

# The Effects of Internal Quality Assurance

## How to make IQA more effective for quality enhancement

### Overview

Quality assurance (QA) is a common practice in higher education worldwide. Yet the literature on internal quality assurance (IQA) pays little attention to measuring the effectiveness of QA systems. IQA can produce significant results within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); in particular, it can improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning, increase employability, and enhance management.

IIEP's research used university case studies to analyse how different IQA practices condition IQA's effectiveness in HEIs in eight countries. Unique to this research is its methodology, which includes multiple stakeholders and quantitative surveys. Drawing from the research data, this brief discusses the effects of IQA tools on teaching and learning, employability, and management. It draws conclusions on which practices allow IQA tools to be more effective.

### The empirical effects of IQA are under-researched

Internal quality assurance (IQA) is a common practice within higher education institutions (HEIs) in many countries, and a significant body of literature focuses on IQA practices. However, as observed by Newton (2015), the study of IQA effects is surprisingly 'under-theorized' and 'under-researched'. An analysis of existing literature revealed that methods of evaluating IQA effectiveness have relied too heavily on the experiences of quality officials, while neglecting the perspectives of other relevant stakeholders. (Westerheijden *et al.*, 2007). In response, IIEP designed a research study to identify the effects of IQA tools on teaching and learning, employability, and management from a multiple stakeholder perspective, including university leadership, academic and administrative staff, and students. This policy brief presents the research results, concluding with some recommendations.

### What are the most effective IQA tools, and what are their effects?

#### The effects of IQA tools on teaching and learning

IIEP's research evaluated common IQA tools for teaching and learning, including well-established tools such as student course evaluations and programme evaluation, and newer tools such as student satisfaction surveys and workload assessments. Academic staff used these tools to improve the quality of courses and programmes.

The IIEP research found that evaluations of study programmes were a more effective tool to improve the learning content in a particular programme than were student course evaluations. Nevertheless, their



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## **Box 1. Graduate exit studies as a tool for programme evaluation at DU, Kenya**

Daystar University (DU) is a private university with no state funding. The university offers academic programmes in areas such as communications, computer science, and business administration. Graduate exit studies are a comprehensive, student-focused IQA tool used for programme evaluation by academic staff at DU. Programme evaluation was introduced in 2012, and takes place every three years. Students in their final year of study take a graduate exit survey and provide feedback on their overall university experience. In the survey, students rank the university departments and services and explain their choices. The university uses the results to evaluate student satisfaction of services, including teaching and learning. Its findings also feed into university improvement plans that involve infrastructure, pedagogy and curriculum.

effectiveness was dependent on sharing the results with a wide range of stakeholders for feedback (See *Box 1*). Though, in comparison, student course evaluations were only moderately effective, they nonetheless were helpful in improving course design, teaching performance, and content.

There were challenges in the use of both types of evaluation. In some cases, the information generated from programme evaluations either was not used to stimulate discussion among the teaching staff and/or academic leadership, or no follow-up action was taken. As for student course evaluations, the qualitative data they produced was often difficult to interpret in terms of identifying areas for improvement.

Some universities combine quantitative and qualitative IQA tools. In addition to student course evaluation, they also use teaching analysis polls, which assess student perspectives through mid-term interviews. This method was more effective in introducing changes in teaching and learning, as it allowed for improvements to be made while a course was still running.

Lastly, new instruments such as student satisfaction surveys evaluate students' overall appreciation of university

services and activities, while student workload assessments track student workload in credit systems. Academic staff found them effective to improve study conditions. However, these new tools are technically demanding, and therefore more difficult to implement in universities with limited human and technical resources.

## **The effects of IQA tools on graduate employability**

Enhancing graduate employability is a fundamental objective of today's higher education systems. IQA plays an important role in strengthening the interaction between higher education and the world of work. Typical IQA tools to improve graduate employability include graduate tracer studies, employer involvement in study programme revision, and job market analysis (see *Policy Brief No 1: Internal Quality Assurance and Employability*). While these tools were identified as being effective, they were sometimes poorly implemented. For instance, graduate tracer studies often faced a low response rate, which meant their reliability was at times doubtful.

## **The effects of IQA on management**

Effective university management is a necessary condition for an effective and successful HEI. Target (or goal) agreements, unit self-evaluation, external evaluation, and certification are examples of management-related IQA tools that support strategic planning in the case universities, and help to increase the performance and effectiveness of management operations at the administrative level.

Target (or goal) agreements, based on the university's strategic planning framework have a positive impact on management (see *Box 3*) (Ganseuer and Pistor, 2017). These agreements help to professionalize planning based on prior evaluation involving stakeholders, while providing opportunities for a discussion of quality at all levels of the university. The effects of such agreements depend on the scope of their application. If applied to both academic and administrative staff, it can affect the entire university's management. On the other hand, where its use is limited to academic staff, improvements in management occur only in academic units.

Unit self-evaluation is another IQA tool that can have a positive effect on university management. It can serve as the first phase in the process of establishing a target agreement. At UDE, it helped units and university leadership to determine performance targets based on prior evaluation. Certification (such as by the International Organization for Standardization [ISO]) improved administrative operations and evidence-based decision-making, and its impact was greater in cases where national QA requirements for management were absent or not clearly defined. It also helped to standardize

## Box 2. The effects of employer involvement in study programme revisions at AIUB, Bangladesh

The American International University of Bangladesh (AIUB) is a private university offering courses in engineering, computer sciences and business administration. AIUB was the first university in the country to establish a formal IQA system. The University involves employers in the revision of study programmes in order to improve content and teaching methods, which in turn enhances student employability. In the most recent study programmes revision process, employers suggested new courses (e.g. biomedicine, rural marketing, investment management and human resource information systems) that responded to labour market demands. Employer engagement has also resulted in the restructuring and redesign of the computer science course curriculum. Employers have also proposed other changes to the curriculum, including the inclusion of case studies to improve student's analytical ability, and presentations to increase their communication skills. The students reported that their capacities improved in areas such as English language, subject knowledge and ethical reasoning

the management processes controlled by administrative units, and to improve the university's information management system through computerization. Some felt that the university's IQA system helped to enhance its overall productivity and the efficiency of its management decision-making. Overall, administrative staff were more appreciative of IQA's contributions to the overall effectiveness of the university than were academic staff.

## Recommendations

The IIEP research identified several principles and good practices to make IQA in universities more effective.

### *Design tools and processes for IQA to integrate multiple stakeholder perspectives*

IQA often collected students' views on their learning experience and identified factors for their academic success, but IIEP's research found that an effective IQA system includes the perspectives of other stakeholders, including academic and administrative staff, graduates, and employers. In particular, IQA is effective when it incorporates multiple stakeholder opinions on the quality and relevance of study programmes. Good practice will typically involve several stakeholders in the data analysis phase, and in an internal dialogue on quality. This process allows universities to consider and

integrate multiple perspectives on important issues with the purpose of informing sound decisions about quality improvement.

### *Approach IQA as an integrated and coherent set of processes and tools*

The IIEP research observed the gradual expansion of IQA, with new tools grafted on to existing ones in HEIs. A delay in introducing or integrating new tools may create problems in data collection and lead to information overload. It is therefore necessary to take a critical look at existing IQA tools and processes to assess use and purposes on a periodic basis, with the intention of integrating them into a coherent whole.

### *Use flexible, qualitative tools in addition to standardized quantitative instruments*

IIEP's research showed that quantitative surveys were commonly used as a method for collecting IQA data. This type of survey included student course evaluations, student and staff satisfaction surveys, student panel analyses, graduate tracer studies, employers' surveys, and others. It was sometimes difficult to identify areas for QA improvement from the survey results. In order to facilitate interpretation, universities should

## Box 3. Target agreements at UDE, Germany

The University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) is one of the ten largest universities in Germany, offering more than 230 courses of study in 11 faculties. Target agreements have broad acceptance and high levels of use at UDE given their direct effect on specific management decisions. Every three years, new target agreements undergo an approval process, where the goal is to align the objectives of decentralized units with those of the university. Preparatory talks for the target agreements involve representatives from the rectorate, the department of development planning, and decentralized units, so that they can be informed about the strategic objectives of the university. Each unit then prepares a report with its achievements with regard to mid-term and long-term strategic goals. Negotiations follow on the targets for the next three years. The results are formalized in a contract between the rectorate and unit. All documents are published on the Intranet and made available to all UDE staff members. The department of development planning makes funds available from its 'innovation budget' to faculties and decentralized units for projects that promise to implement needed change.

consider using both quantitative and qualitative tools in a combined manner. This will enable universities to generate a broader range of evidence for IQA purposes. For instance, some universities conduct student course evaluations alongside midterm student polls. This allows for the collection of qualitative data from selected students to implement immediate changes while awaiting the results from other tools.

## *Support IQA through a solid management information system*

A solid management information system is essential to a university's IQA system, as it affects the availability of necessary data on student profiles, progression, and completion. It also provides data to support a university dialogue on quality improvement. The absence of a solid management information system was problematic for staff

in several case universities, who reported that important data were often outdated and unreliable. Inadequate information systems may not be able to connect student registration data with pedagogical information, making comparisons difficult. Universities without a solid management information system should urgently seek to align their information systems to IQA requirements in order to be effective.

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