Council no longer need to go through a complex programme accreditation process. Instead, they can design and introduce new IQA tools and integrate existing ones, adapted to their own system. At UDE, a two-year development project for IQA was initiated and funded by the Ministry for Science, Technology and Research of the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia. Within this framework, major developments were introduced at the university, such as the development of an implementation process for QA at study programme level, and IQA training for UDE personnel.

Box 3. The national qualifications framework in Bahrain

Bahrain's local QA authority, the National Authority for Qualifications and Quality Assurance for Education and Training (NAQQAET), requires Bahraini HEIs to comply with the NQF, as well as to conduct programme and institutional reviews on a regular basis. This necessity of compliance motivated the University of Bahrain (UoB) to conduct annual programme and course evaluations, and to align the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of programmes with NQF thresholds, helping to improve UoB's IQA system. Centralized management ensured the implementation of the standardized learning outcomes in all colleges and programmes, which in turn ensured its diffusion to all faculty members. The deans reported that they either established or aligned ILOs for their courses with the NQF.

EQA systems can trigger new data collection methods for IQA

National QA agencies can also request that HEIs establish specific tools for data collection. In China, the EQA system consists of compulsory annual institutional self-evaluations, external conformance evaluations conducted every five years, and professional accreditation of certain study programmes. The Higher Education Evaluation Centre (HEEC) requires Chinese universities to submit annual reports on the quality of undergraduate teaching. Xiamen University (XMU), a comprehensive university in China, adapted its IQA system to respond to national requirements by introducing an annual undergraduate evaluation, teaching supervision, teaching observation, and feedback from students. These mechanisms facilitate the annual self-evaluation and the conformance evaluation that is conducted by the HEEC every five years.

EQA can negatively affect quality development too

Despite the positive contribution of EQA to IQA, the IIEP research revealed that there were three limits to EQA functioning effectively for quality enhancement. First, interviewees in academic leadership positions expressed

negative opinions about some accrediting agencies, saying that EQA can reduce internal ownership of quality processes. EQA can also be prescriptive and bureaucratic, leaving a university with little room for diversity in its approaches to education. In this light, EQA could also be an obstacle to innovative practices.

Second, foreign accreditation could require the creation of IQA instruments that suit the higher education system of the country of origin, but not the local one. In this regard, EQA could become an obstacle to context specificity.

Finally, interviewees raised concerns about delays in the accreditation process and ineffective results from accreditation. For instance, strict requirements and regulations of some external accrediting agencies had delayed the launch of new academic programmes, and as a result the proposed core texts were obsolete when the programme was ready for implementation. EQA can therefore become an obstacle to timely implementation of new programmes.

Recommendations

To maximize the benefits of EQA for IQA development, the following conclusions can provide policy guidance.

EQA can support IQA at the early stages of development

IIEP's research demonstrated that EQA was a strong driver for IQA. Compliance with external requirements from EQA shaped IQA in the case universities. At an early stage of development, IQA typically consisted of flexible procedures, allowing an HEI to conform to external quality standards and measurements, organize self-assessment exercises, and provide support for peer review processes. EQA's external view on the quality of academic services was generally valued by the higher education community.

EQA should provide autonomy

If IQA is developed in response to EQA, there is a risk that it will not support quality enhancement and self-regulation processes at institutional and decentralized levels. Institutional autonomy and managerial capacity for policy development, implementation, and monitoring of IQA are all important in this respect. The level of autonomy that national authorities can concede to HEIs for the development of IQA must be adapted to the existing capacity of an HEI. Where this capacity is weak, HEIs may need guidance and support from a QA agency for the development of their IQA. When HEIs have strong institutional capacities, autonomy can be more easily granted.

EQA should involve the academic community

The claim is frequently made that EQA supports quality enhancement in HEIs. To achieve this, it must rely on the individual and collective involvement of academic staff at the institutional level. EQA can lead to improvement through setting

high or good practice standards towards which institutions will strive. However, the main reason EQA brings about improvement is the formal and systematic self-assessment procedures it helps establish within HEIs. Indeed, 'transformative' quality improvement happens more easily when the academic community begins self-assessment by reflecting on their own teaching reality. Otherwise, to the contrary, an EQA system may simply produce a 'culture of compliance'.

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